Green Extractivism and Corporate Accountability: Assessing the Potential and Limitations of ESG for Just Energy Transitions

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Abstract

Renewable energy transitions are transforming not only how energy is produced but also how renewable energy development is governed. As corporations assume an increasingly influential role in this transformation, corporate accountability has become central to broader debates surrounding governance and justice. Among the institutional frameworks shaping these developments, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has emerged as a leading approach through which corporations organize, communicate, and evaluate responsible corporate conduct. Existing scholarship has primarily examined ESG through reporting, disclosure, and investment practices, with comparatively less attention given to its broader role as an institutional framework of corporate accountability.

This Major Research Paper interprets ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability and examines its potential and limitations for advancing a just energy transition through an interpretive qualitative case study of EDF Renewables' proposed Gunaa Sicarú wind project in La Unión Hidalgo, Mexico. Adopting an interpretive qualitative case study design, the research comparatively analyzes a documentary corpus comprising corporate reports, environmental and social impact assessments, consultation records, legal proceedings, NGO reports, and international accountability mechanisms. These materials are interpreted through an analytical framework integrating green extractivism, the Capability Approach, and ESG governance.

The findings demonstrate that ESG functions as an institutional framework through which corporate accountability is organized, communicated, and evaluated across renewable energy governance. Using mechanisms such as due diligence, stakeholder engagement, disclosure, reporting, and transnational accountability, ESG expands the institutional architecture for organizing, communicating, and evaluating responsible corporate conduct. At the same time, these mechanisms do not necessarily resolve broader governance and justice questions concerning participation, territorial authority, and community self-determination. Rather than representing equivalent objectives, corporate accountability and justice emerge as related but analytically distinct dimensions of renewable energy governance.

By interpreting ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability, this research contributes to broader discussions of corporate accountability, renewable energy governance, and just energy transitions. It argues that strengthening institutional accountability is an important component of renewable energy governance but should not be understood as synonymous with advancing justice, which depends on broader governance processes beyond the institutional boundaries of corporate accountability.

Key Words: Corporate accountability; Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG); Renewable energy governance; Just energy transitions; Green extractivism.

Foreword

This Major Research Paper reflects the objectives of my Area of Concentration in the political economy of environmental transitions in the Global South and fulfills the requirements of the Master in Environmental Studies (MES) degree at York University. More importantly, it represents the culmination of the intellectual journey that shaped my graduate studies.

Having completed my undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies before beginning the MES, I entered the program already familiar with many of the ideas that would continue to shape my graduate studies. Rather than introducing me to these topics, the MES challenged me to think about them differently. Throughout the program, I came to understand that climate change and sustainability cannot be understood solely as environmental challenges. They are also questions of governance, justice, institutions, and power. Perhaps the most important lesson I take from the MES is that there are rarely simple answers to complex environmental problems.

This perspective shaped the direction of my research in ways I never anticipated. One of the most unexpected aspects of my graduate studies was completing the Business and the Environment Diploma. Before beginning the program, I never imagined that my major research paper would engage so closely with corporations. However, the diploma exposed me to a dimension of sustainability that I had not previously experienced. Seeing how corporations are increasingly shaping environmental governance fundamentally changed the kinds of questions I wanted to ask and ultimately led me to examine corporate accountability through the lens of renewable energy governance and justice.

Looking back, I realize that this research became the place where the experiences that defined my MES converged. My interest in environmental justice, renewable energy transitions, corporate accountability, and my connection to Mexico all found their way into a single research project. Completing this MRP has reinforced the kind of environmental scholar I aspire to become: one who approaches the complexity of climate change and sustainability with intellectual curiosity, interdisciplinary thinking, and the willingness to engage with the difficult questions they inevitably raise.

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And finally, this MRP is for all of you. My name may appear on its cover, but it exists because of the love, trust, encouragement, and generosity of every person who walked beside me along the way.

AI Disclaimer: This Major Research Paper has employed AI for the translation of two documents belonging to the corpus of the case study.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Climate Change, Transformation, and Governance

Climate change has emerged as one of the defining governance challenges of the twenty-first century. Addressing it requires considerably more than reducing greenhouse gas emissions or deploying new technologies. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Calvin et al., 2023, p.28) emphasizes, limiting global warming depends upon *"rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented transformations"* across energy systems, economies, institutions, and society. Climate change therefore presents not only an environmental challenge but also a broader question concerning how large-scale societal transformation can be collectively organized.

This understanding has increasingly informed contemporary scholarship on sustainability transformations. Rather than viewing environmental change as a technical process of improving existing systems, scholars argue that responding to climate change requires fundamental transformations in the ways societies produce, govern, and organize social, political, and economic life (Scoones et al., 2015). Such transformations involve reconfiguring institutional arrangements, redistributing authority among public and private actors, and renegotiating the rules through which collective action is coordinated.

This perspective is reflected more broadly within sustainability transitions scholarship. As Avelino et al. (2016) argue, sustainability transitions involve profound changes in the structures, institutions, and actor relationships that organize contemporary socio-technical systems. Rather than unfolding through technological innovation alone, transitions emerge through evolving interactions among governments, markets, civil society, and other institutions whose decisions collectively shape societal change.

Understanding climate change through this institutional lens therefore shifts analytical attention beyond environmental outcomes alone toward the governance arrangements through which transformative change is pursued. Examining climate action consequently requires understanding not only what transformations are sought, but also how they are organized, who participates in them, and the institutional frameworks through which responsibilities are defined and coordinated (Avelino et al., 2016; Calvin et al., 2023)

1.2 Renewable Energy, Corporate Accountability, and the Challenge of Justice

The transformations required to address climate change are becoming increasingly visible through the expansion of renewable energy. Across international climate governance, renewable energy has emerged as one of the principal means through which decarbonization is expected to be achieved, supported by sustained investment, technological innovation, enabling infrastructure, regulatory reform, and institutional coordination (Calvin et al., 2023, IRENA, 2024). Achieving this transition, however, depends upon considerably more than technological substitution alone. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that renewable energy transitions are implemented through complex governance arrangements involving multiple public and private actors operating across different institutional and territorial scales (Bridge et al., 2013; Sareen & Haarstad, 2020). Governance therefore emerges through evolving relationships among governments, corporations, financial institutions, regulators, investors, civil society organizations, and affected communities, each contributing to how climate objectives are pursued and implemented.

Among these actors, corporations warrant particular analytical attention. While governments establish climate targets, regulatory frameworks, and broader development priorities, corporations increasingly participate as project developers, investors, constructors, and operators of the renewable energy projects through which these broader objectives are implemented (Bridge et al., 2013; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Through decisions concerning project design, investment, environmental and social assessment, stakeholder engagement, land access, and long-term operation, corporations become central participants in the governance processes through which renewable energy projects are planned, assessed, and delivered. Their analytical significance therefore lies not in being the only actors shaping the energy transition, but in occupying a distinctive role within the implementation of renewable energy development.

This role becomes particularly significant within many Global South contexts, where renewable energy development frequently intersects with broader priorities relating to economic development, industrialization, infrastructure expansion, foreign investment, and energy access (Medinilla et al., 2025; IRENA, 2024). As Medinilla et al. (2025) argue, the challenge of the energy transition extends beyond technological deployment to the governance of implementation, requiring coordination among actors with different interests, incentives, and institutional responsibilities. Renewable energy projects therefore become

sites where climate, development, investment, and governance objectives converge, further expanding the importance of corporate conduct within contemporary energy transitions.

As the responsibilities assumed by corporations within renewable energy development have expanded, so too have expectations regarding how their conduct should be governed. Beyond complying with legal and regulatory requirements, corporations are increasingly expected to assess environmental and social impacts, engage affected communities, conduct human rights due diligence, disclose environmental and social performance, establish grievance mechanisms, and demonstrate responsible business conduct through an expanding range of institutional processes (Pollman, 2024; Wang, 2023). Collectively, these developments reflect a broader shift in how corporate accountability is governed, extending beyond the internal practices of individual firms to encompass the institutional arrangements through which corporate responsibilities are defined, communicated, evaluated, and contested (Pollman, 2024; Wang, 2023). Within this evolving institutional landscape, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) has emerged as one of the principal governance frameworks through which claims of corporate accountability are organized, communicated, and evaluated (Wang, 2023). Understanding how ESG conceptualizes corporate accountability therefore becomes important for understanding the governance of renewable energy development.

1.3 Research Question, Objectives, and Significance of the Study

The preceding discussion established that renewable energy transitions are increasingly governed through complex institutional arrangements involving multiple actors and that corporations have assumed an expanding role within the implementation of renewable energy development. As ESG has become an increasingly influential framework through which corporate accountability is organized and evaluated, important questions remain regarding its potential and limitations for addressing the justice-related challenges that continue to accompany renewable energy development.

This Major Research Paper (MRP) examines the relationship between corporate accountability and justice within renewable energy governance by interpreting ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability. In doing so, it seeks to assess the potential and limitations of ESG for advancing a just energy transition. Accordingly, this MRP asks: **What are the potential and limitations of ESG, understood as an institutional framework of corporate accountability, for advancing a just energy transition?**

To address this question, the study pursues three interrelated objectives: **(i)** to examine ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability within renewable energy governance; **(ii)** to analyse how corporate accountability is represented through the proposed Gunaa Sicarú wind energy project in La Unión Hidalgo, Oaxaca; and **(iii)** to assess the relationship between corporate accountability and justice through the analytical perspectives of green extractivism and the Capability Approach.

By interpreting ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability, this MRP contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding renewable energy governance and just energy transitions. In doing so, it advances an institutional understanding of ESG while offering a nuanced assessment of its potential and limitations for advancing a just energy transition.

Chapter 2: From Green Transitions to Green Extractivism

2.1 Renewable Energy Transitions as Political Projects

Contemporary climate governance increasingly positions renewable energy at the centre of global decarbonization efforts. The *World Energy Transitions Outlook 2024* identifies renewable technologies as being "at the very heart of strategies for climate, development and energy security" (IRENA, 2024, p. 48). Rather than presenting renewable electricity as a discrete climate mitigation measure, the report argues that maintaining a pathway consistent with limiting global warming to 1.5°C depends upon the coordinated expansion of renewable electricity, electrification, energy efficiency, enabling infrastructure, institutional capacity, supportive policy frameworks, and sustained public and private investment (IRENA, 2024). Decarbonization is therefore conceived not as a single technological intervention, but as an economy-wide transformation requiring coordinated technological, financial, regulatory, and institutional change (IRENA, 2024).

This understanding of renewable energy transitions has, however, prompted a growing body of scholarship questioning the assumptions underpinning contemporary decarbonization strategies. Instead of treating the expansion of renewable energy as a self-evident pathway towards sustainability, scholars argue that energy transitions are shaped by competing development models, governance arrangements, and political priorities (Scoones et al., 2015; Transnational Institute & Taller Ecologista, 2019). Even the same renewable technologies may be deployed through fundamentally different systems of ownership, regulation, participation, and state intervention, producing materially different transition pathways. (Transnational Institute & Taller Ecologista, 2019; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013).

Renewable energy therefore emerges not simply as a technological solution to climate change, but as a site through which different political projects of decarbonization are advanced.

Recognizing that renewable energy transitions follow competing political pathways also raised new questions about how those pathways become materially organized. As attention increasingly turned towards the spatial organization of energy transitions, scholars questioned the assumption that transitions unfold independently of the territories through which they are realized. Bridge et al. (2013) argue that transition scholarship had predominantly conceptualized energy transitions as temporal processes, emphasizing movement between successive energy regimes while paying comparatively less attention to their geographical dimensions. Their intervention reconceptualizes energy transitions as spatial processes constituted through changing relationships between infrastructure, territory, landscape, scale, and networks (Bridge et al., 2013). From this perspective, renewable energy projects do not simply occupy territory; they actively reorganize relationships between land, infrastructure, governance, and resource use across multiple spatial scales. Geography therefore becomes constitutive of renewable energy transitions themselves, shaping how competing transition pathways are materially realized.

Yet demonstrating how transition pathways become spatially differentiated does not, on its own, explain why particular territorial configurations emerge over others. Similar landscapes of renewable energy development may nevertheless reflect fundamentally different systems of ownership, investment, regulation, and governance. It is precisely this question that Newell and Mulvaney (2013) address through a political economy of low-carbon transitions. Rather than treating decarbonization as a predominantly technological undertaking, they argue that renewable energy development is embedded within relations of production, investment, ownership, accumulation, and state intervention that shape both how transitions proceed and whose interests they ultimately serve. Their analysis situates renewable energy development within broader relations of production, investment, ownership, accumulation, and state intervention that shape both how transitions proceed and whose interests they ultimately serve.

Taken together, these studies transformed the way renewable energy transitions came to be understood. What initially appeared within climate governance as a technological pathway towards decarbonization increasingly emerged as a political project shaped by competing visions of development, territorial organization, governance, and political economy (Bridge et al., 2013; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Scoones et al., 2015; Transnational

Institute & Taller Ecologista, 2019). Rather than asking only how renewable technologies can replace fossil fuels, scholarship increasingly asked how decarbonization itself is organized, through which institutions, across which territories, and in service of what models of development.

Yet recognizing renewable energy transitions as political projects also directs attention towards a new question. Explaining how decarbonization is politically organized, geographically constituted, and institutionally governed does not, on its own, explain how these contemporary transformations intersect with the longer histories through which land, resources, and authority have been organized. Renewable energy transitions do not unfold upon politically neutral territory. Rather, they proceed through landscapes already constituted through enduring relations of extraction, uneven development, and contested forms of territorial governance. How, then, should renewable energy transitions be understood when they unfold through territories already shaped by historical extractive relations? It is this unresolved question that provides the point of departure for the concept of green extractivism developed in the following section.

2.2 Green Extractivism and the Reproduction of Unequal Power Relations

The political and territorial dimensions identified in the preceding section provide the foundation for understanding the emergence of green extractivism as a critical framework for analysing contemporary energy transitions. Emerging from longstanding debates within Latin American political ecology concerning development, extractivism, and territorial governance, this framework does not begin from the premise that renewable energy is environmentally equivalent to fossil-fuel development, nor does it deny the necessity of decarbonization (Bruna, 2022; Dunlap et al., 2024). Rather, it asks whether development undertaken in the name of sustainability transforms the political and economic relations through which land, resources, authority, and economic benefits are organized, or whether these relations are instead reconfigured around new technologies and environmental objectives (Dunlap et al., 2024). In doing so, the framework shifts analytical attention away from the environmental characteristics of renewable technologies alone and towards the political-economic, territorial, and governance processes through which low-carbon development is pursued (Bruna, 2022; Dunlap et al., 2024).

Green extractivism builds upon longstanding debates within Latin American political ecology that conceptualize extractivism primarily as a model of development rather than as a characteristic of particular natural resources. Gudynas (2009, 2021) conceptualizes

extractivism as a mode of accumulation centred on the intensive appropriation of nature, large-scale production, and the orientation of resources towards external markets. Extractivism is therefore defined less by the extraction of particular materials than by the political and economic relations through which nature is appropriated and incorporated into broader processes of accumulation (Gudynas, 2009, 2021). Acosta (2013) similarly argues that extractive dynamics are not limited to mining or hydrocarbons but may also characterize activities based upon renewable resources whenever they become subject to intensive forms of appropriation and externally oriented development. Consequently, the renewable character of wind, solar, forests, or agricultural systems does not, in itself, determine whether the development model through which they are governed is non-extractive (Acosta, 2013). Although, for example, wind itself is inexhaustible, the infrastructures required to capture, transmit, and commercialize its energy remain dependent upon land, investment, ownership, institutions, and governance arrangements that may reproduce familiar patterns of territorial intervention and resource control (Gudynas, 2021; Acosta, 2013). The critical distinction, therefore, lies not between renewable and non-renewable resources, but between different ways of organizing their appropriation, governance, and social purpose (Gudynas, 2021; Svampa, 2019).

Against this intellectual backdrop, scholars increasingly began asking whether renewable energy transitions, despite their environmental objectives, might also reproduce extractive relations. Dunlap et al. (2024) trace the emergence of the concept of *green extractivism* to discussions first published in 2017 surrounding wind energy, coal mining, and ecological offsetting, where it described the reconciliation of industrial extraction with claims of environmental sustainability under the emerging green economy. Since then, the concept has evolved into a broader analytical framework for examining how low-carbon development may continue to reproduce relations of appropriation, accumulation, and territorial control (Bruna, 2022; Dunlap et al., 2024). Earlier concepts such as *green grabbing* highlighted environmentally justified land appropriation (Fairhead et al., 2012), while green extractivism broadens this analysis from land acquisition alone to the wider political-economic organization of renewable energy development.

From this perspective, renewable energy projects are understood not simply as technological interventions but as governance arrangements through which decisions about land, authority, participation, and development are negotiated (Bridge et al., 2013). Consequently, this analytical framework redirects attention towards questions of ownership, political authority, participation, territorial governance, institutional legitimacy, and the forms

of knowledge that become recognized within decision-making processes. Rather than treating unequal outcomes as isolated project impacts, it asks how they emerge through the political and economic organization of development itself (Bruna, 2022). In doing so, the framework shifts analysis from evaluating the impacts of renewable energy projects towards examining the relations through which those impacts are produced. Renewable energy transitions are therefore understood not simply as technological substitutions, but as political processes through which competing visions of development, authority, and socioecological futures are negotiated (Bridge et al., 2013). Green extractivism consequently provides a framework for analysing not only the outcomes of renewable energy development, but also the structures of governance, authority, and valuation through which those outcomes become possible (Bruna, 2022).

These relations do not remain confined to individual projects. Renewable energy infrastructures are embedded within broader political-economic systems that connect local territories to national policy, transnational finance, industrial production, and global value chains (Verweijen & Dunlap, 2021). Accordingly, green extractivism directs attention to the multiscalar political-economic relations through which renewable energy development is organized. Renewable energy infrastructures are embedded. Across different contexts, political ecology research has shown that renewable energy development frequently gives rise to disputes over land access, participation, benefit sharing, and governance, illustrating how low-carbon transitions may reproduce existing political-economic relations even while contributing to climate mitigation objectives (Dunlap et al., 2024).

Green extractivism therefore asks not simply whether renewable energy contributes to decarbonization, but whether the political-economic and governance arrangements through which it is pursued transform, or instead reproduce, the unequal relations that have historically organized development (Gudynas, 2021). By explaining how contemporary renewable energy transitions become embedded within broader relations of power, accumulation, and territorial governance, the framework provides a powerful account of how these inequalities are produced and reproduced. Yet explanation alone cannot determine whether such arrangements are just (Barragán-Contreras et al., 2025). Addressing that question requires a normative framework capable of evaluating competing claims concerning participation, development, and accountability. It is to that task that the following chapter now turns.

Chapter 3: Rethinking Renewable Energy Governance

3.1 Justice as a Central Consideration in Renewable Energy Governance

Energy occupies a distinctive place in everyday life, enabling many of the activities through which people pursue individual and collective well-being. Heating and cooling homes, preparing food, accessing healthcare and education, communicating with others, travelling, and participating in economic and political life all depend, to varying degrees, upon access to energy services (Day et al., 2016). Yet these examples also reveal something more fundamental. People do not seek electricity or fuel for their own sake, but for the opportunities that energy makes possible. Recognising this distinction, an expanding body of scholarship has increasingly conceptualized energy not as an end in itself, but as the means through which fundamental human needs are met and well-being is supported (Brand-Correa & Steinberger, 2017). Energy therefore derives its significance from the services it provides and the ways in which those services enable individuals and communities to pursue lives they have reason to value (Melin & Kronlid, 2019). By repositioning energy as a means rather than an end, this body of scholarship redirected attention from the provision of energy itself to the opportunities that energy creates, establishing human well-being as a central consideration in subsequent debates concerning energy governance and justice.

Understanding energy in these terms also carries important normative implications. If energy enables people to achieve valued ways of living, then decisions regarding how energy is produced, distributed, and governed cannot be understood solely as technical or economic matters. This understanding closely reflects Sen's (1999) conception of development as the expansion of substantive freedoms, whereby what ultimately matters is not merely the resources individuals possess, but their capabilities to achieve the kinds of lives they have reason to value. Viewing energy as an enabler of human well-being also changes the questions scholars ask of energy systems, shifting attention beyond whether energy is available towards how its benefits, burdens, and opportunities are experienced across different communities. As Sovacool and Dworkin (2015) argue, questions of justice emerge because energy systems distribute both benefits and burdens unevenly while simultaneously shaping opportunities for participation and recognition within energy decision-making. Understanding these inequalities therefore requires attention not only to patterns of energy provision, but also to the governance arrangements through which decisions concerning energy systems are made.

The field of energy justice emerged in response to these concerns. Building upon earlier work in environmental justice, scholars sought conceptual approaches capable of evaluating not only the technical performance of energy systems but also their social consequences and normative implications (Jenkins et al., 2016). As the field expanded, energy justice came to encompass a broad interdisciplinary conversation concerned with understanding where energy-related injustices arise, how they are experienced by different communities, and how governance arrangements might better anticipate, prevent, or address them (Heffron & McCauley, 2017). Justice subsequently came to be understood not simply as an aspiration of energy policy, but as a necessary lens through which the social implications of energy systems could be examined and evaluated.

As renewable energy became increasingly central to climate change mitigation and decarbonization strategies, these discussions acquired renewed significance. An expanding body of scholarship observed that the expansion of renewable energy technologies also generated new social and governance challenges, particularly regarding participation, local well-being, Indigenous rights, benefit-sharing, and community engagement (Velasco-Herrejón & Bauwens, 2020). In this way, renewable energy transitions increasingly came to be understood as socio-technical transformations whose outcomes are shaped by the institutional arrangements through which projects are planned, implemented, and experienced by affected communities (Velasco-Herrejón & Bauwens, 2020). These developments also highlighted the need for analytical approaches capable of evaluating not only the environmental outcomes of renewable energy projects, but also the governance processes through which those outcomes are pursued. Among these, the distributive, procedural, and recognition framework has become one of the most influential approaches within the field (Jenkins et al., 2016) and provides the starting point for the discussion that follows.

3.2 Distributive, Procedural, and Recognition Justice: Contributions and Limitations

As justice became established as a central concern within renewable energy governance, a new challenge emerged. Recognizing that energy transitions raised questions of justice did not, in itself, provide a means of examining how those injustices were produced, experienced, or addressed. The field therefore required an analytical vocabulary capable of moving justice beyond a broad normative aspiration and into a framework through which renewable energy governance could be systematically evaluated (Jenkins et al., 2016). In response, energy justice scholarship increasingly converged around three interrelated dimensions (distribution, procedure, and recognition) as a means of examining how justice

and injustice materialize throughout the development of energy systems (McCauley et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016). Although often presented as three complementary dimensions, distribution, procedure, and recognition can also be understood as reflecting the gradual expansion of what scholars came to regard as relevant to justice (Walker, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2016; Heffron, 2024). Attention moved from the distribution of impacts to the institutional processes through which those impacts were produced, and finally to the social relations that shape whose knowledge, identities, and values become authoritative within environmental governance.

Initially, this analytical framework challenged the tendency to evaluate renewable energy transitions primarily through aggregate measures of performance, including efficiency, security of supply, or carbon reduction. Building on environmental justice scholarship, distributive justice redirected attention towards the uneven allocation of the benefits, burdens, risks, and responsibilities associated with energy development (Walker, 2009). In doing so, distributive justice expanded the study of renewable energy governance by demonstrating that assessments of energy transitions also required attention to their differentiated social and territorial consequences. Questions of employment, infrastructure, investment, environmental degradation, land use, and financial costs consequently became integral to evaluating renewable energy projects (Jenkins et al., 2016). Distributive justice therefore established that the consequences of renewable energy development constitute a question of justice rather than a secondary consideration within energy policy.

Yet identifying unequal outcomes did not fully explain how those patterns emerged. Knowing who benefited from renewable energy development, or who disproportionately bore its costs, revealed little about the institutional arrangements through which those outcomes were produced. This prompted a second expansion in the study of justice, shifting attention from the consequences of energy development to the governance processes through which those consequences were negotiated. Procedural justice therefore introduced questions concerning participation, transparency, access to information, institutional accountability, and the ability of affected communities to influence or contest decisions (Walker, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2016). At the same time, scholarship examining public responses to energy infrastructure challenged the tendency to dismiss community opposition as a problem of public misunderstanding or "NIMBYism." Instead, responses to renewable energy projects increasingly came to be understood as shaped by the physical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts within which development occurred, reinforcing the importance of deliberative governance and meaningful engagement between affected communities, public

authorities, and project developers (Owens & Driffill, 2008). Justice came to encompass outcomes alongside the institutional arrangements through which they were produced.

Questions of institutional fairness, however, did not fully resolve persistent patterns of exclusion. Even where participatory mechanisms existed, they did not necessarily ensure that all actors entered those processes on equal terms or that their perspectives carried comparable authority. A further expansion emerged through the incorporation of recognition, extending analysis beyond institutional procedures to the broader social and cultural conditions that shape environmental governance. Drawing upon theories of recognition developed within political philosophy, environmental justice scholars argued that cultural domination, non-recognition, and the systematic devaluation of particular identities and forms of knowledge constitute injustices in their own right (Walker, 2009). Within renewable energy governance, recognition shifted attention towards whether communities were acknowledged not simply as stakeholders to be consulted, but as legitimate political actors whose relationships to territory, development, and well-being were capable of shaping decision-making itself. In this way, the framework expanded once more: from the distribution of impacts, to the governance of decisions, and finally to the social relations that determine whose knowledge and values become meaningful within those governance processes.

These successive developments provided an analytical framework through which renewable energy governance could be examined across multiple dimensions. Energy transitions could now be examined through the distribution of impacts, the institutions responsible for governing those impacts, and the recognition of the communities most directly affected by them, complementing assessments of their technological and environmental performance. This analytical framework established a coherent basis for evaluating the fairness of renewable energy governance across diverse political and geographical contexts, while simultaneously demonstrating that the success of an energy transition could not be separated from the governance arrangements through which it unfolded (Heffron, 2024). For the purposes of this dissertation, however, its significance lies as much in the questions it enables as in those it leaves unresolved. Collectively, the distributive, procedural, and recognition dimensions provide a robust framework for evaluating whether the benefits and burdens of development are allocated equitably, whether decision-making processes are inclusive and accountable, and whether affected communities are recognised as legitimate participants within those processes (Jenkins et al., 2016; Heffron, 2024). These remain indispensable questions for understanding the governance of renewable energy development.

Yet evaluating the fairness of governance is not identical to evaluating what that governance ultimately enables people and communities to be and to do. A renewable energy project may incorporate participatory procedures, formally recognise affected communities, and provide material compensation while still reshaping people's substantive opportunities in ways that remain difficult to capture through this framework alone. Recent applications of the Capability Approach build upon this distinction by shifting analytical attention from the fairness of institutional arrangements towards the substantive freedoms those arrangements ultimately expand or constrain (Velasco-Herrejón & Bauwens, 2020; Corvino et al., 2021). Rather than asking only whether governance processes are fair, this perspective asks what kinds of lives those processes ultimately make possible for the individuals and communities who experience them. It is this conception of justice that guides the analysis developed in the following section.

3.3 The Capability Approach as a Framework for Justice

The distributive, procedural, and recognition framework has become one of the dominant approaches through which justice is understood within renewable energy scholarship. By identifying the principal dimensions through which questions of justice arise, it has substantially expanded the analytical scope of energy justice research. Yet, as its application has grown, scholars have increasingly questioned whether these three dimensions alone are sufficient to explain what justice ultimately requires. Rather than rejecting the distributive, procedural, and recognition framework, this emerging body of scholarship has sought to extend it by asking a different question: beyond identifying where questions of justice arise, how should justice itself be understood?

It is precisely this question that motivates the work of Velasco-Herrejón and Bauwens (2020). Building upon the growing influence of the distributive, procedural, and recognition framework, they argue that these dimensions provide only a partial account of justice within renewable energy development. While the triumvirate offers a valuable vocabulary for identifying distributive, procedural, and recognition concerns, it provides comparatively limited guidance regarding how justice and injustice should ultimately be understood, whose understanding of justice should prevail, and how they should be interpreted across diverse social and cultural contexts. To address these limitations, they propose extending the energy justice framework through the Capability Approach, arguing that justice should ultimately be evaluated in relation to the lives that people have reason to value.

Dissatisfied with approaches that measured advantage primarily through the distribution of resources, utility, or formal rights, Amartya Sen (1999) developed the Capability Approach as an alternative way of understanding justice. Sen argued that these measures provide only a partial account of human well-being because they reveal relatively little about what people are actually able to achieve in practice. Individuals possessing comparable resources or legal entitlements may nevertheless experience profoundly different opportunities as a consequence of differences in health, gender, social norms, institutional arrangements, environmental conditions, or political circumstances (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). Justice, therefore, cannot be understood solely by examining what people possess, but must also consider what they are genuinely able to be and to do.

This understanding of justice is organised around the distinction between **functionings** and **capabilities**, which together constitute the analytical foundation of the Capability Approach. Functionings refer to the various beings and doings that individuals have reason to value, including maintaining meaningful livelihoods, participating in political life, preserving cultural practices, sustaining relationships with territory, achieving physical well-being, or exercising autonomy (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1999). Capabilities, by contrast, refer to the substantive opportunities available to achieve those valued functionings. Justice is therefore evaluated not simply according to the functions individuals ultimately achieve, but according to the genuine opportunities they possess to pursue lives they have reason to value.

Central to this perspective is Sen's conception of **agency**, understood as people's capacity to pursue goals they themselves have reason to value, together with what Robeyns (2017) identifies as **conversion factors**: the personal, social, environmental, economic, and institutional conditions that shape the extent to which available resources can be transformed into valued functionings. Consequently, identical resources, legal protections, financial compensation, or participatory mechanisms do not necessarily generate identical opportunities. The object of evaluation therefore shifts from the distribution of resources towards the substantive freedoms that individuals and communities possess.

This reorientation has proven particularly valuable within renewable energy scholarship. Building on the conceptual contribution of Velasco-Herrejón and Bauwens (2020), subsequent work has demonstrated how the Capability Approach can be applied to examine the impacts of renewable energy development. Applying the framework to wind energy infrastructure in La Unión Hidalgo, Velasco-Herrejón et al. (2024) argue that the Capability Approach enables analysis of how renewable energy development shapes the opportunities available for affected individuals to pursue lives they have reason to value. This

illustrates how the Capability Approach allows renewable energy projects to be evaluated in relation to locally situated understandings of well-being rather than predetermined or externally defined criteria. Similarly, Corvino et al. (2021) argue that capabilities provide an appropriate evaluative "currency" through which the gains and losses associated with energy infrastructures can be understood. Together, these contributions reinforce the value of assessing renewable energy projects in terms of its implications for substantive freedoms.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that justice cannot be understood solely through the distribution of resources or the fairness of institutional arrangements. Instead, they reorient its normative focus towards the substantive freedoms that individuals and communities possess. This conception of justice establishes the normative foundation adopted throughout this dissertation.

3.4 From Normative Theory to Institutional Analysis

Justice requires more than identifying where inequalities occur; it also requires a conception of what those inequalities ultimately mean for the lives people are able to lead. The preceding sections have established the conception of justice that informs this Major Research Paper. Drawing on the Capability Approach, justice has been understood as a question of the substantive freedoms individuals and communities possess to pursue lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). This normative perspective provides the evaluative basis for the analysis that follows. It clarifies what justice requires, but it does not by itself explain how such commitments become reflected in the governance arrangements through which social, political, and economic life is organized.

Governance concerns the systems of norms, rules, institutions, and practices through which collective affairs are managed and responsibilities are organized across multiple actors (Ruggie, 2014). From this perspective, conceptions of justice do not operate independently of institutions. Normative commitments acquire institutional significance through the governance arrangements that organize decision-making, allocate responsibilities, and mediate competing claims. (Ruggie, 2014). The remainder of this MRP therefore shifts from normative theory to institutional analysis. Having established the normative conception of justice adopted in this study, the following chapter turns to the institutional development of corporate accountability before examining the relationship between ESG and justice.

Chapter 4: ESG and the Search for Corporate Accountability

4.1 The Institutional Evolution of Corporate Accountability

The central concern of this Major Research Paper is corporate accountability. More specifically, it examines whether Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) can function as a mechanism of corporate accountability capable of advancing justice within renewable energy governance in the Global South. Evaluating this question, however, requires more than describing ESG as a contemporary governance framework. It first requires understanding the historical evolution of corporate accountability itself. The contemporary ESG framework is best understood as the latest institutional expression of the much longer and frequently contested evolution of corporate accountability. Rather than emerging as an isolated corporate initiative or as the direct successor to corporate social responsibility (CSR), ESG represents the convergence of a series of intellectual and institutional transformations that progressively redefined the purpose of the corporation, expanded expectations surrounding corporate responsibility, operationalized those expectations through disclosure and reporting, and ultimately integrated these considerations into financial decision-making. (Moon, 2014). Reconstructing this history is therefore essential for understanding how ESG emerged, as well as for identifying the assumptions embedded within the framework before evaluating its capacity to function as a mechanism of corporate accountability within renewable energy governance in the Global South (Pollman, 2022).

Understanding the evolution of corporate accountability requires first examining the intellectual foundations upon which the modern corporation was constructed. Throughout much of the twentieth century, prevailing theories of the firm were dominated by the doctrine of **shareholder primacy**, which maintained that the fundamental purpose of the corporation was to generate value for its shareholders. Within this framework, the primary responsibility of corporate managers was understood to be the creation of shareholder value. Milton Friedman's (1970, para.33) influential assertion that "the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits" became perhaps the clearest articulation of this perspective, while later corporate governance scholarship, particularly Stephen M. Bainbridge's defence of director primacy, reinforced its legal and institutional foundations (Friedman, 1970; Bainbridge, 2002; Moon, 2014). Environmental protection, labour conditions, community well-being, and broader societal concerns were therefore not regarded as intrinsic corporate responsibilities. Rather, they were understood as matters to be addressed through governments, markets, or

civil society, while corporations fulfilled their societal role by operating efficiently within the boundaries established by law (Friedman, 1970; Bainbridge, 2002).

Although questions surrounding the social purpose of the corporation long predated ESG, they acquired renewed urgency as multinational corporations expanded in scale, economic significance, and political influence throughout the twentieth century. As Barra et al. (2026) demonstrates, the emergence of the modern multinational corporation fundamentally altered the relationship between business and society. Corporations increasingly came to shape employment, environmental outcomes, technological development, and public policy at a scale previously associated primarily with states, transforming them into institutions whose decisions carried significant social and environmental consequences (Barra et al., 2026; Moon, 2014). The historical significance of this transformation therefore lies not simply in the growing visibility of corporate impacts, but in the realization that institutions exercising such extensive influence could no longer be evaluated exclusively through financial performance. The question confronting both scholars and policymakers was no longer whether corporations generated economic value, but whether existing conceptions of corporate accountability remained adequate for governing institutions whose activities increasingly extended beyond the marketplace.

It was within this changing institutional landscape that the intellectual foundations of shareholder primacy began to reveal their limitations. While the framework provided a coherent understanding of financial accountability, it offered comparatively little guidance for addressing the increasingly visible environmental and social consequences of corporate activity. Stakeholder theory emerged as perhaps the most influential response to this tension. Rather than conceiving the corporation as existing solely to maximize shareholder returns, In 1984 Edward Freeman proposed that organizations create long-term value through relationships with a broader constellation of stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, governments, and local communities (Freeman et al., 2021). Importantly, stakeholder theory did not simply expand the number of actors considered relevant to corporate decision-making; it fundamentally redefined the corporation itself. Accountability was no longer understood exclusively as a fiduciary relationship between managers and shareholders but increasingly as a broader social relationship embedded within multiple, and often competing, stakeholder interests (Pollman, 2022). As Moon (2014) observes, this marked an important historical shift in the evolution of corporate responsibility, moving the corporation beyond a narrowly financial conception of accountability toward one that increasingly recognized its wider social role. The significance of stakeholder theory within

the genealogy reconstructed here therefore lies not in establishing the foundations of ESG directly, but in redefining the boundaries of corporate accountability itself. Once the corporation was understood as an institution whose legitimacy depended upon relationships extending beyond shareholders alone, the question was no longer simply **who** corporations were accountable to, but increasingly **what** those expanded responsibilities entailed.

The gradual expansion of the corporation's accountability beyond shareholders transformed the substance of corporate responsibility. If stakeholder theory broadened the community to whom corporations were accountable, subsequent developments increasingly questioned what those responsibilities should entail. As Moon (2014) observes, environmental stewardship, labour standards, community relations, and sustainable development increasingly entered debates that had previously been dominated by financial performance alone. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and stakeholder governance reflected different attempts to articulate these expanding expectations while remaining conceptually distinct (Pollman, 2022). Collectively, these developments signalled an important transformation in corporate accountability. Financial performance remained central to evaluating corporate success, yet it was increasingly accompanied by expectations that corporations also account for the broader environmental and social consequences of their activities (Moon, 2014; Pollman, 2022).

Throughout this period, earlier conceptions of corporate accountability did not disappear. Shareholder primacy, stakeholder governance, CSR, sustainability, and later ESG continued to coexist, frequently competing over both the purpose of the corporation and the mechanisms through which accountability should be exercised (Wang, 2023). The historical evolution of corporate accountability therefore reflects the accumulation of successive institutional responses to changing expectations surrounding the role of the corporation rather than the replacement of one framework by another.

As expectations surrounding corporate responsibility expanded, another institutional challenge emerged. If corporations were increasingly expected to account for their environmental and social impacts, those responsibilities also needed to become observable. During the late 1990s, sustainability reporting initiatives and disclosure frameworks began translating broad principles of corporate responsibility into more systematic forms of organizational reporting, gradually shifting accountability from normative aspiration toward institutional practice (Cash, 2025; Pollman, 2022). Questions of corporate responsibility therefore became increasingly connected to questions of governance: how environmental and

social information should be measured, reported, evaluated, and communicated to external audiences.

By the early 2000s, these developments converged within a more coherent institutional architecture. The publication of *Who Cares Wins* (2004), the Freshfields Report (2005), and the Principles for Responsible Investment (2006) marked an important turning point by framing environmental, social, and governance considerations not only as expressions of responsible corporate conduct, but also as information capable of informing investment analysis, fiduciary duty, and capital allocation (Global Compact, 2004; Pollman, 2022). ESG emerged through this broader institutional development, consolidating earlier debates concerning corporate purpose, stakeholder responsibility, sustainability, disclosure, and governance into a common framework through which corporate accountability could increasingly be organized, evaluated, and communicated.

This historical evolution also highlights that ESG emerged within traditions of corporate governance and sustainable finance that developed primarily in the Global North. Understanding these institutional foundations is important because the governance challenges examined throughout this Major Research Paper arise within a different political and historical context. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, renewable energy development in the Global South is shaped by questions of extractivism, territorial rights, environmental justice, and historical inequality that influence how corporate accountability is understood, negotiated, and contested (Dunlap et al., 2024; Gudynas, 2021). The following section therefore turns from the historical evolution of corporate accountability to examining ESG itself as a governance framework before evaluating its implications for renewable energy governance.

4.2 ESG as a Governance Framework

The previous section reconstructed the historical evolution through which ESG emerged as the contemporary institutional expression of corporate accountability. That genealogy explains how environmental, social, and governance considerations became incorporated into corporate responsibility; it does not yet explain why ESG has become one of the principal mechanisms through which corporate accountability is now evaluated. ESG is often presented as a reporting framework or a collection of sustainability indicators. These descriptions, however, capture only its most visible features. Viewing ESG as a governance framework requires asking a different question: why have reporting, disclosure, ratings, and standards come to function as evidence of responsible corporate behaviour? This section argues that ESG derives its influence from the institutional architecture through which

environmental and social information is produced, interpreted, and incorporated into governance, investment, and corporate decision-making (Pollman, 2022; Wang, 2023; Cash, 2025).

Building on the evolution developed in the previous section, ESG should not be understood simply as another iteration of CSR or sustainability. Those earlier frameworks expanded expectations surrounding corporate responsibility and established many of the normative commitments that continue to inform ESG today (Moon, 2014; Pollman, 2022). ESG's distinctive contribution was institutional. It institutionalized many of these earlier expectations through practices of disclosure, measurement, evaluation, and financial decision-making. Claims about environmental and social responsibility increasingly became subject to standardized forms of reporting, comparison, and assessment across corporations, investors, and financial markets. The significance of ESG therefore lies less in redefining what responsible corporations ought to do than in establishing institutional processes through which those claims could be evaluated.

As Wang (2023) demonstrates, this governance architecture did not emerge through a single reporting initiative. It developed through the gradual construction of an interconnected institutional infrastructure linking reporting standards, investment principles, disclosure initiatives, and financial markets. One strand of this development focused on creating common reporting frameworks capable of standardizing how corporations communicated environmental and social performance, exemplified by the establishment of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) in 1997. Building upon the historical developments outlined in the previous section, this emerging governance architecture increasingly linked reporting standards, disclosure initiatives, investment principles, financial institutions, and capital markets into an interconnected institutional infrastructure (Wang, 2023). Therefore, these institutions established the conditions through which environmental and social information could circulate, acquire authority, and inform corporate governance and investment decision-making.

The proliferation of reporting frameworks gradually transformed disclosure from a mechanism for communicating information into one of the principal institutional practices through which corporate accountability came to be governed. As Cash (2025) demonstrates, disclosure performs more than an informational function. Decisions concerning materiality, reporting boundaries, indicators, and assurance shape what corporations measure, how environmental and social impacts are categorized, and which aspects of corporate performance become visible to external audiences. Disclosure consequently became

embedded within the institutional processes through which investors allocated capital, regulators evaluated corporate performance, and corporations organized their own governance practices. ESG reports increasingly informed investment analysis, benchmarking exercises, sustainability ratings, and organizational decision-making. Their influence did not stem from disclosure alone, but from the governance architecture within which disclosure acquired institutional significance (Cash, 2025).

This governance architecture extends well beyond reporting itself. Investors, standard-setting organizations, auditors, consultants, rating agencies, stock exchanges, international organizations, and corporations collectively participate in producing, interpreting, and applying ESG standards (Pollman, 2022; Wang, 2023). Their interactions create an institutional ecosystem through which environmental and social information is interpreted, compared, and incorporated into financial and organizational decision-making. ESG therefore operates through a network of governance rather than a single regulatory authority. Its influence reflects the interaction of reporting standards, market expectations, investment practices, and evaluative frameworks that collectively shape how responsible corporate conduct is understood and assessed.

Understanding ESG through this institutional lens helps explain why it has become one of the dominant frameworks through which corporate accountability is evaluated. Reporting frameworks, sustainability ratings, disclosure standards, and investment principles are frequently treated as evidence of responsible corporate behaviour because they have acquired **institutional authority** within contemporary systems of corporate governance and sustainable finance. ESG does not possess authority by virtue of reporting itself. Its authority has been produced through the institutional adoption of common standards, disclosure practices, and evaluative frameworks that have come to define what counts as "*credible"*evidence of responsible corporate behaviour (Barra et al., 2026; Wang, 2023). They increasingly shape how responsibility is interpreted, communicated, and evaluated across corporations, investors, regulators, and financial markets. Understanding ESG as a governance framework therefore explains why these institutional mechanisms have come to occupy such a central position within contemporary corporate accountability.

Explaining how ESG acquired this institutional authority, however, does not establish whether the forms of accountability it produces are capable of responding to the political, social, and environmental realities within which renewable energy projects unfold. Understanding ESG as governance explains **why** reporting, disclosure, ratings, and standards have become widely accepted as evidence of responsible corporate behaviour. It does not yet

demonstrate whether those institutional forms of evaluation are capable of producing the accountability they claim to represent. The following section therefore turns from explaining how ESG governs to examining whether the forms of accountability it produces can generate meaningful corporate accountability and social legitimacy.

4.3 ESG, Legitimacy, and Social Acceptance

Governance alone cannot account for the authority ESG has acquired within contemporary corporate accountability. A further question therefore emerges: **why have reporting standards, ratings, disclosures, and sustainability indicators come to be accepted as credible evidence of responsible corporate behaviour?** Addressing this question requires shifting attention from governance itself to the relationship between knowledge, legitimacy, and social acceptance. While the previous section examined the institutional architecture through which ESG operates, this section considers how the information generated through that architecture comes to be regarded as trustworthy, authoritative, and capable of supporting claims of responsible corporate conduct.

One explanation lies in the growing reliance on indicators as mechanisms for governing complex environmental and social problems. Merry (2011) argues that indicators do more than organize information or facilitate comparison. They produce standardized forms of knowledge that make complex realities visible, measurable, and comparable across institutions. Their authority derives less from technical neutrality than from the institutional acceptance of particular methods of classification, measurement, and evaluation as credible ways of knowing the world. This is central to understanding ESG. ESG indicators do not simply record corporate behaviour; they help establish the categories through which environmental and social performance becomes intelligible to investors, regulators, corporations, and other audiences. In this sense, ESG begins to acquire legitimacy because it produces information in forms that institutions are already prepared to recognize as evidence.

Viewed from this perspective, disclosure acquires a significance that extends beyond transparency. Cash's (2025) work is useful here because it shows how ESG ratings and disclosure practices can operate as signals of trust, credibility, and responsibility, even when they were originally designed for narrower financial or risk-related purposes. The issue is not only that corporations disclose environmental and social information, but that these disclosures are increasingly interpreted as evidence that a corporation is managing its responsibilities appropriately. What appears as objective corporate information is therefore

always preceded by decisions concerning what deserves measurement, how impacts are categorized, and which forms of evidence are considered credible. ESG legitimacy is produced through this movement from information to interpretation: reports, ratings, and indicators become meaningful because they are read as signs of responsible conduct.

This helps clarify why ESG has become closely associated with legitimacy. Ratings, disclosure standards, assurance processes, and sustainability reports increasingly provide corporations with recognizable ways of demonstrating alignment with accepted expectations of responsible business conduct. Their influence rests not on any single metric, but on the institutional confidence placed in the systems that produce and circulate them. Cash (2025) describes this dynamic in relation to ESG ratings, which can become "trust shortcuts" or legitimacy signals even when their methodologies remain contested, fragmented, or opaque. The significance of this argument for this Major Research Paper is that ESG can generate legitimacy without necessarily producing a direct relationship between corporate conduct and affected communities. It can make responsibility appear legible within institutional systems before determining whether that responsibility is experienced as meaningful by those most affected by corporate activity.

This distinction matters because institutional legitimacy should not be confused with social legitimacy. ESG indicators may demonstrate conformity with recognized reporting standards, but they do not necessarily demonstrate that affected communities regard corporate conduct as legitimate. Balza et al. (2023), examining Social License to Operate within the extractive sector, show how mechanisms intended to signal responsiveness to communities may function as forms of private governance through which corporations claim legitimacy without necessarily enabling meaningful community influence. Their analysis is especially useful because it demonstrates that legitimacy cannot simply be asserted through institutional procedures or corporate communication. It depends on social relationships, trust, participation, and the capacity of affected communities to shape the conditions under which legitimacy is granted or withheld.

Social License to Operate therefore serves a specific analytical purpose in this section. It is not a replacement for ESG or as a separate framework that solves the problem of accountability, but it helps clarify what ESG indicators cannot fully capture. ESG primarily evaluates whether corporations conform to recognized governance practices. SLO directs attention to whether corporate conduct is accepted as legitimate by the communities most directly affected by it. The distinction is important because justice, as this MRP understand it, cannot be reduced to institutional recognition alone. A corporation may satisfy disclosure

expectations, receive favourable ratings, or appear aligned with ESG standards while still failing to address the political, cultural, and relational conditions through which affected communities understand harm, responsibility, and consent.

For the purposes of this Major Research Paper, this is the point at which legitimacy begins to connect directly to justice. Merry (2011)'s analysis reminds us that indicators privilege particular forms of knowledge while rendering others less visible. Cash (2025) shows how ESG information can become interpreted as a signal of trust or responsibility. Balza et al. (2023) demonstrate that institutional claims of legitimacy may coexist with shallow or constrained forms of community engagement. Read together, these authors suggest that the central problem is not simply whether ESG produces information, but whether the forms of knowledge it produces are capable of recognizing the kinds of claims that justice requires. If ESG derives authority from institutional practices that define what counts as credible evidence of responsible corporate behaviour, then the next question is what forms of knowledge, experience, and accountability remain outside those institutional boundaries.

This question moves the analysis toward the justice concerns at the centre of this Major Research Paper. ESG may provide a powerful governance framework for organizing and evaluating corporate responsibility, but its capacity to support justice depends on whether its forms of knowledge can account for the social, political, territorial, and relational dimensions through which harm and accountability are experienced. The following section therefore turns from the legitimacy of ESG as an institutional framework to the limits of that legitimacy in contexts where renewable energy development intersects with extractivism, community rights, and struggles over justice.

4.4 An Integrated Understanding of ESG

The preceding discussion suggests that ESG cannot be adequately understood through any single definition. Describing it solely as a reporting framework, a sustainability initiative, or a governance mechanism captures important dimensions of its operation, yet each perspective remains incomplete when considered in isolation (Pollman, 2022; Wang, 2023). Read together, however, the literature examined throughout this chapter reconstructs ESG as a historically situated framework through which corporate accountability is organized, evaluated, and rendered intelligible across contemporary systems of corporate governance. Its significance therefore lies not in any individual reporting standard, disclosure requirement, or sustainability metric, but in the institutional convergence of historical developments,

governance practices, and forms of knowledge that collectively shape what comes to count as responsible corporate behaviour (Bainbridge, 2002; Pollman, 2022; Cash, 2025; Merry, 2011).

Understanding ESG in these terms requires recognizing that its historical evolution, governance architecture, and institutional authority are not separate dimensions of analysis, but interconnected aspects of the same framework. The history of corporate accountability explains why ESG emerged; its governance architecture explains how it operates; and its institutional authority explains why its disclosures, standards, ratings, and reporting practices increasingly function as credible evidence of responsible corporate behaviour (Moon, 2014; Cash, 2025; Merry, 2011). Together, these perspectives reconstruct ESG not simply as a collection of environmental, social, and governance indicators, but as the contemporary institutional framework through which corporations seek to demonstrate accountability and legitimacy across increasingly complex systems of governance.

This integrated understanding establishes the **analytical scope** through which ESG is understood throughout this Major Research Paper. ESG is not approached here as a proxy for corporate sustainability, nor as a definitive measure of responsible business conduct. Rather, it is examined as the institutional framework through which corporations communicate, organize, and evaluate claims of accountability within renewable energy governance. Defining the scope of the analysis in these terms does not predetermine whether ESG succeeds or fails, nor does it assume that the mechanisms examined throughout this chapter are inherently sufficient or insufficient. Instead, it provides a common conceptual foundation from which ESG can be examined consistently throughout the empirical chapters that follow.

With this understanding in place, Chapter 6 turns to the case of **La Unión Hidalgo**. Rather than treating the case as an illustration of the concepts developed throughout this chapter, it examines how ESG's governance mechanisms, institutional claims of accountability, and practices of disclosure operate within a renewable energy project shaped by Indigenous rights, contested development, and competing understandings of corporate responsibility. The case study therefore provides the empirical context through which the integrated understanding of ESG developed in this chapter can be examined in practice, establishing the foundation for the analytical discussion that follows.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The relationship between ESG and justice raises methodological as well as theoretical questions. Examining that relationship requires more than identifying the governance mechanisms associated with ESG or describing the development of a renewable energy project. It also requires an approach capable of examining how governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice are understood, represented, and negotiated by the actors involved in those processes. The methodological choices adopted throughout this research follow from the nature of that inquiry.

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design (Wiesner, 2022). Interpretive inquiry is particularly appropriate for research concerned with the meanings that social and institutional actors attribute to policies, governance arrangements, and organizational practices. Within the context of this MRP, the central concern is not simply the presence of ESG-related governance or accountability mechanisms, but the ways in which governance, responsibility, legitimacy, participation, and justice are understood, justified, and represented across different institutional settings. The research therefore approaches governance, accountability, and justice as contested institutional constructs whose meanings are produced through organizational practices, documentary representations, and interactions among governance actors rather than as fixed or universally agreed concepts. An interpretive qualitative design provides the methodological orientation required to examine these different constructions while maintaining close attention to the institutional contexts within which they emerge. This interpretive orientation informs not only the overall research design but also the selection and interpretation of the documentary materials through which these institutional constructions are examined.

This orientation also reflects the nature of the empirical material examined throughout the study. The research draws upon documentary materials produced by corporations, public institutions, civil society organizations, community representatives, and other actors involved in the governance of the proposed Gunaa Sicarú wind energy project. Each of these materials represents the project from a particular institutional position and, in doing so, offers a distinct account of responsibility, participation, legitimacy, development, and justice. Considered collectively, they provide insight into how different actors construct and communicate understandings of governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice throughout the development of the proposed project. Their significance therefore lies not only

in the information they contain, but also in the institutional perspectives through which governance, accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice are articulated. Examining these differing institutional representations constitutes the central methodological strategy adopted throughout this research. Rather than treating documentary materials as independent accounts of the proposed project, the study interprets them comparatively to examine how governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice are constructed, negotiated, and contested across different institutional perspectives.

5.2 Scope of Inquiry and Case Study Selection

The interpretive qualitative design outlined in the previous section establishes the methodological orientation of this research. It also defines the scope of the inquiry by identifying the analytical boundaries within which the relationship between ESG and justice is examined. The study is concerned with how governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice are constructed and represented within renewable energy development, and with how these dimensions relate to one another across different institutional perspectives. Within this inquiry, ESG is approached as an institutional governance framework through which particular claims about corporate responsibility, accountability, and legitimacy are articulated and evaluated. The study does not seek to evaluate the technical performance of the proposed project or assess compliance with ESG standards.Nor does it undertake an independent legal analysis of the international legal instruments, human rights frameworks, or accountability mechanisms referenced throughout the documentary corpus. These materials are examined insofar as they contribute to understanding how corporate accountability, legitimacy, and justice are represented and contested within renewable energy governance. These questions remain central to the broader governance context of renewable energy development, but they involve distinct analytical objectives that extend beyond the scope of the present study. International and domestic legal instruments and accountability mechanisms are therefore considered as institutional components of the governance process rather than as objects of legal analysis in their own right. The unit of analysis is the institutional representations through which governance, accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice are constructed and contested throughout the proposed project. These dimensions are examined relationally rather than independently, with attention to how they are represented across different institutional processes and how those representations evolve throughout the governance trajectory reconstructed in the case.

Defining the scope of the inquiry also requires defining its empirical boundaries. Instead of examining questions of corporate accountability and justice across renewable energy development in general, the study investigates these questions through a single case study. The proposed Gunaa Sicarú wind energy project in La Unión Hidalgo, Oaxaca, was selected because it provides an appropriate empirical setting through which the research question can be explored. Case selection within interpretive qualitative research is guided by the relationship between the research question and the empirical setting rather than by the expectation that a single case should represent a broader population (Wiesner, 2022). The value of Gunaa Sicarú lies in its capacity to illuminate the relationship between ESG and justice within a clearly bounded governance process. Indigenous governance forms an essential part of this governance context because it shapes the institutional conditions within which corporate accountability is articulated, negotiated, and contested. The study engages with these dimensions because they influence the institutional representations of corporate accountability examined throughout the analysis, but it does not seek to provide an independent analysis of Indigenous governance itself.

A further consideration informing the selection of Gunaa Sicarú was the availability of a substantial documentary record capable of supporting an interpretive qualitative inquiry. Throughout the development of the proposed project, corporations, public institutions, civil society organizations, community representatives, journalists, and academic researchers have each produced documentary materials that reflect different institutional perspectives on the same governance process. Collectively, these materials provide the empirical basis through which competing representations of ESG governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice can be examined while maintaining a consistent focus on a single renewable energy project. Examining these complementary institutional perspectives enables the study to interpret how competing understandings of governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice are constructed and related within a shared institutional process.The documentary corpus assembled for this research is described in the following section.

5.3 Documentary Corpus

The empirical component of this research is based on a documentary corpus constructed to examine how questions concerning ESG, governance, corporate accountability, participation, legitimacy, and justice become visible throughout the development of a proposed renewable energy project. The proposed Gunaa Sicarú wind

energy project provides the empirical setting through which these broader governance questions are investigated. Within an interpretive qualitative research design, documentary materials are treated as empirical material because they provide access to the institutional processes through which governance is represented, responsibilities are allocated, and competing understandings of accountability, participation, legitimacy, and justice are articulated. Rather than functioning solely as records of events or decisions, these materials constitute the documentary space within which different institutional perspectives on renewable energy governance are represented. The documentary corpus therefore provides the empirical foundation through which the research question is examined.

The documentary corpus was assembled iteratively throughout the research process. Its composition evolved alongside the development of the inquiry, as emerging institutional actors, governance processes, and analytical concerns identified through the research directed attention toward additional documentary materials. Selection was guided by analytical relevance and by the contribution each document made to understanding the governance processes examined in this study. The process also involved methodological decisions regarding the analytical boundaries of the inquiry. The corpus remained open to refinement throughout the research process while maintaining the scope established in the preceding sections. Additional materials were incorporated where they deepened the interpretation of the research question. Documentary sources or conceptual debates that extended beyond the scope of the inquiry were not pursued further because they introduced distinct research questions that warranted independent investigation. The documentary corpus therefore reflects both the evolution of the research and the methodological decisions through which its empirical boundaries were defined.

Publicly available documents produced by corporations, government institutions, civil society organizations, community representatives, journalists, and other governance actors constitute the principal empirical material examined throughout the study. To situate these materials within their broader political and institutional context, the analysis also draws upon case-specific academic scholarship addressing renewable energy development in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Indigenous territorial governance, and the evolution of the conflict surrounding La Unión Hidalgo. This scholarship provides the broader context within which the documentary materials are interpreted and connects the empirical analysis to the wider debates surrounding renewable energy governance and green extractivism developed throughout the preceding chapters. Publicly available interviews, webinars, lectures, and similar communications are incorporated where they contribute additional institutional

perspectives relevant to the research question. Scholarly correspondence with researchers working on ESG, energy justice, and renewable energy governance informed the refinement of the analytical framework but does not constitute part of the documentary corpus examined throughout the analysis.

The documentary corpus was approached comparatively rather than document by document. Individual sources were interpreted alongside materials produced from different institutional perspectives, allowing the relationships among governance, accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice to be examined rather than treating each document as an isolated account. Attention was directed toward how individual documents represented governance relationships and toward the meanings they attributed to accountability, participation, legitimacy, and justice. Comparison across the corpus made it possible to identify how these meanings converged, diverged, and interacted across institutional perspectives. Areas of convergence revealed shared understandings of governance and corporate accountability, while points of disagreement exposed competing interpretations of responsibility, participation, and justice. This comparative approach allowed the analysis to examine not only what individual actors claimed, but also how particular understandings of governance, accountability, and justice acquired authority or became contested across the documentary record.

Table 1

Overview of the Documentary Corpus

Title	**Source**	**Type of source**	**Reference**	**Link**
Evaluación de impactos sociales en el marco de la construcción y operación del proyecto "Central Eólica Gunaa Sicarú"	Eólica de Oaxaca, S.A.P.I. de C.V	Social Impact Assessment	Eólica de Oaxaca (n.d)	https://base.energia.gob.mx/dgaic/DA/P/DGImpactoSocialOcupacionSuperficial/ConsultaPreviaLibreInformadaComunidadesIndigenas/CPLICentr

				alE%C3%B3licaGunaaSicar%C3%BA/AcuerdosPrevios/SENER_03_01_EVIS.pdf
Manifestación de Impacto Ambiental Modalidad Regional	Eólica de Oaxaca, S.A.P.I. de C.V	Environmental Impact Assessment	Eólica de Oaxaca (2017)	https://avispa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UH_MIA_20OA2017E0031.pdf
N/A	Godswill Agbaitoro	Personal communication with academic	Agbaitoro (2026)	
N/A	Daniel Cash	Personal communication with academic	Cash (2026)	
N/A	Paola Velasco-Herrejón	Personal communication with academic	Velasco-Herrejón (2026)	
Espacio de la sociedad civil en proyectos de energía renovable: Un estudio de caso de la comunidad de Unión Hidalgo en México.	European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights.	Policy Document	Cannella, L., & Mueller-Hoff, C. (2019)	https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Publikationen/ECCHR_PP_WINDPARK_ES.pdf

SPECIFIC INSTANCE "EDF- EDF ENERGIES NOUVELLES IN MEXICO"	French National Contact Point	Report	French National Contact Point (2018)	https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/61681f56-2cf6-428f-a22c-6c7ef7d4d8b2/files/a1ebd5fc-c25f-4f44-8605-fdfe463c30ab
French court greenlights lawsuit against EDF over wind farm in Mexico	Mongabay	News Article	Arsenault & Le Billon (2024)	https://doi.org/10.66709/news-283694
Reference document 2016: Annual financial report	Électricité de France (EDF)	Report	EDF (2017)	https://www.edf.fr/sites/groupe/files/2022-08/edf-ddr_2016-en.pdf
Wind farm in Mexico: French energy firm EDF disregards indigenous rights	European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), & ProDESC	Case Report	ECCHR & ProDESC (2020)	https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/CASE_RESPORT_EDF_MEXICO_NOV2020.pdf

Set back to EDF in Mexico! The Zapotec community of Unión Hidalgo and ProDESC achieve the definitive cancellation of the wind park megaproject "Gunaa Sicarú"	Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales A.C. (ProDESC)	Blog Post	ProDESC (2026)	https://prodesc.org.mx/en/set-back-to-edf-in-mexico-the-zapotec-community-of-union-hidalgo-and-prodesc-achieve-the-definitive-cancellation-of-the-wind-park-megaproject-gunaa-sicaru/
Donde el Viento Vale Oro	La Jornada	Magazine Article	La Jornada (2014)	https://issuu.com/lajornadaonline/docs/ojarasca111022014

EDF power solutions Ceases Development of the Gunaa Sicarú Wind Project in Mexico	EDF Power Solutions	Website	EDF (2026)	https://www.edf-re.com/press-release/edf-power-solutions-ceases-development-of-the-gunaa-sicaru-wind-project-in-mexico/

Note. The documentary corpus includes the principal materials examined throughout the analysis. URLs are provided only for publicly accessible online documents.

5.4 Analytical Framework

The documentary corpus described in the previous section does not provide a self-evident account of the governance processes examined in this research. Documentary materials require interpretation, and that interpretation is conducted through the analytical framework developed throughout Chapters 2 to 4. The purpose of the framework is not to determine the meaning of the documentary materials in advance, but to provide a consistent and theoretically grounded basis through which they can be interpreted in relation to the research question.

The analytical framework brings together three complementary perspectives developed throughout the literature review. Green extractivism situates the governance of the proposed project within the broader political economy of renewable energy development and directs attention toward the historical and structural conditions shaping governance processes. The Capability Approach provides the normative conception of justice informing the analysis, while ESG is approached as the institutional governance framework through which claims concerning corporate responsibility, accountability, legitimacy, and performance are

articulated, organized, and evaluated. Considered together, these perspectives establish the analytical basis through which the documentary corpus is interpreted.

The analytical framework informed the interpretation of the documentary materials by directing attention toward a series of analytical questions rather than predetermined variables or evaluative criteria. Each document was read in full and relevant passages relating to the principal analytical dimensions of the study were highlighted and annotated throughout the reading process. These passages were subsequently compared across documents produced by different institutional actors and revisited throughout the analysis to examine points of convergence, divergence, and tension in the ways governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice were represented. Where these comparisons revealed analytical gaps, additional documentary materials were incorporated into the corpus and interpreted through the same process.

Throughout the analysis, documentary materials were examined to consider how governance processes were represented, how corporate accountability was articulated, how legitimacy was established or contested, how participation shaped decision-making, and how different understandings of justice emerged across institutional perspectives. These dimensions were considered relationally rather than independently, allowing the analysis to examine how particular governance arrangements shaped corporate accountability, how claims to legitimacy interacted with participation, and how these relationships informed competing understandings of justice. These questions were derived deductively from the theoretical discussions developed in the preceding chapters and refined iteratively throughout the research process as the documentary corpus evolved. Interpretation also extended to what remained absent from the documentary record, considering not only the ways governance, accountability, participation, and justice were represented, but also the dimensions that received limited attention or were displaced by alternative institutional priorities.

Taken together, this framework provides a consistent basis through which institutional representations of governance, corporate accountability, legitimacy, participation, and justice can be interpreted comparatively across the documentary corpus. Rather than evaluating the proposed project against a predefined model of ESG or justice, the framework supports an interpretive examination of how these concepts are constructed, negotiated, and related within competing institutional perspectives. In this way, the analytical framework translates the theoretical discussions developed throughout Chapters 2 to 4 into a structured interpretation of the documentary evidence.

5.5 Researcher Positionality

This research has been shaped by my position as a Mexican researcher studying environmental governance, political economy, and justice within the Global South. Growing up in Mexico and later pursuing graduate studies in Canada exposed me to different ways of understanding sustainability, development, and the role of corporations in environmental governance. These experiences did not determine the conclusions of this research, but they influenced the questions that initially drew me to the relationship between ESG, renewable energy development, and justice. They also shaped my interest in examining how governance frameworks developed within global sustainability debates are experienced in places where questions of development, inequality, and territorial rights often intersect.

The selection of the proposed Gunaa Sicarú project reflects this position while also illustrating its limits. I encountered the case through my academic work rather than through personal experience, only later realizing that it unfolded in the same region of Oaxaca where part of my family has its roots. That coincidence reinforced my interest in understanding the governance of the project, but it did not establish a relationship with the community itself. I am not a member of La Unión Hidalgo, nor do I speak on behalf of those whose lives and experiences are represented throughout the documentary record. The analysis presented in this MRP is therefore based exclusively on publicly available documentary materials and seeks to interpret the institutional representations that emerge through them rather than the lived experiences of the community. Recognizing this distinction was essential in defining both the scope of the inquiry and the limits of the claims this research could responsibly make.

My understanding of ESG also evolved considerably throughout the research process. I initially approached ESG as a concept closely associated with corporate sustainability and professional practice, reflecting the way it is frequently encountered within both academic and business environments. As the literature review developed, ESG emerged as a considerably more complex governance framework than I had anticipated. This evolution required revisiting several assumptions that accompanied the project from its earliest stages. It also became increasingly clear that the most challenging methodological decision was not selecting the case study, but defining the conception of justice that would guide the analysis. The Capability Approach was ultimately adopted because it offered a way of interpreting justice that was consistent with the analytical objectives of this research while remaining attentive to previous scholarship developed through meaningful engagement with the

community itself. Equally important was recognizing where the inquiry should end. Throughout the research, I deliberately avoided reducing ESG to a *caricature* of corporate practice, treating justice as a universal concept, or extending the analysis into Indigenous governance in ways that exceeded the methodological and empirical boundaries of the study

The interpretation presented throughout the following chapters reflects these decisions. When documentary evidence complicated my initial assumptions, it was incorporated into the analysis rather than set aside, even when doing so required refining the analytical framework or narrowing the scope of the inquiry. In the same way, recognizing when a new concept, author, or debate represented a distinct research project became an important part of the research process itself. This MRP therefore does not present a definitive account of ESG, justice, or the governance of the proposed Gunaa Sicarú project. It offers one interpretive reading developed through a transparent series of methodological choices and analytical judgments, with the intention of contributing to an emerging conversation concerning renewable energy governance, corporate accountability, and justice in the Global South.

Chapter 6: La Unión Hidalgo: Renewable Energy, Governance and Contestation

6.1 Renewable Energy Development in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Stretching across the narrowest corridor between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec occupies a distinctive geographical position within southern Mexico. Located in the state of Oaxaca, the convergence of the Sierra Madre mountain ranges and atmospheric pressure differentials between both coastlines generates exceptionally strong and consistent wind currents, conditions that have long shaped everyday life across the region and would later position the Isthmus at the centre of Mexico's renewable energy transition (Elliott et al., 2003; Dunlap, 2017). Over the past two decades, these same winds have transformed the region into one of Mexico's principal centres of wind energy generation, concentrating dozens of wind parks across its predominantly agricultural landscape (Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024). As one Mexican newspaper once observed, the Isthmus became the place *"donde el viento se convierte en oro"*—where the wind turns into gold (La Jornada, 2014). Whether understood as a symbol of opportunity, investment, or extraction, this transformation forms the backdrop against which different understandings of development, authority, and governance would later come into negotiation.

Long before the expansion of wind energy, however, the Isthmus was already a socially and politically complex region composed of municipalities, agrarian communities, and Indigenous peoples whose relationships with the territory had developed over generations. Among them, the Binnizá (Zapotec) and Ikoots (Huave) peoples have historically maintained deep cultural, political, and territorial ties to the region, particularly across the municipalities where contemporary wind development has since concentrated (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2020; Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024).Across the Isthmus, territory sustains agriculture, fishing, and other local livelihoods while also providing the foundation upon which community life, collective responsibilities, and political authority are organized. Land is understood not merely as an economic asset, but as a space through which social relationships, cultural continuity, and collective decision-making are reproduced (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2020). Accordingly, authority over the territory extends beyond formal state institutions. Alongside municipal governments and formal agrarian authorities, community assemblies (*asambleas comunales*) remain important forums through which communal lands and territorial affairs are collectively deliberated, while broader efforts to restore communal authority continue through Indigenous political organizing (Schwab de la O & Jones, 2024; Mejía-Montero et al., 2020; Valenzuela Basurto & Krisch, 2026). Together, these social and institutional arrangements constituted an existing governance landscape within which subsequent renewable energy development would be introduced and negotiated alongside established forms of territorial authority.

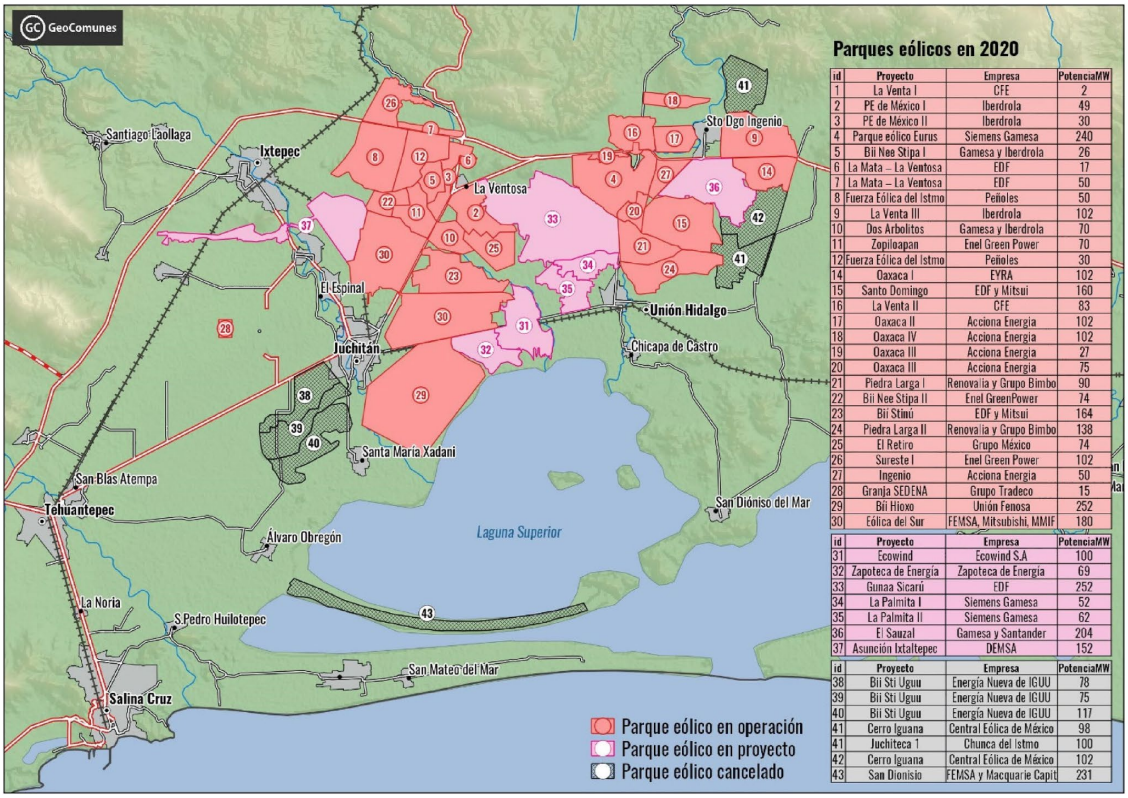
This territorial landscape acquired a new institutional meaning during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The publication of the *Wind Energy Resource Atlas of Oaxaca* in 2003 systematically identified the region as possessing one of the world's most favourable onshore wind regimes (Elliott et al., 2003). By rendering the Isthmus' wind potential visible, measurable, and comparable, the Atlas positioned the region as a strategic resource for renewable electricity generation within public planning and emerging energy policy (Dunlap, 2017; Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024). This understanding was further reinforced by international organizations, most notably the International Finance Corporation, which described the Isthmus as possessing "the best wind resources on earth" (IFC, 2014, as cited in Dunlap, 2017). As recognition of the region's wind potential expanded, attention increasingly shifted from identifying the resource itself to creating the conditions through which it could be developed.

Throughout the 1990s, a series of legal and regulatory reforms established those conditions. In anticipation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), reforms

to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution modified the legal framework governing communal land, while amendments to the Electricity Public Service Law introduced the self-supply (*autoabastecimiento*) model, opening new opportunities for private participation in what had previously been a state-controlled electricity sector (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2020). Together, these reforms did more than facilitate private investment. They marked the beginning of a governance arrangement in which corporate conduct itself became an object of institutional concern. As corporations assumed a more prominent role in developing renewable energy infrastructure, the manner in which they exercised their responsibilities increasingly became integral to the governance of the energy transition. It was within this evolving governance framework that successive wind projects began to materialize, initiating what has frequently been described as the Isthmus' "wind rush" (Dunlap, 2017).

Over the following two decades, these institutional changes were accompanied by the rapid expansion of wind development across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. By January 2015, the region hosted more than 1,600 wind turbines distributed across numerous wind parks, fundamentally reshaping both the physical landscape and the governance of renewable energy development (Dunlap, 2017). Figure 6.1 illustrates the territorial scale of this transformation by mapping the network of wind parks established across the Isthmus by 2020. As successive projects were proposed and developed, land negotiations, environmental and social assessments, public meetings, and, in some cases, Indigenous consultation became recurring features of renewable energy development. Over time, these processes generated an evolving institutional history through which renewable energy projects came to be governed in the Isthmus. Consequently, new proposals no longer entered a territory unfamiliar with utility-scale wind development. They became part of a landscape shaped not only by longstanding Indigenous systems of governance and collective authority, but also by two decades of renewable energy development, institutional practices, and community experiences that increasingly informed how subsequent projects would be understood, negotiated, and contested (Dunlap & Arce, 2022)

Figure 1
Map of wind parks in the Isthmus



id	Proyecto	Empresa	PotenciaMW
1	La Venta I	CFE	2
2	PE de México I	Iberdrola	49
3	PE de México II	Iberdrola	30
4	Parque eólico Eurus	Siemens Gamesa	240
5	Bii Nee Stipa I	Gamesa y Iberdrola	26
6	La Mata – La Ventosa	EDF	17
7	La Mata – La Ventosa	EDF	50
8	Fuerza Eólica del Istmo	Peñoles	50
9	La Venta III	Iberdrola	102
10	Dos Arbolitos	Gamesa y Iberdrola	70
11	Zopiloapan	Enel Green Power	70
12	Fuerza Eólica del Istmo	Peñoles	30
14	Oaxaca I	EYRA	102
15	Santo Domingo	EDF y Mitsui	160
16	La Venta II	CFE	83
17	Oaxaca II	Acciona Energía	102
18	Oaxaca IV	Acciona Energía	102
19	Oaxaca III	Acciona Energía	27
20	Oaxaca III	Acciona Energía	75
21	Piedra Larga I	Renovalia y Grupo Bimbo	90
22	Bii Nee Stipa II	Enel GreenPower	74
23	Bii Stinú	EDF y Mitsui	164
24	Piedra Larga II	Renovalia y Grupo Bimbo	138
25	El Retiro	Grupo México	74
26	Sureste I	Enel Green Power	102
27	Ingenio	Acciona Energía	50
28	Granja SEDENA	Grupo Tradeco	15
29	Bii Hioxo	Unión Fenosa	252
30	Eólica del Sur	FEMSA, Mitsubishi, MMIF	180
31	Ecowind	Ecowind S.A	100
32	Zapoteca de Energía	Zapoteca de Energía	69
33	Gunaa Sicarú	EDF	252
34	La Palmita I	Siemens Gamesa	52
35	La Palmita II	Siemens Gamesa	62
36	El Sauzal	Gamesa y Santander	204
37	Asunción Ixtaltepec	DEMSA	152
38	Bii Sti Uguu	Energía Nueva de IGUU	78
39	Bii Sti Uguu	Energía Nueva de IGUU	75
40	Bii Sti Uguu	Energía Nueva de IGUU	117
41	Cerro Iguana	Central Eólica de México	98
41	Juchiteca 1	Chunca del istmo	100
42	Cerro Iguana	Central Eólica de México	102
43	San Dionisio	FEMSA y Macquarie Capit	231

*Note***.** From *Contested visions of sustainable development in conflicts over renewable energy, land, and human rights: A case study of Unión Hidalgo, Mexico,* by Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024. (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/09240519231223655)

6.2 The Gunaa Sicarú Project

The regional transformation of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec described in the previous section unfolded through dozens of renewable energy developments, each introducing a different configuration of infrastructure, investment, and territorial intervention. Among them was the Central Eólica Gunaa Sicarú, a proposed 300 MW wind energy project located in the municipalities of Unión Hidalgo and Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca. Envisioned to extend across approximately 4,700 hectares, Gunaa Sicarú was described as one of the largest proposed wind parks in Latin America and represented one of the most ambitious utility-scale renewable energy developments planned within the Isthmus (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017; Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024).

The original proposal envisioned Gunaa Sicarú as an integrated renewable energy system with an installed generating capacity of 300 MW. According to the project description

submitted to the Mexican environmental authorities, the development would comprise 115 wind turbines, twelve underground medium-voltage collector circuits, internal access roads, an electrical substation, a 230 kV transmission line, and the infrastructure required to connect the proposed project to Mexico's National Electric System (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017). Electricity generated by the turbines would first be transmitted to the project's own substation before entering infrastructure connected to the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) transmission network and, ultimately, the Ixtepec Potencia substation (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017). The proposal therefore illustrates that utility-scale renewable energy development is not simply the deployment of wind turbines. It entails the construction of interconnected systems for electricity generation, transmission, and grid integration (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017).

The proposal was developed by *Eólica de Oaxaca, S.A.P.I. de C.V.*, a project company operating within EDF Renewables México, the Mexican subsidiary of Électricité de France (EDF). By the time Gunaa Sicarú was conceived, EDF had established itself as one of the world's largest electricity producers and had positioned renewable energy development as a central component of its long-term corporate strategy (EDF, 2017). Through its corporate reporting, EDF represented renewable energy as an activity to be advanced through dialogue with territories and external stakeholders, environmental responsibility, and respect for internationally recognized human rights (EDF, 2017). Consequently, Gunaa Sicarú entered the development process not only as a technically defined renewable energy project, but also as one associated with an established corporate understanding of responsible development and accountability. As the proposal advanced, this corporate framing was complemented by a series of institutional processes through which different dimensions of the project were formally documented and evaluated. Three were particularly significant for Gunaa Sicarú: *Manifiesto de Impacto Ambiental* (MIA; Environmental Impact Assessment), the *Evaluación de Impacto Social* (EVIS), Mexico's social impact assessment; and the Indigenous consultation process required under Mexico's legal framework.

The environmental dimensions of the proposed project were documented through the **MIA** submitted by *Eólica de Oaxaca, S.A.P.I. de C.V.* to the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) as part of the federal environmental authorization process (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017). Prepared in accordance with Mexico's environmental assessment framework, the document described the project's physical characteristics, construction and operational activities, existing environmental conditions, anticipated impacts, and the measures proposed to prevent, mitigate, or compensate for those impacts (Eólica de Oaxaca,

2017). It further documented the ecological characteristics of the project's area of influence, including vegetation, wildlife, hydrology, soils, and land use, while assessing the potential environmental consequences associated with each phase of the proposed development (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017). Before the proposed project could be evaluated environmentally, its anticipated ecological effects first had to be documented through the categories, methods, and evidentiary requirements prescribed by Mexico's environmental assessment framework (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017). The MIA therefore established the institutional basis upon which environmental impacts became knowable within the regulatory process.

Complementing the environmental assessment, *Eólica de Oaxaca, S.A.P.I. de C.V.* also prepared an **EVIS** in accordance with the requirements governing energy-sector projects in Mexico (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d). Whereas the **MIA** concentrated primarily on environmental conditions and anticipated ecological effects, the EVIS documented the broader social and territorial context within which the proposed project would be introduced. The assessment described the project's area of influence, demographic characteristics, Indigenous communities, patterns of land tenure and resource use, local economic activities, existing forms of community organization, and the social impacts anticipated throughout the different phases of development (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d.). It also identified proposed prevention and mitigation measures while recognizing Indigenous consultation as a central component of the project's subsequent implementation (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d.). The project was therefore rendered governable through the categories and evidentiary logic of the EVIS.

Taken together, the project description, EDF's corporate commitments, the **MIA**, and the **EVIS** reveal a governance process that appears both extensive and multidimensional. Each rendered the project intelligible through the categories of a particular institutional process, progressively assembling the technical, environmental, social, and corporate representations through which Gunaa Sicarú became governable (EDF, 2017; Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017; Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d). These documents present the project as governed through an extensive set of technical, environmental, social, and participatory procedures designed to anticipate impacts, secure regulatory approval, and engage affected communities before construction begins. It is precisely this apparent comprehensiveness that makes the subsequent trajectory of Gunaa Sicaru so striking. Yet despite the apparent comprehensiveness of this institutional architecture, Gunaa Sicarú became the subject of sustained community opposition, legal contestation, and transnational accountability claims. The following sections reconstruct how that architecture encountered, and was reinterpreted within, the political and territorial world in which the project sought to operate.

6.3 Institutional Contestation and the Reconstruction of Accountability

The previous section reconstructed Gunaa Sicarú as it became represented through project documentation, corporate commitments, and regulatory procedures. As implementation approached, however, this governance architecture encountered a territory already shaped by earlier experiences of wind development, established community institutions, and contested understandings of land and authority.*by the territory that was mentioned before in 6.2 The following sections examine how this encounter generated competing representations of participation, responsible corporate conduct, and accountability across domestic and transnational institutional arenas.

6.3.1 Contested Consultation and Community Representation

The Indigenous consultation initiated by the Secretaría de Energía (SENER) in April 2018 became the principal institutional process through which community participation in the Gunaa Sicarú project was formally organized. By the time the consultation began, however, community members reported having interacted with EDF representatives since late 2016, while the project itself had already been publicly announced in April 2017 (Cannella & Mueller-Hoff, 2019; French National Contact Point, 2018). Consequently, the consultation commenced only after important stages of project development were already underway. Questions concerning the extent to which affected communities could shape the project's development therefore emerged directly from the institutional sequence through which consultation itself was organized.

The consultation was therefore required to determine not only when participation would occur, but also who would be institutionally recognised as participants within the process. The project's *Evaluación de Impacto Social* (EVIS) sought to identify the actors considered relevant to the proposed development. It documented municipal and agrarian authorities, landholders, *comuneros*, Indigenous organizations, civil society groups, transport organizations, and committees formed around previous wind developments (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d). The assessment also recognised consultation as fundamental to protecting the rights, territories, natural resources, self-determination, and autonomy of Indigenous peoples potentially affected by energy projects (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d.).

Recognition, however, did not by itself determine influence. Although the EVIS recognised multiple actors and identified consultation as fundamental to protecting Indigenous rights, identifying relevant participants did not establish whether they would participate before key decisions had been taken, nor whether the consultation process itself

provided a meaningful opportunity to shape the decisions affecting the project. As Velasco-Herrejón and Savaresi (2022) argue, the existence of participatory procedures does not by itself establish meaningful participation. Rather, meaningful participation depends upon whether institutional arrangements enable Indigenous communities to influence decisions affecting their territories.

These tensions became visible in the ways community actors described both the project and the conditions under which it should proceed. Binnizá community member Pedro Matus remarked that *"These projects are bringing social problems. They [wind companies] believe we are the enemies,"* describing a context in which wind development had become associated with social divisions and the stigmatization of those who challenged the terms under which projects were introduced (Arsenault & Le Billon, 2024). Guillermo Torres, a lawyer working with ProDESC, similarly rejected the characterization of the dispute as opposition to renewable energy itself: *"The communities do not oppose the energy transition … But that doesn't mean these projects have carte blanche"* (Arsenault & Le Billon, 2024). Together, these accounts suggest that the central dispute did not concern renewable energy itself, but the conditions under which affected communities could participate in determining how renewable energy development would proceed.

6.3.2 Expanding Corporate Accountability Beyond Consultation

The consultation process did not resolve the competing understandings of participation reconstructed in the previous section. Throughout the consultation, community representatives and supporting civil society organizations continued to argue that concerns regarding meaningful participation, access to information, Indigenous rights, and the progression of the project remained unresolved (Arsenault & Le Billon, 2024; ProDESC, 2026). Instead of abandoning these claims, community representatives and supporting organizations increasingly pursued them through institutions capable of examining the responsibilities of the corporation itself. Yet the concerns themselves remained remarkably consistent as the governance process expanded.

This institutional expansion became evident in February 2018, when ProDESC, acting alongside representatives of the Indigenous and agrarian community of Unión Hidalgo, submitted a Specific Instance against EDF to the French National Contact Point under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. Although submitted through an entirely different institutional mechanism, the complaint continued to centre on concerns that had already emerged during the consultation process, including participation, access to

information, Indigenous rights, and the project's continued development despite ongoing community opposition. (French National Contact Point, 2018). Rather than remaining confined to the consultation process itself, these concerns were now presented within an international mechanism examining corporate conduct under the OECD Guidelines.

Subsequent advocacy by ECCHR similarly situated the dispute within broader discussions of corporate human rights responsibilities. In its submissions and public reporting, ECCHR argued that significant commercial and institutional decisions concerning Gunaa Sicarú had preceded meaningful community participation and questioned whether EDF had exercised appropriate human rights due diligence throughout the project's development (Cannella & Mueller-Hoff, 2019; ECCHR & ProDESC, 2020). ECCHR therefore did not introduce a fundamentally different critique of the project. Rather, it situated many of the same concerns regarding participation, project development, and Indigenous rights within a broader framework of corporate human rights responsibilities.

These developments help illustrate how the governance trajectory surrounding Gunaa Sicarú progressively expanded across multiple institutional arenas. As accountability processes expanded across multiple institutional arenas, the concerns under examination remained strikingly consistent. Participation, Indigenous rights, access to information, and the timing of project development continued to reappear despite being examined through increasingly diverse governance mechanisms. This institutional trajectory raises an important analytical question: what does the expansion of accountability across multiple governance arenas reveal about the capacities and boundaries of the corporate accountability architecture through which the project was governed? (Chapter 7 will expand on this).

6.3.3 The Project's Institutional Outcome

The governance processes reconstructed throughout this chapter continued across consultation procedures, legal proceedings, and transnational accountability mechanisms over several years. In January 2026, however, EDF Power Solutions announced that it would discontinue the Gunaa Sicarú wind project after more than a decade of planning (EDF Power Solutions, 2026; ProDESC, 2026). According to the company, the cancellation of the transmission infrastructure required to connect the project to Mexico's national electricity grid, together with the termination of its electricity supply contract with the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE), meant that the project was no longer commercially viable (EDF Power Solutions, 2026). EDF also reaffirmed its commitment to respecting the rights of Indigenous

peoples and to fulfilling its contractual obligations with local communities (EDF Power Solutions, 2026).

The announcement marked the end of the proposed wind project, but not of the institutional trajectory reconstructed throughout this chapter. By the time Gunaa Sicarú was formally discontinued, consultation procedures, constitutional litigation, corporate accountability mechanisms, and transnational human rights processes had each become part of the project's governance history. Together, they produced the documentary record through which the institutional trajectory examined in the following chapter can be interpreted

6.4 The Analytical Significance of the Gunaa Sicarú Case

The preceding sections have reconstructed how Gunaa Sicarú evolved from a proposed renewable energy project into a case through which contemporary renewable energy governance can be empirically examined. Considered as a whole, this trajectory reveals more than the history of a single wind project. It illustrates one of the central tensions accompanying contemporary renewable energy development. Conceived as part of Mexico's transition towards low-carbon electricity generation, Gunaa Sicarú promised to contribute to national decarbonization objectives while simultaneously becoming the subject of sustained disputes over Indigenous participation, responsible corporate conduct, and accountability. The case therefore illustrated that renewable energy projects may advance important environmental objectives while continuing to generate unresolved questions of justice. Instead of pointing to an inherent contradiction between renewable energy and justice, the case highlights the limits of governance frameworks that address technical, environmental, legal, and social questions through distinct institutional logics, such as ESG (Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024; Dunlap & Arce, 2022).

The analytical value of Gunaa Sicarú lies in the fact that these tensions did not remain confined to a single institutional arena. Over more than a decade, environmental and social assessment, Indigenous consultation, constitutional litigation, corporate due diligence initiatives, and transnational accountability mechanisms each reconstructed a different institutional understanding of participation, responsible corporate conduct, and accountability. Taken together, these processes produced an unusually rich empirical record through which the governance of renewable energy development can be examined. As Paola Velasco-Herrejón has similarly observed, Gunaa Sicarú has consequently become an

important point of reference within discussions of renewable energy governance in Mexico because it concentrates many of the institutional tensions that continue to shape the sector (P. Velasco-Herrejón, personal communication, June 2026).

The preceding reconstruction establishes the empirical foundation for the remainder of this dissertation. The following chapter brings this institutional trajectory into dialogue with the normative conception of justice developed in Chapter 3 and the conceptualization of corporate accountability developed in Chapter 4. Rather than asking simply whether Gunaa Sicarú was governed well or poorly, it examines whether ESG's understanding of corporate accountability is capable of responding to the competing understandings of participation, responsibility, and accountability documented throughout the case.

Chapter 7: Assessing ESG Through a Justice Lens

The preceding chapters developed the analytical foundations through which this MRP examines the relationship between corporate accountability and justice in renewable energy governance. These four chapters do not offer competing explanations of the same case. They form a sequence, and each chapter does a specific job the next chapter depends on. Green extractivism identifies the political and territorial conditions that make renewable energy development contested. The Capability Approach then defines what justice requires within those conditions. ESG is the institutionalized framework of corporate accountability that is evaluated against that definition. Chapter 7, in other words, does not ask whether ESG is just in the abstract. It asks whether ESG, understood this way, can contribute to justice as Chapter 4 already defined it.The discussion below does not follow this same order. It begins with the governance architecture surrounding Gunaa Sicarú as it was actually encountered, then turns to the normative questions the case raises, then to the Capability Approach, and finally to the broader political context of green extractivism.

7.1 ESG as Corporate Accountability in Practice

Chapter 5 argued that ESG is best understood not as a collection of environmental, social, and governance indicators, but as a broader institutional framework through which corporations organize, communicate, and evaluate claims of corporate accountability. As Pollman (2022) demonstrates, the concept itself emerged without resolving fundamental normative questions concerning whether ESG should primarily promote shareholder value, reduce corporate externalities, or advance broader social objectives. Instead, its flexibility

enabled ESG to evolve into a governance framework capable of accommodating multiple understandings of responsible corporate conduct while organizing them through common institutional practices. Read through this institutional lens, the documentary record surrounding Gunaa Sicarú reveals considerably more than a series of regulatory requirements or administrative procedures. Rather, it provides a concrete illustration of how corporate accountability is constructed and institutionalized in practice.

Across the documentary corpus, accountability is consistently represented as something that can be anticipated, documented, and governed through formal institutional processes. This logic is already evident in EDF's broader corporate commitments. As a participant in the United Nations Global Compact since 2001, EDF publicly situated its operations within internationally recognized commitments relating to human rights, environmental responsibility, labour standards, and responsible business conduct (United Nations Globlal Compact, n.d.). Rather than presenting these principles as responses to project-specific criticism, the company frames them as integral components of how renewable energy projects should be developed. These broader commitments are subsequently translated into project-specific governance through a series of complementary institutional instruments. The *Manifestación de Impacto Ambiental* (MIA) constructs environmental accountability through "*control, prevention, mitigation, and compensation measures*" (author's translation), presenting the project's environmental viability as contingent upon the implementation of these procedures. Rather than framing environmental responsibility as a broad ethical commitment, the MIA represents accountability as a technical process through which anticipated impacts can be identified, assessed, managed, and monitored (Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017, p.3)

The *Evaluación de Impacto Social* (EVIS) performs a parallel institutional function for the project's social environment. Rather than understanding accountability primarily through environmental management, it presents social accountability as something to be achieved through structured participation. Project engagement, it argues, should be grounded in "*transparent, culturally appropriate information and dialogue*" (author's translation) within a process of free, prior and informed consultation (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d., p.32). Here, accountability is constructed through procedural mechanisms intended to govern the relationship between the project and affected communities by institutionalizing consultation, dialogue, and stakeholder participation.

Read in this way, the documentary record surrounding Gunaa Sicarú reflects the broader institutional evolution of ESG identified in Chapter 5. As Wang (2023) argues, ESG

developed as a governance architecture intended to integrate environmental, social, and governance considerations into routine processes of corporate decision-making, risk management, and disclosure. Rather than relying solely on legal compliance or retrospective remedies, accountability increasingly operates through anticipatory practices of assessment, documentation, monitoring, and due diligence that seek to identify and manage potential risks before they materialize. Within Gunaa Sicarú, the MIA, EVIS, consultation process, and associated corporate commitments collectively illustrate how this institutional logic is operationalized through multiple, mutually reinforcing governance mechanisms.

Taken together, these documents do considerably more than compile environmental and social information. They construct a particular understanding of corporate accountability in which environmental and social concerns become governable through institutional procedures. This reflects what Merry (2011) describes as the growing reliance on documentary and classificatory practices that translate complex social realities into standardized forms of knowledge capable of informing governance. Rather than merely describing environmental conditions or community dynamics, the MIA and EVIS render these realities administratively legible by organizing them into categories of impacts, mitigation measures, consultation processes, and stakeholder relationships through which accountability can be monitored and managed.

This governance architecture appears remarkably comprehensive. Environmental impacts were assessed, social conditions documented, consultation initiated, corporate commitments articulated, and multiple mechanisms of domestic and transnational oversight established throughout the project's development. In this sense, the case illustrates precisely the type of institutional architecture through which ESG seeks to organize contemporary corporate accountability. Yet it is precisely this apparent completeness that gives rise to the central analytical puzzle of this chapter. If environmental risks were assessed, social impacts documented, consultation institutionalized, and accountability embedded within multiple governance mechanisms, why did the project nevertheless remain the subject of sustained contestation from the very community these arrangements were intended to engage? Addressing this question requires moving beyond the institutional language of accountability itself and considering the alternative understandings of justice and legitimacy articulated by those who experienced the project directly.

7.2 From Institutional Accountability to Substantive Freedom

7.2.1 The Boundary in ESG's Own Language

Addressing the puzzle posed at the close of the previous section requires moving beyond the institutional language of accountability itself. The persistence of contestation surrounding Gunaa Sicarú does not indicate that governance mechanisms were absent or poorly executed. As the preceding section demonstrated, the opposite is true: environmental risks were assessed, social impacts documented, consultation institutionalized, and corporate commitments articulated through an extensive and internally coherent governance architecture. What this completeness cannot explain, on its own terms, is why the community these arrangements were designed to engage remained unpersuaded by them. Answering that question requires asking something different from the same documentary record: not whether ESG's governance mechanisms existed, but what those mechanisms were capable of enabling even when they operated as intended.

Read through the Capability Approach developed in Chapter 4, the documentary corpus reconstructed above begins to reveal a different kind of limitation. As Robeyns (2017) explains, the Capability Approach distinguishes between the institutional means through which development is pursued and the substantive opportunities people ultimately possess to determine what they are able to do and to be. Read in this way, the documentary record suggests that its governance instruments were principally designed to demonstrate that accountability had occurred, rather than to establish that authority over the project's outcome had been substantively shared.

The EVIS illustrates this distinction particularly clearly. As discussed in the previous section, it commits the project to "transparent, culturally appropriate information and dialogue" (author's translation) through a process of consultation (Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d., p. 32). These commitments are institutionally significant not only because they establish procedural expectations, but because they operate as forms of disclosure through which ESG institutionalizes corporate accountability and produces institutional legitimacy. As Chapter 5 argued, disclosure within ESG does not simply communicate information. Instead, ESG legitimacy is produced through the movement from disclosure to interpretation, whereby governance instruments become interpreted as evidence that corporate responsibilities are being managed in accordance with recognized governance practices. The EVIS therefore functions simultaneously as a governance instrument and as a legitimacy-producing mechanism, rendering corporate accountability institutionally recognizable through disclosure.

By requiring transparent information, consultation, and culturally appropriate dialogue, the EVIS expands the procedural expectations governing the relationship between the project and affected communities. Yet the institutional language through which these commitments are articulated also defines the scope of what the document is designed to demonstrate. It establishes that communities should be informed, consulted, and engaged, thereby providing institutional evidence of conformity with recognized expectations of responsible corporate conduct. It is less concerned with whether those same governance arrangements enable communities to meaningfully shape, negotiate, or ultimately refuse the development being proposed. This does not appear as a failure of implementation within a single governance instrument, but as a feature of the broader governance architecture itself through which ESG institutionalizes corporate accountability and generates institutional legitimacy. If institutional arrangements shape the substantive opportunities available to individuals and communities, as the Capability Approach suggests, governance architectures that do not meaningfully redistribute authority likewise limit the capabilities through which affected communities can pursue the futures they have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). From this perspective, the governance architecture through which ESG institutionalizes corporate accountability and generates institutional legitimacy can nevertheless be interpreted as limiting capabilities and, therefore, as reproducing an unjust institutional arrangement.

7.2.2 Why the Boundary Is Political

Read against the broader political economy of renewable energy development reconstructed in Chapter 3, this institutional boundary assumes a wider significance. As argued throughout the dissertation, renewable energy transitions are not simply technological substitutions but political processes through which competing visions of development, authority, and socioecological futures are negotiated (Bridge et al., 2013). Green extractivism therefore directs analytical attention beyond the environmental objectives of renewable energy itself and towards the governance arrangements through which these projects are planned, authorized, and implemented (Bruna, 2022; Gudynas, 2021).

The documentary record surrounding Gunaa Sicarú reflects precisely this broader political context. As Chapter 6 demonstrated, the project entered a territory where governance institutions already existed: communal land tenure, assembly-based decision-making, and Indigenous authorities whose legitimacy long preceded EDF's arrival. The resulting dispute

therefore did not emerge because governance was absent, but because multiple governance systems came to coexist within the same territory. Read in this way, the contestation surrounding Gunaa Sicarú extends beyond the implementation of consultation procedures themselves. It raises the question of how ESG's institutional architecture relates to pre-existing forms of territorial authority that operate according to different political and legal traditions.

Seen through the perspective of green extractivism, this relationship reveals a recurring tension within contemporary renewable energy development. Chapter 3 argued that green extractivism asks not simply whether renewable energy contributes to decarbonization, but whether the governance arrangements through which renewable energy is pursued transform, or instead reproduce, the political-economic and territorial relations that have historically organized development (Gudynas, 2021). The findings presented here speak directly to that analytical question. Although the Gunaa Sicarú project was supported through increasingly sophisticated institutional mechanisms of environmental assessment, stakeholder engagement, and corporate accountability, the underlying relations of authority, participation, and territorial governance remained fundamentally contested. These findings suggest that increasingly sophisticated corporate accountability mechanisms may coexist with the continued reproduction of similar extractive dynamics where the underlying relations of authority, participation, and territorial governance remain substantially unchanged.

Seen through the perspective of green extractivism, this relationship reveals a recurring tension within contemporary renewable energy development. Renewable energy projects may be supported through increasingly sophisticated institutional mechanisms of environmental assessment, stakeholder engagement, and corporate accountability while the governance institutions through which affected communities exercise territorial authority remain comparatively peripheral to determining how development ultimately proceeds. The question therefore is not whether renewable energy contributes to decarbonization, but how authority over renewable energy development is institutionally organized.

This distinction is captured succinctly by Guillermo Torres of ProDESC, who rejected characterizations of the conflict as opposition to renewable energy itself, observing that *"the communities do not oppose the energy transition… But that doesn't mean these projects have carte blanche"* (Arsenault & Le Billon, 2024). Read alongside the documentary corpus, Torres' observation illustrates that the central dispute was never renewable energy as a

societal objective. Rather, it concerned the governance arrangements through which that objective would be pursued and the authority of affected communities to participate in determining those arrangements.

7.2.3 Findings

Taken together, these observations support a bounded analytical conclusion. The limitation identified here does not arise because ESG fails to institutionalize corporate accountability; the previous section demonstrated that it is capable of doing so through an extensive and internally coherent governance architecture. Nor does it arise because institutional accountability lacks value. On the contrary, ESG can expand transparency, strengthen due diligence, formalize stakeholder engagement, and create meaningful institutional opportunities through which corporate conduct may be scrutinized and, perhaps most importantly, challenged. The documentary trajectory reconstructed throughout the Gunaa Sicarú case demonstrates the practical significance of this institutional architecture: it generated the evidence, procedures, and governance record through which unresolved concerns could subsequently be pursued across additional accountability arenas. The existence of these institutional pathways, however, should not be conflated with the realization of justice. Rather than demonstrating that justice had been achieved, the expansion of accountability beyond the project's original governance mechanisms illustrates that the underlying concerns surrounding participation, territorial authority, and Indigenous self-determination remained unresolved still through various institutional arenas.

The limitation becomes visible only when the governance architecture reconstructed throughout the documentary corpus is evaluated through the conception of justice developed in Chapter 4. Read in this way, ESG's institutional mechanisms remain primarily concerned with demonstrating how corporations anticipate, document, monitor, and respond to environmental and social concerns. They are considerably less equipped to establish whether those same governance arrangements expand the substantive freedoms of affected communities to participate in determining the conditions under which development proceeds.The findings suggest that future debates should move beyond asking how ESG can become a more effective framework of corporate accountability and instead ask what institutional arrangements are required to govern renewable energy transitions justly. This may ultimately require reimagining what has increasingly become a corporate energy

transition as one that begins with the people and communities whose lives, territories, and futures renewable energy development is intended to transform.

Finally, the analysis presented here does not suggest that ESG or corporate accountability are incompatible with a just energy transition. Rather, it suggests that the continued expansion of ESG within renewable energy governance should be accompanied by an equally careful understanding of what the framework is—and is not—designed to govern. The very completeness of ESG's governance architecture may inadvertently become a barrier to broader conceptions of governance by reinforcing the assumption that increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of corporate accountability are sufficient to govern the energy transition. A just energy transition, however, requires governance arrangements capable not only of holding corporations accountable, but also of sharing authority, enabling agency, and engaging with the political questions that corporate accountability alone cannot resolve.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

8.1 Summary of Findings

This MRP set out to examine the relationship between corporate accountability and justice within contemporary renewable energy governance by asking whether ESG, understood as an institutional framework of corporate accountability, can contribute to advancing a just energy transition. Rather than evaluating the technical performance of ESG mechanisms or determining whether justice was ultimately achieved in the Gunaa Sicarú project, the analysis sought to understand how corporate accountability is institutionalized through ESG, how these governance arrangements operate in practice, and what their institutional capacities and limitations reveal about the pursuit of justice within renewable energy development.

The analysis first revealed that renewable energy transitions extend beyond processes of technological decarbonization to encompass broader transformations in governance through which authority, participation, and responsibility are reorganized. As renewable energy has become central to international climate mitigation strategies, questions surrounding land use, Indigenous participation, territorial governance, and corporate responsibility have become increasingly prominent. Renewable energy projects therefore generate not only electricity, but also new institutional arrangements through which competing claims over development, sustainability, and justice are negotiated. Understanding

the contemporary energy transition consequently requires attention not only to technological change, but also to the governance structures through which that transition is organized (Bridge et al., 2013; Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Scoones et al., 2015; Transnational Institute & Taller Ecologista, 2019).

Understanding renewable energy transitions in these terms also expands the way ESG can be understood**.**Throughout the analysis, ESG emerged not simply as a collection of environmental, social, and governance indicators, but as an institutional framework through which corporations organize, communicate, and evaluate claims of corporate accountability. Its significance therefore lies not only in the individual mechanisms it encompasses, but in the governance architecture it creates through practices such as due diligence, stakeholder engagement, environmental and social assessment, disclosure, reporting, and risk management. Together, these practices institutionalize accountability by organizing how corporate responsibilities are anticipated, documented, monitored, and communicated across multiple institutional actors (Cash, 2025; Pollman, 2022; Wang, 2023; Cash, 2025).

Viewed through this institutional understanding of corporate accountability, the Gunaa Sicarú case acquires additional analytical significance. The documentary record reveals considerably more than the trajectory of a single renewable energy project. It illustrates how contemporary corporate accountability is progressively assembled through interconnected governance mechanisms that render responsibility visible, documentable, and administratively governable. Environmental and social impact assessments, consultation processes, stakeholder engagement, corporate commitments, grievance mechanisms, litigation, and transnational accountability procedures collectively demonstrate the increasingly institutionalized character of corporate accountability within renewable energy development (EDF, 2017; Eólica de Oaxaca, 2017; Eólica de Oaxaca, n.d).

Tracing the institutional organization of accountability also brings its boundaries into sharper focus. As governance mechanisms become increasingly visible across the documentary record, so too do the political questions that continue to surround Indigenous participation, territorial authority, and community self-determination. Community organizations and supporting civil society actors repeatedly questioned not simply the existence of accountability mechanisms, but the extent to which these institutional processes addressed longstanding concerns regarding participation, recognition, and authority. The findings therefore suggest that institutional accountability both strengthens the governance of renewable energy development and reveals questions of justice that extend beyond its current

institutional reach (Cannella & Mueller-Hoff, 2019; French National Contact Point, 2018; Schwab De La O & Jones, 2024).

These findings acquire an additional dimension when interpreted through the Capability Approach. The institutional developments identified throughout the analysis contribute meaningfully to expanding transparency, strengthening due diligence, formalizing participation, and creating additional opportunities for oversight and contestation. Collectively, these developments represent important advances in the institutional organization of corporate accountability within renewable energy governance. They also illuminate the continuing importance of asking what these institutional arrangements ultimately enable individuals and communities to be and to do. Questions concerning territorial authority, Indigenous self-determination, and the collective freedom of communities to influence decisions affecting their futures remain integral to understanding justice within renewable energy transitions, while extending beyond what corporate accountability mechanisms are institutionally designed to resolve (Pollman, 2022; Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017; Velasco-Herrejón & Bauwens, 2020; Wang, 2023).

Ultimately, the findings suggest that ESG occupies an important yet necessarily limited place within the governance of the contemporary energy transition. Its institutional mechanisms strengthen corporate accountability and contribute to more structured forms of governance, but they cannot substitute for the broader political processes through which communities negotiate development, territorial authority, and collective self-determination. Rather than diminishing the importance of ESG, this conclusion situates corporate accountability as one component of the wider governance arrangements required to advance a just energy transition.

8.2 Contributions to Theory and Practice

This dissertation demonstrates the analytical value of interpreting ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability. Drawing upon Pollman's (2022) understanding of ESG as a flexible and normatively unsettled concept, the analysis shows how this institutional interpretation provides a productive way of examining the relationship between corporate accountability and justice within renewable energy governance. Rather than focusing primarily on ESG indicators or reporting practices, this perspective directs attention towards the institutional arrangements through which corporate accountability is organized, communicated, contested, and evaluated.

Applying this analytical framework to the proposed Gunaa Sicarú project also contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding renewable energy governance by demonstrating that expanding institutional accountability does not necessarily resolve broader questions of justice. Interpreting the documentary record comparatively across corporate, governmental, judicial, and civil society sources illustrates how corporate accountability is progressively institutionalized through multiple governance processes, while also revealing that questions concerning Indigenous participation, territorial authority, and collective self-determination remain contested. In this respect, the dissertation demonstrates both the possibilities and the limits of corporate accountability within contemporary renewable energy transitions.

Taken together, these contributions advance an institutional understanding of corporate accountability that remains attentive to the broader political and normative dimensions of renewable energy governance. In doing so, the dissertation contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding ESG and renewable energy transitions by demonstrating how institutional accountability can be meaningfully strengthened while recognizing that a just energy transition ultimately depends upon political processes extending beyond the institutional capacities of corporate accountability alone.

8.3 Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

The first consideration concerns the relationship between the documentary analysis and the lived experiences of the communities represented within it. Although the documentary corpus incorporated materials produced by community representatives alongside those of corporations, public institutions, civil society organizations, journalists, and academic scholarship, the research did not include fieldwork in La Unión Hidalgo, participant observation, or interviews with community members and other actors directly involved in the governance of the proposed Gunaa Sicarú project. Consequently, the dissertation reconstructs institutional representations of accountability, participation, and justice rather than the lived experiences through which these governance processes are encountered and negotiated. While this approach is consistent with the interpretive research design adopted throughout the dissertation, participatory and community-based methodologies remain essential for understanding how these institutional processes are experienced in practice.

A second consideration arises from the interpretive documentary methodology itself. Documentary materials provide valuable insight into how corporations, governments, civil society organizations, and other governance actors represent, justify, contest, and institutionalize corporate accountability. They do not, however, fully capture the informal negotiations, interpersonal dynamics, and everyday practices through which governance is also shaped. The conclusions presented throughout this dissertation should therefore be understood as interpretations of institutional representations rather than comprehensive accounts of all the processes through which accountability and justice are negotiated.

A third consideration concerns the analytical scope adopted throughout the dissertation. The research interpreted ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability through the complementary analytical perspectives of green extractivism and the Capability Approach. This focus enabled an in-depth examination of how contemporary corporate accountability conceptualizes justice within renewable energy governance. It did not seek to provide a comprehensive evaluation of Indigenous governance, consultation processes, or the substantive justice outcomes associated with the proposed Gunaa Sicarú project. These important questions extend beyond the analytical objectives of the present research and remain valuable areas for continued scholarly inquiry.

A final consideration concerns the interpretation of ESG adopted throughout this dissertation. As Pollman (2022) argues, ESG remains a flexible and normatively unsettled concept capable of accommodating multiple understandings of corporate responsibility. This dissertation deliberately examined ESG as an institutional framework of corporate accountability because this perspective aligned with the research question and provided a productive way of examining the relationship between corporate accountability and justice within renewable energy governance. Consequently, the analysis does not engage in depth with other approaches that conceptualize ESG primarily through financial materiality, sustainability reporting, investment decision-making, or ESG ratings. These perspectives raise important questions of their own and may generate different insights into the governance of renewable energy transitions.

These methodological and analytical considerations also identify several opportunities for future research. Participatory and community-based methodologies could complement institutional analysis by bringing documentary representations into dialogue with the lived experiences of communities directly affected by renewable energy development. Comparative analyses across additional renewable energy projects could further examine how relationships between corporate accountability and justice vary across governance contexts

and institutional settings. Finally, future research could move beyond evaluating existing frameworks of corporate accountability and instead focus on developing governance frameworks capable of institutionalizing justice within renewable energy transitions. Whether this occurs through the continued evolution of ESG or through entirely new institutional arrangements remains an open question. What this MRP suggests, however, is that such frameworks should begin not with the accountability of corporations, but with the substantive freedoms, authority, and agency of the people and communities whose lives renewable energy development is intended to transform.

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