Meaningful capacity building for community ownership at the pre-development and operational phases

How do we move from *communities owning* shares on paper to **communities** *owning their future* in large-scale renewable energy projects?

That question sat at the centre of Session 3 of the **JustRE Alliance Community of Practice (CoP) on Community Ownership,** held on 13 November. Building on Session 1 (defining community ownership) and Session 2 (Indigenous equity partnerships in project development), this third session zoomed in on a crucial piece of the puzzle: **capacity building for meaningful community ownership at the pre-development and operational phases.**

Two complementary experiences anchored the conversation:
- **Pre-development capacity building in La Guajira, Colombia** – presented by **José Vega** (Stockholm Environment Institute – SEI Latin America).
- **Operational-phase capacity building for community trusts in South Africa** – presented by **Holger (Holle) and the INSPIRE team,** drawing on work led by **Yumnaa Firfirey.**Together, they offered a grounded view of what it actually takes, institutionally, politically, and emotionally, for **communities to exercise real power in the energy transition.**

Why capacity building is non-negotiable for community ownership

Opening the session, Juan Pablo Cárdenas, the Alliance coordinator, reiterated **JustRE's mission:** a **Global South alliance for a just transition to renewable energy,** focused on **rapid deployment of large-scale renewables with social excellence as a core pillar.** Community ownership has emerged within the Alliance as one of the most promising ways to:

Improve **social acceptance** and reduce conflicts

Ensure **long-term local benefit** from energy investments

Shift communities from "stakeholders to be managed" to **co-owners and co-decision-makers**

But none of this happens automatically because a legal shareholding exists. Communities and the broader ecosystem around them need **capacity:** access to information, skills, tools, governance systems, and peer networks that allow them to navigate complex projects on equal footing.

Session 3, therefore, asked a very practical question:
What capacities are needed, when, and by whom, for community ownership to be meaningful from the first project conversation through to 20+ years of operations?

La Guajira, Colombia: building capacities before the first turbine goes up

José Vega presented **SEI's work in La Guajira,** a region with some of the best wind resources in the world, with capacity factors of up to 60–65% and more than 40 wind projects planned, but also a long history of **social conflict, cancellation and delay.**

Crucially, around **60% of La Guajira is Indigenous territory,** mostly Wayuu land. Communities have repeatedly said: *"We want to build capacities to engage with this sector."* SEI responded with a **multi-year, co-designed training process** rather than a ready-made course.

Step 1
Understand the real challenges

Before designing any training, SEI and partners worked with communities to map what was actually going wrong. A key conclusion:

Communities are not opposed to wind or solar as technologies; **they are opposed to how projects are developed.**

Eight recurring problems emerged, including:

- **Lack of accessible information** – Who are the companies? How many turbines? Where can people see the Environmental Impact Assessment?
- **Ambiguity around leadership** – Multiple layers of Wayuu authority (ancestral leaders, traditional leaders, etc.) are often not understood or respected by developers.
- **Unequal or unclear benefit sharing** – Between communities, and within each community.
- **Weak institutional and planning coordination** – Between companies, government, and territorial authorities.

One particularly important piece was the role of the **"community advisor"** – a legally recognised right in Colombia's consultation processes. Advisors are meant to support communities to understand and negotiate projects, but in practice:

- They are often **paid by companies,** creating tension around impartiality.
- Some operate with limited accountability to communities.
- In some cases, they even request a share of community benefits, on top of company payments.

SEI's conclusion: communities need the option, over time, to **become their own advisors** or at least complement external advisors with strong local capacities.

Step 2
Co-design what to learn

From 2022 to 2024, **SEI worked with Wayuu leaders, youth, and other actors through workshops and conversations** to shape a training curriculum that **responds to *their questions,*** not just external agendas. The resulting course, **"Intercultural Dialogue with Energy and Community Participation",** includes ten modules such as:

- **Climate change and just transition** – Why this energy shift is happening, and what "just" can mean locally.
- **Technical basics of wind energy and associated infrastructure** – Turbines, transmission lines, grid connection.
- **Finance and business models** – How projects make money, where cash flows go, what "returns" and "tariffs" actually mean.
- **Human rights and FPIC** – From transactional consultation to ongoing, informed consent.
- **Life Plans (Planes de Vida)** – Tools for communities to define their own development vision and use it as a reference in negotiations.
- **Opportunities and benefits** – Employment, contracts, social investments, equity participation, and their trade-offs.
- **Energy communities** – What they are in Colombian law, and how communities could organise one.
- **Peer-to-peer exchanges** – Site visits in La Guajira and Brazil to talk directly to other communities living next to wind farms.

SEI's first cohort brought together **leaders from different projects, clans, and contexts,** deliberately mixing experiences. The objective was not only to transmit knowledge, but to **enable horizontal learning and build a network of local "energy interlocutors".**
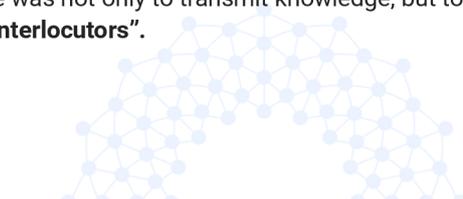
Step 3
Tools that stay in community hands

Capacity building also produced **concrete tools.** One example is an **online mapping platform** co-developed with Colombia's energy planning unit: communities can click on each licensed project to see who the developer is, installed capacity, number of turbines, and – crucially – local features like schools, water infrastructure, and roads. This helps communities:

- Visualise how projects intersect with their territories
- Ask more precise questions in consultations
- Engage in a more informed way with planners and companies

For José, the deeper shift is that **FPIC is slowly moving from "one more hurdle" to a process of trust-building and joint planning.** The work is far from perfect, but both companies and communities are beginning to see consultation as more than a yes/no transaction.

South Africa: capacity building when community trusts already own shares

From Colombia's pre-development context, the session moved to **South Africa,** where community ownership is not a future aspiration but a **regulatory requirement.**

Through the national **Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement** Programme (REIPPPP / REAP), more than **90 wind, solar, hydro and biomass projects** – over **6,000 MW** – are already feeding electricity into the grid. Each project must meet ambitious socio-economic criteria, including:

- **Community shareholding** – on average, 8.9% of each IPP is owned via local community trusts.
- **Socio-economic and enterprise development spending** – a percentage of revenues is earmarked for local projects and businesses.

In theory, this framework can significantly contribute to South Africa's national development goals and rural economies. In practice, as the **INSPIRE** team showed in their short documentary and presentation, **making this model work is complex.**

Community trusts often struggle with:
- Designing a **shared, long-term vision** for what their ownership should achieve
- Managing **governance, conflict and trauma** in communities deeply marked by apartheid and ongoing inequality
- Deciding how to use socio-economic funds and dividends in ways that are **strategic, not fragmented**
- Understanding **loans, refinancing, and financial risk** attached to their equity

Trust Matters: a maturity framework and a learning ecosystem

INSPIRE's **Trust Matters programme,** now complemented by **Land Matters,** was created to respond to these challenges. Like SEI's course, it is built through **co-design** with community trustees, industry, DFIs, and government.

From extensive workshops, WhatsApp groups, calls and a national learning event with more than 150 participants, the team distilled a **Trust Maturity Framework** with four interlinked pillars:

Governance
Structures, roles, rules, transparency, and accountability inside the trust

Capacity
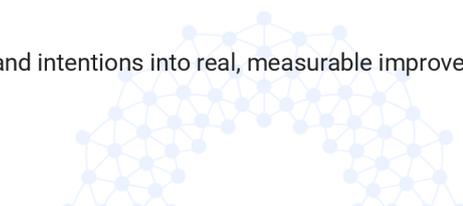Skills, information, and support systems trustees need to fulfil their role

Vision & Strategy
A shared long-term direction, co-created with communities (not just consultants)

Impactful Delivery
The ability to turn money and intentions into real, measurable improvements in people's lives

On top of this framework, INSPIRE and partners developed a **self-assessment tool.** Community trust boards work through a set of questions and scoring sheets (yes, a complex Excel – but one they co-built) that helps them:

- Reflect on where they stand in each pillar
- Surface different perceptions within the board
- Identify priority areas for support and change

The tool generates spider diagrams and other visuals, but its real value is in the **conversations it forces trustees to have** about purpose, power, and practice.

The results feed into a growing **Trust Support Matrix:** a roadmap for future resources such as templates, videos, case studies, and webinars on topics ranging from **debt refinancing to post-trauma governance.** INSPIRE is also incubating ideas for a **Community Ownership InCubator** to support future equity partnerships in both auctioned and private PPA projects.

One powerful point from Yumnaa and Holger's team: community trusts must think **beyond the 20-year PPA.** Dividends will stop when contracts end, so trusts need to:

- Build **reserves and long-term income streams** now ("a retirement fund for the trust")
- Anchor decisions in a **community-defined vision** that outlives individual projects and people

Cross-regional lessons: from "capacity gaps" to shared leadership

The dialogue between Colombia and South Africa surfaced several shared lessons:

Capacity is relational and political, not just technical:
It is about who is recognised as a leader, who sits at the table, and whose knowledge counts.

Co-design is non-negotiable:
Both SEI and INSPIRE started by listening and mapping challenges, not by importing a predefined curriculum.

Peer learning changes the energy:
Whether it is Wayuu leaders visiting Brazilian wind farms, or South African trustees sharing loan refinancing strategies, talking to peers in similar situations builds trust, demystifies technology, and widens the imagination of what is possible.

Governance structures must be long-term:
From dual Wayuu leadership (traditional and ancestral) to South African trusts planning for a post-PPA future, community ownership requires institutions that can evolve over decades.

FPIC and community ownership are converging:
When communities have real information, capacities, and governance tools, consultation stops being a box-ticking exercise and becomes a platform for joint decision-making – including the right to say no.