A LOOK AT TRANSITIONS IN COAL MINING TERRITORIES IN COLOMBIA

ACTORS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND DIALOGUE

CREER
Centro Regional de Empresas y Emprendimientos Responsables

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vision that guides this document proposes moving away from the traditional concept of "mine closures" to a broader approach of "responsible exits". This approach is part of the global energy transition agenda and climate goals, allowing for a systemic view that transcends the rigidity of the final phase of a contract to be understood from the comprehensive life cycle of mining projects. From this perspective, responsible exits integrate the social, environmental and human rights dimensions of the sector in a cross-cutting manner, seeking to support a more positive transformation that involves a diversity of actors at the "upstream", "midstream" and "downstream" levels.

This document integrates and presents the lessons learned from the events held by the Centro Regional de Empresas y Emprendimientos Responsables (CREER) in August 2025, on the occasion of the visit to Colombia by international experts from the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSRM) at the University of Queensland, the Institute of Human Rights and Business (IHRB) and the Ford Foundation. The fundamental purpose of these meetings was to strengthen the just energy transition agenda in the country's mining contexts, connecting global and regional lessons learned about mine closures with the territorial realities of the Colombian Caribbean. The visit coincided with the tenth anniversary of CREER and served as a platform for the official launch of its strategic line of "Just Energy Transitions", seeking to guide future action in the face of the decline of coal and the transformation of extractive industries towards sustainable models with a Human Rights approach.

To understand the urgency of these considerations, it is necessary to consider the mining context of Cesar and La Guajira, departments that account for 33% of Colombia's coal mining area and have consolidated the country's position as the largest producer of this mineral in Latin America. However, the economic dependence of these territories is profound: coal mining accounts for between 43% and 61% of the departmental budget and generates up to 95% of royalty and tax revenues across these territories. This context creates structural tension with the national government's agenda (2022-2026), which promotes a progressive reduction in fossil fuels and a ban on new exploration contracts.

While accelerated decarbonisation is being discussed in the country's capital, coal continues to sustain the social and fiscal fabric in the regions, creating extreme vulnerability to unforeseen or poorly planned closures.

The visit by international experts was carried out using a two-stage methodology designed to capture both the national political vision and the territorial experience. The first stage, carried out in Bogotá, consisted of strategic dialogues with civil society organisations, state institutions and trade associations such as the Colombian Mining Association (ACM). The second phase focused on activities carried out in the departments of Cesar and La Guajira, where technical visits were made to the Pribbenow Mine (Drummond Ltd.), dialogues with the Workers' Collective for a Just Transition, meetings with local authorities, and specific spaces with Wayuu communities and groups of women and young people who, in one way or another, have faced exclusion in these mining processes.

Keys to transformation: findings from the dialogue on responsible exits and closures

Among the key lessons learned from the visit, the first issue addressed is that of social participation and the multiple dimensions of justice in the transition. It was found that current participation mechanisms tend to be merely procedural and informative, with no real capacity to influence plans for the cessation of activities, which generates mistrust and the perception that the energy transition is an externally imposed process. Constitutional Court ruling T-029 of 2025 in the Prodeco (Glencore) case marked a milestone by demanding substantive citizen participation, reinforcing that procedural justice is the necessary basis for achieving forms of distributive, restorative and transformative justice.

A second key learning focuses on governance, land use planning and institutional capacities, where a significant gap was evident between national decarbonisation targets and the tools available to local administrations. Institutional management faces the challenge of incorporating into its planning different mechanisms of public policy related to the energy transition driven by the central government, which often overlap and generate conflicts. International experience suggests that the strength of local institutions is essential to avoid scenarios of abandoned mines and ensure that mine closure is aligned with a responsible exit approach in line with new forms of sustainable development in the regions.

The third learning point highlights the need for conceptual alignment and the construction of common meanings around mine closure processes. There is a complex array of meanings in this field, which makes local actors merge terms such as 'responsible closure', 'just transitions', and 'decarbonisation', among others, leading them to have different expectations that hinder the construction of agreements. For energy transitions to be legitimate, educational processes are required to translate technical and legal language into the cultural realities of the territory, ensuring that the language used does not obstruct the appropriation of information and allowing the community to truly decide the pace and conditions of change.

Regarding labour retraining and economic diversification, it was confirmed that this is the most urgent challenge to prevent the collapse of local economies. Dependence on coal affects not only direct employment, but also an entire informal value chain. For example, in Cesar, female informality reaches 66% within the coal mining sector (suppliers, service providers, food, clothing, caring occupations). In this regard, retraining cannot be limited to isolated training courses; it requires real productive investment in sectors such as agribusiness, the bioeconomy, and the operation and maintenance of renewable energy infrastructure, taking advantage of existing infrastructure such as the mining corridor railway line. Experiences such as those in Australia and India show that success depends on offering immediate benefits, creating conditions for real participation by workers from the initial stages, and a combination of knowledge and information following local perspectives to achieve the necessary diversification.

The final learning area analysed is corporate co-responsibility in territorial transformation, which should not be limited to technical environmental management, but should integrate human rights due diligence throughout the project cycle, as well as the lived experience of communities living in these areas. A significant gap was identified in the visibility of the role of international coal buyers and some actors in the value chain, who should participate in financing the social liabilities of closure. Under the principle of *trailing liability*[1], companies remain responsible for cumulative impacts of the mining projects, and for creating robust financial instruments (such as trust funds or insurance) to ensure the stability of the territory even if the company withdraws or transfers assets.

Priorities for advocacy: strategic recommendations for a Just Transition

To put these lessons into practice, it is imperative to adopt a strategic vision that prioritises ten fundamental pillars in the country's agenda. Energy transitions must begin by integrating a social and human rights perspective into mine closures, understanding that planning cannot be solely technical, but must protect the culture, housing, mental health and spiritual transitions of ethnic communities in the coal mining

1 Trailing liability is designed to ensure that the costs and liabilities associated with decommissioning will be borne by the industry and do not become the responsibility of government.

territories. This protection must be backed by due diligence and multi-level co-responsibility, explicitly involving coal-buying companies and countries so that they assume clear roles in managing the impacts of the energy transition, whether gradual or abrupt, from fossil fuel-based economies.

Internally, it is necessary to resolve the lack of articulation between the national agenda and territorial land use planning, harmonising the discourse on decarbonisation with the fiscal reality of municipalities so that communities do not bear the costs of the energy transition alone. This highlights the need to bridge the gap between the mining sector and the energy transition agenda. It requires aligning the industry's transformation with emerging green economies and securing the critical minerals essential for national reindustrialisation. However, none of this will be possible without addressing the absence of a strong regulatory framework and institutional arrangement, building a national roadmap that requires advanced and participatory planning, and preventing closures from depending on unilateral business decisions.

The transition landscape is also characterised by uncertainty, where market-driven shocks can lead to premature and unplanned mine closures. Consequently, there is an urgent need for institutional safeguards that address the challenge of stranded assets. Transition planning must extend beyond linear, planned timelines to include contingency frameworks capable of absorbing sudden industrial shifts.

Finally, in terms of livelihoods, the agenda must focus on strengthening labour retraining and economic diversification strategies, integrating technical training programmes with real investments that guarantee the economic autonomy of the communities directly affected. Alongside this, participatory governance is required within land use planning that gives real decision-making power to young people, women and the LGBTIQ+ population, ensuring that the energy transition does not reproduce historical inequalities. Finally, multi-stakeholder dialogue must be consolidated as the great enabler, serving as an important means of building trust in highly polarised contexts and ensuring that the energy transition are a collective project for fair and sustainable territorial transformation.

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