Impact Journey Collective

NRGI External Evaluation 2026

Final Report: Executive Summary

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I. Executive Summary

Overview

This external evaluation examines what the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI) has contributed to more accountable and inclusive governance of oil, gas, and mining since 2020. It draws on Outcome Harvesting and Contribution Analysis across six countries (Colombia, DRC, Ghana, Guinea, Senegal, Tunisia), in-depth case studies in Colombia and Nigeria, a systematic document review, and 26 interviews with 42 stakeholders. The central finding is this: where NRGI combined rigorous analysis, trusted convening, and sustained support to local actors, it helped produce meaningful shifts in governance systems. Where those conditions were absent, due to political resistance, insufficient follow-through in program design, or resource constraints, results were weaker and harder to sustain.

What has worked and why

NRGI has contributed to meaningful changes across four areas: policy and regulatory reform, coalition-building and relationship change, narrative and discourse change, and the capabilities of accountability actors.

- **Policy and regulatory change:** NRGI's analytical work has informed policy debates and reform processes related to transparency, revenue management, and oversight of the extractive sector across multiple countries. Interviewees (both internal and external) noted that NRGI's research was widely used by policymakers, civil society organizations (CSOs), and journalists as a reference point.
- **Coalition-building and relationship change:** A recurring theme across interviews was NRGI's ability to bring together actors who previously had limited trust or direct engagement.
- **Narrative and discourse change:** In several countries, NRGI helped introduce new concepts into public debate, particularly around justice and the social dimensions of transition.
- **Capability, confidence, and participation:** NRGI's evidence, training, and accompaniment have strengthened the capacity of civil society actors to engage more effectively with governments and companies.

The outcome harvest exercise examined a number of outcomes derived from NRGI's work across a subset of NRGI's geographic focus areas and substantive priorities. Of these, 46 outcomes were identified across six priority countries, refined and validated through an iterative review process with NRGI staff. The other 38 preliminary outcomes were extracted from NRGI documentation during the initial desk review stage, and included preliminary outcomes across a range of countries, including Indonesia, Mexico, Mongolia, Nigeria, Peru, and Uganda. The evaluators assessed the 46 validated outcomes that were subjected to the iterative review process and found that the types of change that NRGI helped bring about included policy and practice reforms (the principal outcome in 24 of the 46 outcomes tracked), strengthening/supporting effective engagement by accountability actors (principal outcome in 12 cases) and strengthening/supporting effective collaboration, exchange and representation (principle outcome in 6 cases). These patterns suggest that NRGI's work frequently contributes to institutional change and strengthened accountability ecosystems. The harvested outcomes, together with the case studies, while not intended to be representative of the full scope of NRGI's work, do provide illustrative examples of some of the pathways that the organization is following to influence resource governance and suggest that NRGI's influence is

linked both to direct policy wins and to strengthening the systems and relationships that make governance reform possible.

Excerpt from Table 1: Countries selected for the full Outcome Harvesting exercise: harvested outcomes

Selected countries	Outcomes
Colombia	6
DRC	7
Ghana	5
Guinea	6
Senegal	10
Tunisia	12
TOTAL	**46**

Interviews with NRGI partners and other key stakeholders underscored the significance of NRGI's influence, highlighting the organization's direct contributions to policy and regulatory change, ability to bring together actors who previously had limited trust, contribution to new narratives about just energy transitions in public debates, support to strengthen civil society capacity, and constructive substantive engagement across stakeholders. The most significant contributions occurred when NRGI integrated its capabilities rather than deploying them in isolation. Evidence-based research, convening, technical assistance, and sustained accompaniment, when combined, converted technical inputs into actionable reforms or stronger accountability ecosystems in ways that no single capability achieved alone.

The two case studies illustrate this pattern, and also reveal something important about the nature of NRGI's contribution: both cases produced enabling conditions for future change rather than immediate policy victories. In Nigeria, NRGI support helped create the country's first consolidated dataset on sector-wide methane emissions through the oil and gas sector audit process led by the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) — a transparency infrastructure that did not reduce emissions directly, but established the accountability foundation for future regulation. In Colombia, NRGI-supported convening helped around 30 civil society and community organizations co-develop a shared meta-narrative on just energy transition, strengthening relationships and coherence among organizations that are now deploying that narrative in formal policy consultations. These are early, foundational outcomes, and recognizing them as such is important for how NRGI measures and communicates its contribution.

Across outcomes, trust and relationships were as important as evidence quality. Where governments trusted NRGI's technical expertise and civil society had established relationships with policymakers, evidence shaped debates. Where relationships were weak or governments resistant, even strong research had limited effect. Long-term, sustained engagement was the consistent differentiator between influence and limited impact.

NRGI's convening role and political independence gave it a distinctive position in divided environments. As one external partner noted, "*their neutrality [independence] when it comes to politics… makes you trust them more.*" This enabled NRGI to bridge adversarial relationships, including between civil society and government in Tunisia, and to build coalitions, such as the PACTEJ platform in Senegal, which far exceeded expectations and gained formal government recognition that outlasted individual projects. In Ghana, a civil society monitoring committee formed around a single petroleum bid round evolved into a lasting extractives governance network

that later mobilized to scrutinize and ultimately block the Agyapa agreements on gold royalties. In high-risk settings, NRGI's international presence also provided a form of institutional protection for local leaders. In high-risk contexts, interviewees also noted more direct forms of protection. As one partner explained: "*When there is an international actor present, it generates protection for local organizations… it gives them confidence that they can promote debates that are absolutely necessary*."

What has not worked and why

Recurring shortfalls cluster around four patterns:

- **The implementation gap.** Policy wins frequently did not translate into practice. This is partly due to structural factors outside NRGI's control including political will, institutional capacity, and funding cycles. But it also reflects a program design problem: work too often treats policy adoption as the endpoint, with insufficient attention to post-adoption engagement, enforcement actors, and implementation pathways. As one staff member reflected, "*We focused on what's a policy win we can get… but two years later there's no one following up to make sure those things are enforced.*" Program design can do more to build follow-through in and from the outset, and NRGI should build time and resources for follow-through into project plans and funding proposals.
- **Evidence without a sufficiently nuanced influence strategy.** In some contexts, strong research was produced without a full plan for how it would reach decision-makers or be activated by coalition partners. Influence strategies did not always account for community-level incentives - in the DRC, for example, artisanal mining communities sometimes experienced stronger governance as a threat rather than a benefit, a dynamic that advocacy design did not adequately address.
- **Political resistance and structural ceilings.** Entrenched interests backed by political and financial power do not yield to evidence or dialogue alone. As one partner noted, "*we're not going to counteract that just with spaces to talk.*" NRGI's approach — combining research, coalition-building, and sustained engagement — is calibrated to work within this reality. The finding is not that the approach is wrong, but that these structural limitations represent a ceiling that technical governance work cannot always overcome, and that this ceiling should be made explicit in program design and expectations.
- **Resource constraints.** Since early 2025, aid cuts have made resourcing pressures acute. Beyond general constraints, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region systematic donor fatigue has also eroded appetite for sustained engagement precisely in places where governance challenges are most acute. As one MENA-based interviewee explained, "*We've been really struggling with funding because there was this fatigue of funding [in] MENA.*" This regional dynamic deserves recognition as a strategic risk.

Theory of Change: what holds and what needs refinement

NRGI's People-Power-Policy Theory of Change (ToC) remains broadly valid and appropriate to the complexity of the natural resource governance field. Its core logic, that informed actors, shifts in power, and improved policy levers together produce governance change, is supported across the evidence. Seven core assumptions were assessed and most are valid or mostly valid.

However, two important qualifications apply. The ToC narrative was developed concurrently with this evaluation and has not yet been fully institutionalized across the organization. In addition, of the three pathways, Power (that is, working to shift power) proved the most challenging. NRGI has good access and produces solid evidence and recommendations, but NRGI sometimes struggles, particularly in highly complex contexts, to translate these into concrete decision-making influence,

especially if local actors lack access to the spaces where decisions are actually made. This could be better acknowledged, tracked and accounted for in program design.

The strongest outcomes in the evaluation emerged when all three pathways operated together: capable civil society actors (People) with access to decision-making spaces (Power) deploying credible, timely evidence and policy tools (Policy). This interaction is NRGI's core theory.

Ways of working

- **Political economy analysis.** PEA is conceptually embedded in NRGI's strategy and project design guidance. In practice, however, integration remains uneven. As one internal reflection acknowledged, "*we don't consistently enough integrate*" political understanding into strategic decision-making. NRGI's internal centralized reporting system (SOLAR) includes a function for staff to report significant contextual developments, but as of this evaluation and since the SOLAR system was refined and re-launched last year, that function has not yet been used. This is an illustration of small *knowing-doing* gaps this evaluation identifies.
- **Learning and adaptation.** NRGI has made genuine progress in embedding learning into strategy and planning cycles. The SOLAR lesson-recording function, structured around a "What? So what? Now what?" model, represents a serious effort to make lesson capture more action-oriented. The organization has adapted methods in response to context, replicated promising tools, and shown it can stop or change work when evidence points in that direction. A risk is that rapid strategic shifts — a genuine strength in terms of agility — can also leave partners behind. As one partner observed, "*You turn so fast that they're thrown in another direction.*"
- **Partnerships and ecosystem positioning.** NRGI's hybrid model – combining technical expertise and global convening power with a flexible, partner-enabling approach – is a comparative advantage, further strengthened by its political independence. NRGI's work to connect with diverse partners coming from a range of perspectives also represents a challenge to keep in balance, to ensure that the organization's communication of its mission and drivers is consistent. One interview revealed an emerging tension between partners focused on addressing climate change and those focused more directly on effective governance of extractive industries, which underscores the importance of NRGI playing an honest broker role and avoiding the risk of being perceived to be using its relationships with national and local partners to advance its own agenda. Managing this dynamic thoughtfully to ensure partnerships are genuinely reciprocal will become increasingly important as NRGI's work – especially around climate and energy transition – continues to evolve.
- **Integrating (or institutionalizing) systems-change thinking and ways of working**: Further integrating systems-change thinking and the above ways of working more systematically and evenly across the organization will take continued and strengthened strategic discipline in where NRGI focuses, more proactive adaptation, and a stronger shift toward local ownership in reform processes. This shift also has implications for recruitment and staff development.

Recommendations

1a. Embed political economy analysis as a continuous practice. *Finding: PEA is acknowledged but unevenly applied; the SOLAR context-change function is not consistently used, illustrating the gap between enabling infrastructure and operational uptake.* Integrate brief, periodic PEA updates into existing program review cycles. Use PEA explicitly to test assumptions about government responsiveness, reform feasibility, and civic space. Ensure country teams lead or co-own analysis to

reflect real-time context, activating the SOLAR context-change function as a structured prompt for this work.

1b. Strengthen attention to inclusion and power dynamics within PEA. *Finding: Equity and inclusion considerations — particularly for communities affected by extractive activities — are important to NRGI's work but not consistently integrated into program design.* Integrate prompts into PEA to assess who holds power, who is excluded, and why. Where relevant, reflect dimensions such as gender, geography, and community status as part of broader power analysis, building on existing practice rather than introducing parallel frameworks.

2. Prioritize implementation and follow-through as core to impact. *Finding: A persistent implementation gap limits the durability of policy and transparency gains; program design too frequently treats adoption as the endpoint.* Include implementation considerations in program design from the outset in terms of who will follow through, how, and with what support. Allocate resources for post-adoption engagement where strategic, and support partners best positioned to monitor and sustain reforms over time.

3. Clarify and operationalize NRGI's role within partnerships. *Finding: NRGI works strongly in alliances, provides essential analytical support to partners, and consciously empowers partner leadership. The trust and connection the organization has built with partners is a driver of success. However, tension between catalytic and sustaining roles, and the emergence of partnership dynamics that trade on NRGI's local credibility rather than building genuine collaborative capacity, can create inconsistencies in engagement and expectations.* Define intended role (catalytic versus sustaining) during program design and align resourcing accordingly. Develop criteria for assessing and, where necessary, pushing back on partnership arrangements that trade on NRGI's local credibility rather than building genuine collaborative capacity.

Beyond clarifying NRGI's role in individual partnerships, develop a deliberate multi-level alliance strategy in priority contexts, identifying which actors are needed at national, regional, and international levels, and how they combine to create leverage together and make power-shifting pathways more explicit.

4. Take a more deliberate and context-specific approach to subnational engagement. *Finding: Many critical resource governance decisions are experienced at subnational and community levels, but NRGI's engagement at these levels is uneven and not strategically defined.* Make clear choices about when, where, and how NRGI engages sub-nationally, and be explicit where it will not engage directly. Define a clearer approach to define NRGI's approach to supporting organizations better positioned to operate at community level and ensure that learning from subnational engagement feeds consistently into national advocacy and policy work.

5. Strengthen coherence across levels to support systems change. *Finding: NRGI's global influence and technical credibility are strengths, but alignment between global, regional, and country-level work is uneven, and role clarity varies.* Align global products and advocacy more closely with country priorities. NRGI has taken steps to drive the evolution of its strategy and ways of working from the needs and ideas being generated by its country-based staff and partners – including the development of strategy pillars by leaders from across the organization and the creation of cross-team and cross-regional working groups and strategy committees to advance learning and effective implementation. Enhancing structured opportunities for cross-country learning on similar governance challenges is important, as is ensuring regular feedback from country experience informs global strategy and that the ToC narrative is socialized and operationalized across teams.

In addition, continue to ensure that global-level norm-setting work, particularly NRGI's role in EITI standard revisions and similar international governance processes, is planned for, resourced, and connected to country-level programming. This pathway of influence (shaping the standards that countries use as benchmarks) should continue as an important contribution channel with its own strategy for engagement.

6. Strengthen SOLAR as a tool for strategic decision-making. *Finding: NRGI generates valuable outcome data that is not consistently used to inform adaptation; the context-change function has not been used; disaggregated data and external corroboration are weak.* Reposition SOLAR as a decision-support tool, not a reporting system. Organize it around a small number of strategic learning questions. Map outcomes consistently to People-Power-Policy pathways. Require external substantiation and validation for outcome claims where possible, track disaggregated data on gender and other relevant dimensions, and build structured reflection points into program review cycles that prompt decisions about what to continue, adjust, or stop.

Conclusion

NRGI has made meaningful and credible contributions to resource governance across diverse and often difficult contexts. Its contribution lies in enabling incremental but cumulative change by strengthening accountability ecosystems, building coalitions, and shaping the conditions under which governance reforms become possible. These are not small achievements in a field characterized by entrenched interests, shrinking civic space, and structural power imbalances. Realizing this potential more fully in the next strategy period will depend on a coherent set of operational shifts: embedding political economy analysis as a continuous practice rather than an intermittent one; treating implementation and follow-through as core program deliverables; managing partnership dynamics with strategic intentionality; and deepening locally anchored approaches that enable sustained ownership of reform. Most of the operational building blocks for this exist — SOLAR for lesson capture, project design guidance for PEA, existing civil society platforms in priority countries. The challenge is consistent use, not new infrastructure.