From Gardi Sugdub to Isber Yala:

An Indigenous Community-led Planned Relocation in Panama

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What can I offer?

• My own optimism.

• The remarkable planned relocation experience of the people from Gardi Sugdub.

• The profound sense of agency that the Guna people have had to address very difficult circumstances they face and the specific challenges that they are dealing with.

• People generally are not passive victims, and most hate to be seen in that way, but many times they are agents of their own destiny.
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In memory

Blas Lopez, community leader of Gardi Sugdub and one of the heroes of the relocation of his community, who passed away on June 4, 2024. Blas died from dengue fever the day after the community moved to Isber Yala.
1. Human Rights Watch Video (6:48)
2. Background Information
Panama (the Guna region of Gunayala in red)
Gunayala, a region rich in history

- Some degree of kinship between the Gunas and the indigenous people that inhabited the area upon the arrival of the Spaniards can be assumed.

- The Guna people appear in colonial documentation starting in 1604.

- The first group of Gunas that returned to live in the current Gunayala region did so in the year 1650.

- When the Scots arrived in the Guna territory to establish a colony in 1698, the entire northern coast of Panama was already inhabited by Guna communities. Since then, the Guna people have lived and decidedly defended the land.

- During the 17th and 18th centuries the Guna interacted and many times partnered with pirates from England, France, and the Netherlands to fight against the Spaniards.

Guna leader Lacenta or “Golden Cap”, according to the narration of pirate Lionel Wafer. Source: Picture included in William Dampier’s book, 1687.
Gunayala, a region rich in history

• Due to the permanent conflict with the Spanish authorities, the Guna communities were located in the mountains.

• Only at the beginning of the 19th century, after independence from Spain did the settlement of the islands begin. This was a slow process that lasted several decades.

• In 1925 the Guna expelled the Panamanian authorities from the Gunayala region and declared autonomy. This uprising is called the “Tule revolution.”

• The Tule revolution is the most important historical event of the modern Guna people which they celebrate with pride every year.

• The Guna semi-autonomous status was later reflected in various laws on the Gunayala region.

Map of the Spanish Fort of Mandinga, at the mouth of the Carti River, 1785. Source: General Archive of the Indies, Seville, Spain.
3. Planned relocation
Different frameworks, approaches or angles to planned relocation/resettlement

1. UNFCCC Policy Arena
      • Art. 14 (f) - Climate mobility: displacement, voluntary migration and planned relocation
      • Creation of the Task Force on Displacement

2. After disasters or as disaster risk reduction/prevention measures

3. Development projects (dams, highways, etc.)
What is planned relocation?

- It is a complex and long-term set of processes aim to facilitate the moving of a community to a new and perhaps safer location.
- It is more than the physical building of a community, but the recreation of a new community.

Some characteristics:
- It is collective, as opposed to individual.
- It is coordinated or planned, as opposed to improvised.
- It is intended to be permanent, as opposed to temporary.
- It is done in anticipation or in response to climate related hazards and vulnerabilities (slow processes, such as sea level rise, or reconstruction after disaster).
- Multicausality is always present (climate related hazards and vulnerabilities + something else).
- Generally, it should be a measure of last resort (after adaptation options have been exhausted).
The big picture about the relocation of communities due to climate change

• A review by Bower and Weeranshinghe (2022) identified more than 400 cases of planned relocations globally since the 1970s. Some regions are “hot spots” such as the Pacific region.

• Planned relocations will likely continue to increase in the future.

• All, or almost all relocations, will be within the borders of a country.

• Planned relocations will take different forms, shaped to the specific contexts of a given population, place and time.

Partial view of Isber Yala, May 28, 2024.
Why do we talk about relocation of communities in Gunayala?

- In Gunayala there are 49 Guna communities, 38 of them are located on islands near the mouth of the rivers.

- Gardi Sugdub is one of these 49 communities.

- Population growth and the possibility of increased exposure to disaster risk due to rising sea levels are making Guna communities think that the time has come to relocate to the mainland.

- It is estimated that approximately 28,000 people in Gunayala will eventually have to relocate from the islands to the mainland.

- Gardi Sugdub is a case of planned, preventive, voluntary and community-led relocation.

Gardi Sugdub’s resident, Evelio López, looking for a spot to get better reception for his cell phone.
Sea level rise predictions for the island of Gardi Sugdub

Source: Jesse, Ariana (2020)
Things to consider during a planned relocation process

Before deciding to move
• Whether to move
• Who decides about moving and how?

Gardi Sugdub’s case
• In 2010, the community of Gardi Sugdub collectively decided to move to the mainland and created a special committee assigned with that task.
• Originally the community decided to ask the Panamanian government for support, but they were planning to move even if support was not offered. That determination or sense of agency was present from the very beginning.
Things to consider during a planned relocation process

After deciding to move, but before moving (typically, over 5 years)

• Where to move? Who decides?
• What kind of support is needed and offered?
• Who decides about the design of the physical space of the new community?
• Who decides about the designs of the house prototypes?
• Who decides about the definition of who is part of a community and its rights during a relocation process?
• What to do with the place where the community is located after moving to a new relocation site?

Gardi Sugdub’s case

• The community decided to move to a parcel of land they owned. It was located next to a school and health center the government was building at that time.

• Originally in 2011 the Panamanian government offered to build 56 houses for the relocation. Once the case become known internationally, in 2015 the government offered to build 300 houses.

• The Panamanian government decided the design of the physical space and the house prototype.

• Until last minute the government tried to decide who should be included as part of the community. Finally, they allowed the community to decide.

• It was hard for the community to imagine and decide what to do with the island. A final decision is still pending.
Things to consider during a planned relocation process

At the time of moving (several weeks, months or years)

• When to move?
  • Should the community move-in only after all the houses have been completed or do so on a staggered basis?
  • Should the community move-in only until all or minimal services are available?
• Symbolism of space occupation (especially important for indigenous peoples)
• How to move (logistics)? Who is helping? Who is paying?

Gardi Sugdub’s case

• The Gardi Sugdub community decided to move collectively as a community once the new houses were completed and minimal services were available.
• Gardi Sugdub’s saila, Jose Davies decided to bless and inaugurate the Gathering House of Isber Yala several weeks before the official inauguration by the Panamanian President.
• For three days at the beginning of June 2024 the Panamanian government assisted with the logistics of the move from Gardi Sugdub to Isber Yala. They provided volunteers, boats and trucks. Around half of the community moved in that way.
Moving day at Gardi Sugdub, June 2, 2024
Moving day at Niga Kantule port, June 2, 2024
Things to consider during a planned relocation process

After moving (several years)

- Are there social programs offered to support and facilitate the transition to the new relocation site?
- Are there economic programs offered to rebuild the local economy in the new relocation site?
- What new kind of expenses will people have at the new site?
- What are the new things that need to be managed or administered at the new site?

Gardi Sugdub’s case

- At this moment the Panamanian government doesn’t yet have social or economic programs to support the Isber Yala community during the transition.
- People in Isber Yala will have to pay energy bills to a private utilities company. People will have to pay a monthly fee to the community for the new water and sanitation system.
- The Isber Yala community will need to create committees to administer the new water and sanitation system, and train people on how to do the regular maintenance.
4. Potential impacts of relocation
Potential cultural losses

- Relocation to the mainland will present the Gunas with social, economic, political and cultural challenges in the form of losses that are inherent and inevitable in any relocation/resettlement project.
- My colleague Anthony Oliver-Smith and I project a certain array of problems that the Guna will likely face in the resettlement process: the loss of place, home and past may all be triggered by the totality of losses that are experiencing.
- All forms of losses fold into what can be the most devastating of all: the loss of meaning.
The loss of home

The Concern

• Resettlements produce deep pain among people due to the loss of home, understood as the built environment and community.

• The new community of Isber Yala will mean an almost total reorientation towards the urban space.

• The project will relocate a community of 1,300 people currently living in extremely overcrowded conditions (on an island of less than 1 hectare to an area of 22 hectares in a more dispersed spatial distribution).

Partial view of Isber Yala, May 28, 2024.
The Gardi Sugdub community has taken a very pragmatic approach to the design of the houses, and they are the first to recognize that the design is culturally inappropriate, but at the same time many value what has been built for them.

Their strategy focused on obtaining a lot large enough to expand their houses according to the needs and opportunities of the families.
The loss of place

The Concern

• Resettlement processes cause anguish to the people who have to experience it, due to the fear generated by the loss of a known place.

• The relocation of Gardi Sugdub will distance its inhabitants from the sea, which they refer to as their grandmother, which has been omnipresent in their lives, in an intimate way.

• The new community, approximately 1.5 kilometers from the coast will not allow them to see the ocean.
The loss of place

Guna resources to respond

• The Guna have always maintained a close relationship with the mainland.
• Isber Yala is located close to their farms (“it is a place to work”).
• In this way, a sense of continuity with the past can be established on the continent and it will provide them with cultural elements that can be reinterpreted for cultural adaptation to the new community.

Isber Yala’s gathering house, May 28, 2024.
The loss of past

The Concern

• Nostalgia is defined as the pain for a lost past. We wonder if nostalgia could be present in an indigenous culture that still vibrates and proudly celebrates a victorious past and a no less successful present.

• Will the loss of the past be inevitable in the relocation of Gardi Sugdub? If so, what and how much of the past will be lost?

• Perhaps the answer to these questions depends on ensuring that there is a continuity of key traditions.

Looking at the future relocation site, 2014
The loss of past

Guna resources to respond

• Clearly, history is very important for maintaining the cultural identity of the Guna people.
• Ethnographers have highlighted that the Guna chiefs (sailas) govern by consensus. This is why the Casa del Congreso (gathering house) is so central to its culture.
• La Casa de la Chicha (Chicha house) is the site of many community solidarity celebrations involving food and dancing.
• The Guna language is also central to their culture, as all songs and traditions only exist in their own language.

Gardi Sugdub/Isber Yala’s Sailas Ernesto Pérez and Jose Davies sitting in the chiefs’ hammocks at the gathering house.
Conclusion

• The Guna people have a robust sense of identity.
• Their language (Dulegaya) continues to be vital and actively used across generations.
• Historically, the Guna people have demonstrated enough flexibility so far to adapt without sacrificing their sociocultural integrity.
• The Gunas of Gardi Sugdub/Isber Yala seem prepared to adapt once again and keep protecting the core aspects of their culture, now from the mainland.

Gardi Sugdub/Isber Yala’s Saila Jose Davies in his private museum of Guna culture in Gardi Sugdub.