

An Overview on the Relocation of Guna Indigenous Communities in Gunayala, Panama

-Mission Report-



DISPLACEMENT SOLUTIONS



Guna fisherman in his "cayuco" at Playón Chico, Gunayala. Photo by Carlos Arenas.

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I. Executive Summary

This is Displacement Solution's third report on climate displacement and the attempts of affected island communities to relocate to the mainland in the Gunayala region of Panama. Displacement Solutions has been following the relocation efforts of the indigenous Guna people of the island of Gardi Sugdub for more than three years, which we believe could provide a model of how to resolve climate displacement for the Gunayala region and beyond. In our latest visit to the region in September 2016 which is the subject of this report, Displacement Solutions found that there are now more and more island communities in Gunayala which are being forced to consider relocating to the mainland as a combined result of a lack of space caused by an ever increasing population, rising sea levels and other effects of climate change.

Since our last visit to Panama in 2015, progress in relation to the relocation of the islanders of Gardi Sugdub to the mainland, and indeed in relation to Panama's commitment to resolving the problem of climate displacement throughout the region, has been disappointing. The three key government projects required to support the Gardi Sugdub relocation – namely the construction of 300 houses, a new school and medical center – have all stalled for a variety of reasons, and there is no clear timeframe as to when – or indeed whether – they will be completed. The lines of communication with government officials on the status of the various projects have been unreliable, and indeed Displacement Solutions was not provided with clear answers by government officials to many outstanding questions in the course of its latest visit.

In addition, and despite some encouraging official statements made in the past, the government has not yet engaged in a participatory planning process with the Gardi Sugdub community on the relocation, nor have any official steps been taken to plan for or address climate displacement in the region, despite the fact that it is expected that some forty additional islands will be severely affected by a lack of space due to an increasing, population rising sea levels and extreme weather events, and will eventually be forced to relocate.

The Guna communities living on the islands continue to be well-organised, with the Gardi Sugdub islanders having taken considerable steps themselves towards relocation, and, as discovered on this latest visit, with other islands such as Playon Chico now set to follow. The report concludes that there are essentially four categories which the islands fall into in terms of their approach to climate displacement and relocation: 1) communities in the process of relocating, such as Gardi Sugdub; 2) communities wishing to relocate that have taken some initial steps forward, such as Playon Chico; 3) communities that would like to relocate but have not yet taken concrete steps towards that goal, such as Gardi Maladup, Digir (Isla Tigre), and Yandub (Nargana); and 4) communities where there is not yet a consensus about the need to relocate, such as Niadub, Corazon de Jesus, and Soledad Mandinga.

The report sets out the various opportunities, challenges and pitfalls posed by the relocation process, ranging from the opportunity created by the fact that the availability of land on the mainland to relocate to, does not present a major obstacle in Gunayala as it does in many other similar scenarios in other countries around the world, to the challenges posed by the need to provide - in addition to new housing - the infrastructure and other technical support required to ensure that the relocation is successful.

Displacement Solutions has been calling on the Panamanian government since 2014 to apply the Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement within States – which set out a framework for action to address climate displacement - regarding the relocation of island communities in Gunayala. The Panamanian government has made several promises to assist the community of Gardi Sugdub to relocate, which has been very encouraging, but there has been little in the way of concrete action to date.

The report makes a number of recommendations to the government of Panama, as well as international actors like the Inter-American Development Bank – which is already engaged with projects to support indigenous peoples in Panama and in the Gunayala region - regarding the support and assistance which is required to support the relocation process.

If the Guna communities are not assisted now in their preventive relocation to the mainland, there is a serious risk that when the sea level reaches a trigger point, or when a natural disaster strikes, they would probably be forced to move to the slums of Panama City where they would lose their livelihoods and traditional way of life. This would clearly be a great loss not only for the affected communities themselves, but also more broadly to the indigenous culture of Panama.

II. Introduction

Since 2014, Displacement Solutions has been closely following the situation of Guna indigenous communities in the autonomous region of Gunayala, Panama and their need to relocate from their island homes to the mainland as a result of sea level rise and lack of space on the tiny islands. In September 2016, DS conducted its third visit to the Gunayala region as part of its ongoing effort to assist the community of Gardi Sugdub island in the relocation process.

DS has published two previous reports regarding the relocation of the Guna indigenous communities¹. These reports focused mainly on the community led process of relocating Gardi Sugdub, as well as the opportunities, challenges and complexities that this presents. DS has also provided the community of Gardi Sugdub with training, information and the opportunity to participate in current global discussions about the relocation of communities affected by climate change. In April 2015, DS organized a workshop in Gardi Sugdub conducted by Professor Anthony Oliver-Smith, an international expert on relocation, on the complexities of relocation processes. In May 2016, DS invited one of Gardi Sugdub's community leaders to present their relocation experience in Geneva², Switzerland where he had also the opportunity to learn from the relocation experience of indigenous communities in Alaska, and other communities in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Bangladesh and Colombia.

This latest visit to the region in September had three main objectives³:

- First, to obtain updated information about the relocation of Gardi Sugdub;
- Second, to obtain a broader picture of relocation among other communities affected by climate change in the region;
- Third, to encourage and facilitate information-sharing about the ongoing relocation process from Gardi Sugdub with other Guna communities we visited.

Following three years of working with Guna communities in Gunayala, we have identified four different types of communities as determined by their relocation status, each of which is examined in this report:

1. *Communities in the process of relocating.* This is the case of the community of Gardi Sugdub.
2. *Communities with a desire to relocate, and although they have taken the first steps toward that objective, they still don't have a clear path to their relocation.* This is the case of the island community of Playón Chico.

¹ Displacement Solutions (2014). *The Peninsula Principles in Action. Climate Change and Displacement in the Autonomous Region of Gunayala, Panama.* Available here: <http://displacementsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/Panama-The-Peninsula-Principles-in-Action.pdf>; Displacement Solutions (2015). *One Step at a Time. The Relocation Process of the Gardi Sugdub Community in Gunayala, Panama.* Available here: <http://displacementsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/One-Step-at-a-Time-the-Relocation-Process-of-the-Gardi-Sugdub-Community-In-Gunayala-Panama.pdf>.

² Displacement Solutions (2016). *Land Access for Climate Displaced Persons and Communities. Roundtable Hosted by Displacement Solutions & The Global Migration Centre of The Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.* Available here: <http://displacementsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2016-DS-Land-Access-for-Climate-Displaced-Persons-and-Communities-Roundtable-Report.pdf>.

³ Displacement Solutions' team was led by human rights lawyer Carlos Arenas, author of this report.

3. *Communities that would like to relocate but don't know where to start and how to take concrete steps towards this goal.* This is the case of communities such as Gardi Muladup, Digir (Isla Tigre), and Yandub (Narganá). These communities are closely watching Gardi Sugdub's relocation process to learn from that experience.
4. *Communities where relocation is not yet on their agenda, and/or where there is not a consensus among the community members about the need to relocate.* This is the case of Niadub (Isla Diablo) Corazón de Jesús, and Soledad Mandinga.



Google Earth's image from Gardi Sugdub (left) to Playón Chico (right).

There are ten sections of this report. Following the executive summary and introduction, section three provides background information on the relationship between the Panamanian government and indigenous peoples. Section four provides a detailed update on the relocation of Gardi Sugdub. Section five details the first steps taken by the community of Playón Chico, which has the second most developed relocation process in Gunayala to date. Section six provides general information about the relocation status among some of the other communities we visited. Section seven sets out the opportunities, challenges and pitfalls posed by the relocation of Guna communities. Section eight highlights the urgent need for government action to support relocation in Gunayala and to apply the Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement within States. Section nine summarizes Displacement Solutions' conclusions, and section ten makes recommendations both for stakeholders who are already involved, as well as others who need to become involved, in order for the relocation of Guna communities to be successful.

The information contained in the report was obtained from visits to the island communities, meetings with traditional authorities and leaders, community leaders and members of the diaspora living in Panama City; the Panamanian government, including the ministries of

Housing, Health and Education; as well as Guna intellectuals, academics, and civil society leaders with knowledge about Gunayala.

III. Background information

The dynamics of the Panamanian government's actions (or lack thereof) regarding the relocation process in Gunayala cannot be properly understood without a grasp of the relationship between the government and indigenous peoples in Panama in general, and with the Guna people in particular.

After the inauguration of President Juan Carlos Varela and his administration in 2014, it seemed that the relationship between the state and indigenous people of Panama would finally change. In his youth, President Varela had personal experience living for some time among Guna communities that, according to his own testimony, had a deep and lasting impact on him. As a result, when he assumed power, he announced a new dawn in the relationship between the Panamanian state and its indigenous peoples. Despite these plans, the reality has been that good intentions have not proved to be enough to execute concrete and effective policies and practices that have positive and lasting impacts on indigenous people (as opposed to past approaches which were colonialist, racist and manipulative).

It is still hard to see concrete results of the promised new attitude toward indigenous peoples. On the one hand, last year President Varela took all his ministers to a cabinet meeting on the island of Playón Chico and made several promises in response to their demands, most of which are still waiting to materialize. On the other hand, his own Minister of Government, Milton Henríquez, has made one of the most offensive and historically inaccurate statements about Panama's indigenous peoples, saying that they could not claim ownership over their territories because they were not originally from Panama since they came from Colombia in the 17th century, and that the Europeans arrived in Panamanian territory before the current indigenous groups⁴. Despite the fact that Minister Henríquez has tried to have a respectful relationship with indigenous peoples, that unfortunate statement has hurt Panama's indigenous communities deeply and has resulted in multiple concerns⁵. Moreover, the International Labour Organization Convention 169 on indigenous peoples is still waiting for approval by the Panamanian government 27 years after having been implemented and ratified by almost all the other Latin American countries.

In addition, powerful economic interests have continued pushing for the development of megaprojects on indigenous lands, such as dams and electric power lines, which have been one of the main factors leading to a clash between the state and the indigenous peoples. This has resulted in attempts to manipulate, divide and corrupt indigenous communities and their leadership. For instance, the Guna community of Muladup has stated that they would like to

⁴ Part of the problem with that argument is that the Panamanian state was created only in 1903, and before that year Panama had been a province of Colombia since its independence from Spain in 1821. In addition, the Guna people were far from being passive observers during the war of independence against Spain, considering that they played a very active and strategic role alongside Bolívar's independence army, as recently has been documented by a DS researcher. See: Arenas, Luis Carlos (2016). "La Nación Cuna y la independencia de Colombia y Panamá (1819-1821). *Historia 2.0*. Issue 12. <http://historiaabierta.org/historia2.0/index.php/revista>

⁵ "Pueblos indígenas cuestionan acción del ministro Henríquez". *La Estrella de Panamá*. April 7, 2016. <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/pueblos-indigenas-cuestionan-accion-ministro-henriquez/23932439>

have a road to reduce their current isolation. The Panamanian government has offered to build the road if the Guna General Congress (GGC) approves a project that has been promoted by the Colombian government and some Colombian private companies for the last several years to bring a power line from Colombia to Panama through the Guna territory in Gunayala. The GGC has voted several times against that project, but government officials have kept pushing for it, going as far as trying to manoeuvre the community of Muladup to pit them against the GGC.

These negative developments form the backdrop to and inform the dynamics behind the relocation of Guna indigenous communities. Indeed it sometimes would appear that the Panamanian government uses the relocation of the Guna communities as a political bargaining chip, whereby some government officials offer to intervene in exchange for the approval by the GGC of totally unrelated government demands.

IV. Communities in process of relocating: An update on the relocation of Gardi Sugdub.

When Displacement Solutions previously visited Panama in April 2015, the community of Gardi Sugdub had just cleared the land selected as the relocation site and were ready to go ahead with relocation, even without planning or support from the Panamanian government. A few months later, the Panamanian government offered in June 2015 to build 300 houses for the relocation of Gardi Sugdub, and later surveyed the community to learn about the socio-economic conditions of the potential beneficiaries of those houses.

During this latest visit, the community living on Gardi Subdub appeared to be in ‘wait and see’ mode regarding the government’s promise to build the 300 houses and seemed to accept the government’s argument that it will take some time⁶. The sense of urgency to relocate seen in previous visits appeared to have been put on hold, with the community seemingly prepared to give the Ministry of Housing the time it has requested to initiate the project. However, among Gardi Sugdub’s diaspora the attitude seems a little different, as some people in that group did not believe in the government promise at all⁷.

The following sections provide an update on the status of the three different projects that are currently happening in the area where the Gardi Sugdub community is planning to relocate. As mentioned in previous reports, the health center, school and the new settlement will all serve the same community and should be seen as a single project, despite the fact that different state entities are managing them separately – generally without cooperation or even prior consultation.

⁶ Meeting with the Gardi Sugdub community to talk about planned relocations in Gunayala. Gardi Sugdub, September 23, 2016.

⁷ Meeting with members of the board of directors of Gardi Sugdub’s association in Panama City. Panama City, September 30, 2016.

1. Planning and design of the new community:

As mentioned in our previous report, in June 2015, the Deputy Minister of Housing Jorge Gonzalez committed to build 300 houses for the relocation of Gardi Sugdub. He promised that the project would be participatory and that it would be a model for future relocations in Gunayala and in Panama, which is exactly what Displacement Solutions had been advocating for since 2014⁸. However, besides a socio-economic survey of the people of Gardi Sugdub (which included members of the diaspora in Panama City) as of September 2016, nothing else has been done.

During our latest visit to Panama, DS met with several government officials at the Ministry of Housing to learn more details about the status of the project and the plans going forward. We were informed by the Ministry of Housing that the project is in the process of getting the “*pliego de cargos*”, or statement of objectives, which is the process of detailing what the project entails before it goes public for bids⁹. If this is the case, once the “*pliego de cargos*” is done internally, it is not at all clear whether the community will be given the opportunity to offer their input regarding the layout of the community and the design of the houses, despite many public promises made by officials from the Ministry of Housing that the project would be participatory.

One very positive development is that over the last year the community of Gardi Sugdub has opened direct lines of communication with several functionaries at the Ministry of Housing. As a result, several traditional authorities as well as other community leaders from Gardi Sugdub and from its diaspora have met with several officials from that Ministry, including Deputy Minister Gonzalez, to talk about the status of the project¹⁰. In these meetings some people were informed that the funding for the project was postponed until 2017, and others heard that it would be postponed until 2018.

⁸ Displacement Solutions (2015). *One Step at a Time. The Relocation Process of the Gardi Sugdub Community in Gunayala, Panama.*

⁹ Meeting with Anais Marin, National Director of Social Development at the Ministry of Housing and Regional planning. Ciudad de Panama, September 27, 2016. Meeting with César Echeverry, deputy director of the National Direction of Architecture and Engineering, and with Luis Martinez, director of program “Techos de Esperanza”, both at the Ministry of Housing. Panama City, September 29, 2016.

¹⁰ We also learned that deputy Minister Gonzalez has been very open to being contacted directly by leaders of the Gardi Sugdub community. For instance, he regularly communicates with Blas López, one of the leaders of the neighborhood committee.



Blas López, community leader from Gardi Sugdub. Photo by Carlos Arenas

Interestingly, inside the Ministry of Housing, the topic of the relocation of Gardi Sugdub is managed personally by the Deputy Minister of Housing Gonzalez. Several interpretations could be drawn from the unusual handling of this project. On one hand, it could show that this project has a high profile inside the Ministry and one of its leaders is taking a personal stake in it. On the other hand, it could also be interpreted that this project is perceived as having the potential to bring political benefits to its promoters inside the ministry, if it is done successfully. We tried to meet with Mr. Gonzalez, however we were told that he was not able to make space in his busy agenda¹¹. Consequently, we were unable to resolve the outstanding questions outlined above and to which the Deputy Ministers were unable to provide answers, such as whether the process will in fact involve further community consultation and when funding for the project will be available.

2. Status of the health center:

Regrettably, there has been no further work on the health center that was under construction near the site where the community of Gardi Sugdub is relocating for the past two years. According to the original contract, the center should have been completed by January 2013. Only about 54% of the physical structure has been completed, but since construction was completely abandoned two years ago, it is showing signs of a rapid and perhaps irreversible deterioration. The building lacks doors and hasn't been guarded during this time, and as a result it has been extensively vandalized. Unfortunately, this project provides an example of

¹¹ However, while we were meeting with other officials from the Ministry of Housing, Mr. Gonzalez was following the developments of the meeting through WhatsApp, as we were told by those same officials we were meeting with. Meeting with César Echeverry, deputy director of the National Direction of Architecture and Engineering, and with Luis Martinez, director of program "Techos de Esperanza", both at the Ministry of Housing. Panama City, September 29, 2016.

how everything can go wrong with a government project where no state institution or functionary seems willing to take overall responsibility for coordination and completion.

Approximately \$11.5 million dollars were invested by the Panamanian government in this project. The Puerto Rican based company Omega Engineering was the construction company for the project. This company has been under judicial scrutiny as part of the ongoing investigation of corruption charges against the previous administration of President Ricardo Martinelli¹². According to reports, Omega Engineering has had problems in several construction projects in Panama in addition to one in Puerto Rico¹³. The criminal investigation currently underway against Omega Engineering as well as their financial problems have resulted in the paralysis of the construction project.

However, the current problems with the Minsa-Capsi health center are not only inherited from the previous administration. The authorities at the Ministry of Health during the current administration of President Varela have not been pro-active enough to do whatever is necessary to protect the expensive investment already made in the structure. The Panamanian Ministry of Health has a unit called the Health Infrastructure Unit that is responsible for the building and could reasonably be expected to have protected it until the legal dispute was resolved. During our visit to Panama we tried unsuccessfully for several days to meet with Architect Iveth Olmos, the head of that Unit. On our last attempt to talk to her, we were able to find her at the door to her office and we raised our concern about the poor condition of the building where so much money had been invested. We also showed her a video of the condition of the building and she informed us that her office could not do anything and did not have funding to pay for guards¹⁴. A link to a video which shows the state of the building as of September 2016 can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwnfwacOkIw>.

¹² “Capsi de Llano Cartí es un problema para el Ministerio de Salud”. *La Estrella de Panama*. November 6, 2015. <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/politica/capsi-llano-carti-problema-para-ministerio-salud/23902218>

¹³ Citrón Arbasetti, Joel. “Omega abandona Proyecto Paseo Puerta de Tierra y entra compañía con pobres credenciales”. *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*. March 8, 2016. <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2016/03/omega-abandona-proyecto-paseo-puerta-de-tierra-y-entra-compania-con-pobres-credenciales/>

¹⁴ Conversation with architect Iveth Olmos, head of the Health Infrastructure at the Ministry of Health. Panama City, September 30, 2016.



The construction of the health center in Gardi Sugdub has been paralyzed for the last two years. This picture taken on September 23, 2016 shows that the building has been completely abandoned. Photo by Carlos Arenas.

Last year Panama's General Comptroller, said:

"Before continuing this project, the Ministry of Health should study the realities such as the possibilities of using the building and the needs of the people, to know if when the construction is finished it would have the demand for which it was originally conceived. At present the nearest community to the construction site is more than 20 kilometers away, and the electricity is 30 kilometers away".

"Here there is a lack of planning, so there have been many problems since its inception. There is no electricity and getting it here will be very costly; also there is no circulation of people. Here are many millions invested and the health authorities must decide whether to continue the construction in order to reach an agreement with the construction company"¹⁵.

In response to these public comments, Displacement Solutions sent a public letter to the Comptroller General dated September 16, 2015. The letter pointed out that there was a clear

¹⁵ "Contralor recomienda estudio de factibilidad para Minsa-Capsi en Cartí". *La Estrella de Panamá*, August 28, 2015. <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/contralor-recomienda-estudio-factibilidad-para-minsa-capsi-carti/23888286>. See also: *La Prensa*, "Contralor recomienda estudio de factibilidad para uso de Minsa-Capsi en Cartí": http://www.prensa.com/sociedad/Contralor-recomienda-estudio-factibilidad-Minsa-Capsi_0_4288071280.html. *El Siglo*, "Humbert: Minsa-Capsi sin planificación": <http://elsiglo.com/panama/humbert-minsa-capsi-planificacion/23888413>. *Telemetro*, "Minsa-Capsi de Cartí lejos de la comunidad, energía eléctrica y agua": http://www.telemetro.com/nacionales/Minsa-Capsi-Carti-comunidad-energia-electrica_0_838716593.html.

need for the health center for the Guna indigenous communities, and called for the health center, as well as other planned public projects necessary for the relocation, such as the model school and 300 homes, to be completed in full. The letter also called for greater transparency regarding the public funds invested in these projects. The Comptroller General never replied to the letter and to our knowledge has not said or done anything further on any of the matters raised.

Currently there is total uncertainty about the future of this project. It is not clear if the current government will decide to finish the project or abandon it entirely. In fact, the local police force has expressed interest in using the building if the idea of the health center is abandoned.

3. Status of the new school complex

The new school complex at Cartí was originally scheduled to be ready by 2014. For several reasons there have been multiple delays. Currently 92% of the project has been completed, but progress stopped in June 2016¹⁶ when the paperwork became out-dated as it did not reflect additions to the contract. We were told that the General Comptroller's office is responsible for the delay.

The Ministry of Education still plans to have the school ready by January 2017, to furnish it in February, and start classes in early March¹⁷. Despite remaining optimistic, the principal of the Gardi Sugdub school has doubts that the school will be ready by March¹⁸. According to the Guna architect Calixto Colman, who does a daily and independent inspection of the construction, the work that is needed to finish the school could be accomplished in three months¹⁹.

¹⁶ A video on the status of the new school as of September 24, 2016 can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwnfwacOkIw>

¹⁷ Meeting with Architect Erik Botello, coordinator of infrastructure at PRODE-MEDUCA. Panama City, September 30, 2016.

¹⁸ Phone interview with Professor Francisco Gonzalez, principal of the school at Gardi Sugdub, October 11, 2016.

¹⁹ Interview with architect Calixto Colman, independent inspector for the construction of the new school at Gardi Sugdub. Panama City, September 29, 2016.



*Partial view of the administrative offices of the school complex in Carti as of September 23, 2016.
Photo by Carlos Arenas.*

It is important to keep in mind that at the beginning of 2016 some families at the Gardi Sugdub school were pushing to move to the new building. However, the Ministry of Education was able to persuade them to wait until the construction was finished. Although some classrooms were ready at that time, the site was still considered a construction site with a lot of heavy machinery and materials everywhere which were a real hazard to the children. It is therefore likely that by the beginning of 2017 parents, students and perhaps even school teachers will push very hard to move to the new school, even if the construction has not been entirely finished because the arguments used last year were no longer true ²⁰.

The main unresolved problem with the school is that it still does not have water. Originally, the school project assumed that it could use the aqueduct that serves the island of Gardi Sugdub, built by the same community and in use for around 20 years. However, Gardi Sugdub does not have water year around, and during the dry season the water does not reach the island. The design of this aqueduct is based on gravity, and it traverses hills and valleys. In addition, the pipeline appears to be full of leaks. As an attempt to mitigate the issue, it was decided that the school would have two large water tanks with a capacity of 25,000 gallons each. The tanks would be filled during the night to avoid interrupting the flow of water to the island of Gardi Sugdub. That said, the community of Gardi Sugdub is not entirely convinced that this arrangement will work and has been considering the possibility of obtaining water from a different spring located in the neighboring community of Acuatupu. This community has

²⁰ Architect Erik Botello from Prode-Meduca agreed with us that this could be the most likely scenario and this time perhaps it would be impossible to stop it.

generously agreed to share their water with Gardi Sugdub, but the cost of constructing a new aqueduct may be prohibitive for the community as the cost of the required pipes for the 8 kilometer line would be around US\$40,000²¹.



Gym at the new school complex in Gardi Sugdub as of September 23, 2016. Photo by Carlos Arenas.

Until the community of Gardi Sugdub relocates to the mainland, the daily transportation of its 550 students to the new school will remain a logistical challenge. The new school will have some dormitories for students coming from more remote communities and for teachers who do not reside in Gardi Sugdub. The maritime transportation seems to be the most problematic issue that needs to be resolved soon. The school in Gardi Sugdub owns two boats, but they can only carry around 25 students each, so they would have to make several trips every day. It seems that several boat owners at Gardi Sugdub are willing to help, but they are obviously requesting some support to cover the cost of time and gasoline. Transportation on the mainland is also an issue as it takes approximately 40 minutes to walk from the Carti port to the new school. The Ministry of Education has already purchased a school bus and it seems that it will buy a second one in order to provide ground transportation for the students²².

²¹ Interview with Antonio Shaw, Sanitary engineer at the Ministry of Health, and Florentino Quintero, Water and Sanitation Coordinator for the Gunayala region at the Ministry of Health. Panama City, September 26, 2016. Antonio and Florentino are both Gunas.

²² Phone interview with Professor Francisco Gonzalez, principal of the school at Gardi Sugdub, October 11, 2016.

V. Communities that want to relocate and have taken the first steps toward that objective: The case of Playón Chico (Ukupseni)²³

1. Background information:

The community of Playón Chico is the second most populated community in Gunayala after Ustupo. According to the 2010 Census there were 1,849 people living on Playón Chico that year. The longest points of the island measure 412 meters and the widest only 283 meters²⁴. Perhaps the first documented reference to the existence of Guna settlements in Playón Chico can be found in a Spanish report from a geographical expedition that surveyed the region with the given name of North Darien at the end of the eighteenth century. That document mentions that at the mouth of the Playón Chico River “there are huts of Cuna Indians”²⁵. It is not exactly clear when the first Guna communities settled on the island of Playón Chico, but it is estimated that it happened around the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, perhaps the first documented reference to the number of settlement was made by the British explorer, Dr. Eduard Cullen, in a book published in 1853. According to Dr. Cullen, at that time, “Playón Chico had about twenty huts”²⁶. As a result, it is safe to say that the Gunas has been living in the Playón Chico area for at least 210 years and have been inhabiting the Playón Chico island for at least 165 years²⁷.

The population density on the island has been mentioned for many years. A study of Playón Chico published in 1995 by Guna intellectual Eligio Alvarado observed that since that time, new houses that were being built were smaller than in the past and they were in closer proximity to each other. In some areas the streets have been eliminated entirely to make space for more houses²⁸. As a result, during the mid-1990’s a group of leaders from Playón Chico, many of whom were living in Panama City, promoted a project called *Ukupseni 2000*, with the idea of creating infrastructure on the mainland that could facilitate the move. Eduardo Stocel, a professor from Playón Chico, remembers the story in this way:

“There was an organization that we called the Panama Chapter, formed by those from Playón Chico working in Panama City. These people gathered there and saw that the move was necessary. At the time the rise in sea level was not mentioned, nor that the glaciers were melting. It wasn’t something we spoke about, but we simply saw that people were seeing that the island was filling up with people or there was no room for a

²³ The spelling of this community in the Guna language used to be Ukupseni before the current Uggupseni. We will refer to this community as Playón Chico.

²⁴ Measurements based on tools provided by Google Earth.

²⁵ Cuervo, Antonio, editor (1891). “Expedición Fidalgo. Derrotero de las Costas de la América Septentrional desde Maracaibo hasta el Río de Chagres, que explica las cartas esféricas de las costas de la Goagira y Provincias del Río de la Hacha, Santa Marta, Cartagena de Yndias, Darien del Norte y Portobelo y los planos de sus puertos, ysas y bajos”. *Colección de Documentos Inéditos sobre la Geografía y la Historia de Colombia*. Bogotá: Imprenta de Vapor de Zalamea Hermanos. Tomo I. Costa Atlántica. Page 233.

²⁶ Cullen, Eduard (1853). *Isthmus of Darien Ship Canal; with a Full History of the Scotch Colony of Darien, Several Maps, Views of the Country, and Original Documents*. London: Effingham Wilson, Publisher. Second edition. Page 73.

²⁷ According to the oral history of Playón Chico, the first member of the community started moving from the interior of the Darien to the coast near the Playón Chico area around the year 1700 as a result of the pressure from colonizers. Meeting with traditional authorities and community leaders from Playón Chico. Playón Chico, September 21, 2016.

²⁸ Alvarado, Eligio (1995). *El valor del ambiente en los Kunas desde una perspectiva de género*. San José: UICN.

family that wanted to live alone, there was no space and then it was necessary to move to the other side. (...) That idea of those living in Panama was brought to the local Congress, to the people. And people agreed to it but the problem was how we were going to move and what support we would have. At that time it was *compañero* Eligio Alvarado who was driving this.”²⁹.

A plan was made to relocate Playón Chico, including the planning and architectural design of the new community by architect Patrick Dillon³⁰. However, the Panamanian government only supported the construction of the bridge and a new school on the mainland, but didn’t support the relocation, which didn’t make the project viable.

Over the last twenty years the community of Playón Chico has continued growing, so the lack of space has only gotten worse, accelerating the migration of its people to Panama City. The current concern about sea level rise and the increase of flooding events in the lowest areas of the island during periods of high tides and storms adds to the mix of factors that shifts the relocation of the community from an option to a necessity, which continues to get more acute as time goes on³¹.

2. The revival of the idea to relocate to the mainland:

The idea to relocate to the mainland was revived a couple of years ago when, at the beginning of the administration of President Varela, he asked all Guna communities to submit demands for projects to the government. On June 16, 2015 President Varela held a cabinet meeting in Playón Chico, with attendance from local community members and from other communities throughout Gunayala. The community of Playón Chico requested support to relocate to the mainland. President Varela promised to build 50 houses as part of his program “Techos de Esperanza” (Roofs of Hope). Although the government’s offer was substantially lower than what was needed, it still hasn’t materialized. Eighteen months have passed since that promise was made and not only has the Panamanian government not done anything, but it seems that the project is not even currently among the plans of the Ministry of Housing. In fact, during our meeting with the director of the “Techos de Esperanza” program he told us that he had no knowledge of any housing program for the community of Playón Chico³².

According to the traditional leaders and other community leaders we met with, there is overall support among the inhabitants of Playón Chico for the idea of relocating. Obviously, there are also major concerns among community members due to the current uncertainty about the project as well as the lack of a plan. Some leaders mentioned that people ask questions such as,

²⁹ Meeting with traditional authorities and community leaders from Playón Chico. Playón Chico, September 21, 2016.

³⁰ Meeting with Eligio Alvarado and other leaders from Playón Chico living in Panama City. Panama City, September 24, 2016. Patrick Dillon is a very well-known and respected architect in Panama, and the community of Playón Chico has recently reached out to him for help once again.

³¹ Murray, Jessica & Ouellet-Decoste, Eloise (2008). *Climate Change in Ukupseni, Comarca Kuna Yala. Research, Projections, and Education*. Unpublished paper available at <https://www.mcgill.ca/pfss/files/pfss/murrayouelletdecoste.pdf>

³² Meeting with Luis Martinez, director of program “Techos de Esperanza” at the Ministry of Housing. Panama City, September 29, 2016.

“If we were to move to the mainland how would we fish? How would the cayucos (canoes) arrive?”³³. Other people have more existential questions: “What will happen to our island?”³⁴

The current first saila (community leader) Luis Layans is very supportive of the relocation idea and would like to be able to carry it through during his leadership tenure. Saila Layans mentioned to us that the Guna Cultural Congress and the hospital in Playón Chico are asking for a piece of land to build their installations. Part of the reason saila Layans likes the idea of relocating the community is due to the fact that he has seen first-hand how Guna communities which live on the mainland in Caimán, Colombia, have more space available than island communities in Panama, and can do things like plant gardens next to their homes³⁵.

3. Aspects that would facilitate Playón Chico’s relocation to the mainland:

- a. *Location:* Playón Chico has a unique advantage to relocate given its proximity to the mainland, and the fact that it is already connected to the mainland by a 165 meters long pedestrian bridge. Accessing the relocation site to work on it and to go back to the island is very easy.
- b. *Land:* The community of Playón Chico already owns some land that could potentially be used for the relocation site³⁶. They are currently using that land for a communal agricultural project, where they have planted yuca, bananas and plantains, and have a greenhouse for cocoa plants, among others. However, the community is aware that a technical study is needed to find out if that site is adequate, or if it is necessary to find another plot of land on higher ground, and also to know how much land is needed for the new community. If a new plot of land is required, the community would have to make the necessary internal arrangements to obtain that land by exchanging it with the land that it currently owns, or by buying it, if they have the resources. Although unlikely it is also possible that a community member may decide to donate some land, as was the case in Gardi Sugdub.

³³ Meeting with traditional authorities and community leaders from Playón Chico. Playón Chico, September 21, 2016.

³⁴ Meeting with Eligio Alvarado and other leaders from Playón Chico’s diaspora in Panama City. Panama City, September 24, 2016.

³⁵ Meeting with Playón Chico’s first saila Luis Layans. Playón Chico, September 21, 2016. A video showing one potential site where the community of Playón Chico could relocate is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxukmjHHQOQ>. A video interview regarding saila Luis Layans’s vision for the relocation is also available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0IB2A_pXME

³⁶ Unfortunately, we were not able to get a reliable answer regarding the size of the plot of land own by the community. Saila Luis Layans mentioned that it could be around 15 hectares, but he was not sure. Interview with first saila Luis Layans. Playón Chico, September 22, 2016.



A 165m pedestrian bridge that connects the community of Playón Chico to the mainland. The picture was taken coming from the mainland to the island. Photo by Carlos Arenas.

- c. *There is some Infrastructure already built close to a potential relocation site:* In addition, some infrastructure already exists on the mainland, including a school and an airstrip that was built in the 1950s and offers daily flights to and from Panama City³⁷. At the same time the water source that the community currently uses is located close to the potential relocation site, and perhaps could be used for the new settlement. However, in the future some infrastructure, mainly the school, would eventually need to be relocated to higher ground as well, since it is located in a very low lying area near the ocean. During the rainy season, the administrative regional offices of the Ministry of Education get flooded.

³⁷ The regional offices of the Ministry of Environment are also located at the mainland.



The regional administrative offices of the Ministry of Education (Meduca) in Playón Chico after a rainy day. The ocean is on the left and remaining buildings of Playón Chico's school are located to the right of Meduca building. Photo: Carlos Arenas.

- d. *Current revival of agricultural production:* Changes in the economic structure in Gunayala over the last twenty years have had a strong impact on agricultural production and food availability in the region. Tourist services and a well-organized demand for lobster and other sea products have taken a lot of young people away from the traditional jobs of working the land to produce food for local consumption. Several testimonies collected by Rawluk & Godber at Playón Chico in 2007 are very revealing regarding these problems³⁸. A Guna woman mentioned the following: “Before, our grandparents spent three days on the mountain and two days in the ocean. Today there is not lunch, the whole *comarca* is hungry. I want us to spend more time on the mountain and in the ocean, with the children, so that the children can know the taste of lobster.” Another woman added:

“My children have not tasted lobster or sea turtle. The company buys those. I would like the small airplane [that comes to the community every week to buy lobster and some other marine species] to be banned, so that the youth start fishing and working in the fields. Now they don't work the fields and there is nothing to eat. The youth get used to the city when they go there to go to school. They forget the fields, and that food is not only something you can buy, but also something you can produce”.

³⁸ Rawluk, Andrea & Godber, Annelise (2011). “Widening the Scope of Scenario Planning in Small Communities: a Case Study Use of an Alternative Method”. *Ecology & Society* 16(1):11.

The Guna General Congress with the support of FAO has been implementing food programs to increase food production in the region³⁹. Currently there is a revival of agricultural production in Playón Chico. Interestingly, it is not the young people who are going to the fields, but the women. Playón Chico has three groups of approximately 35 organized women who have been working enthusiastically on new agricultural projects and have been using some of the land owned collectively by the community that could eventually be used for the relocation⁴⁰.

- e. *The seed of an organizational structure that could lead the relocation:* Little by little, the community of Playón Chico and its diaspora have come together again to start discussing, organizing and mobilizing about the idea of relocating the community to the mainland. In that sense, Displacement Solutions sees a lot of potential in the organization that is currently emerging to move the relocation idea forward. However, it still needs to prove that it is able to survive beyond the initial enthusiasm with the idea of relocating, considering that it should be clear that this endeavor would be one of the major challenges the community will have to confront. Everyone should be clear that the relocation process generally takes many years, even in circumstances where there is strong government support and resources dedicated to it.

4. Aspects that still need to be overcome to move the relocation project forward:

- a. *A strong grassroots organization to lead the relocation effort:* The Ukupseni 2000 project would seem to lack a very important component- a strong grassroots organization of the inhabitants of the island. Ukupseni 2000 placed a great deal of emphasis on the technical aspects of the relocation such as planning and architectural designs, but lacked the active involvement of the main beneficiaries of the project- the people who actually live on the island. Currently, that local organization already exists, but as stated before it still needs to be strengthened and consolidated.

The technical aspects of a relocation are clearly very important, but they need to be coupled with local leadership that guides the consultants and technical experts needed. Perhaps the ideal scenario would be to have a strong local grassroots organization and to have the active support of the organized diaspora living in Panama City. These two groups working side by side, and with clear leadership of the current inhabitants of Playón Chico, should have the final say about the overall direction of the project, including the approval of all the technical recommendations of the relocation. The organizational experience of the Gardi Sugdub community would also provide a helpful learning experience for the community of Playón Chico to assist them in their planning for relocation. In fact, during our visit to Playón Chico, and during our conversation with its diaspora in Panama City, it was clear that both groups were very receptive to learning about the organizational experience of Gardi Sugdub.

³⁹ "Agricultura sostenible en las comarcas". *La Prensa*, Panama City, September 5, 2014.
http://impresa.prensa.com/economia/Agricultura-sostenible-comarcas_0_4020348060.html

⁴⁰ A video testimony from Elena Gonzalez, a Guna woman leading this effort can be found in this link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtECFxbRFBo>

- b. *External support:* The magnitude of the relocation project makes it almost impossible to carry out successfully without adequate external support. The Panamanian government has the primary responsibility to do so, but it seems that the government has neither the resources nor the interest to take the need to relocate to the mainland seriously. As a result, national and international external support would be appear to be needed to move the relocation forward.

VI. Status of other Guna communities regarding relocation

1. Communities that would like to relocate but do not know where to start and how to take concretes steps forward:

a. Gardi Muladup:

The island community of Gardi Muladup is located 1.2 kilometers from the mainland, but in practice it is 2.6 kilometers away from the port near the mouth of the Cartí River. It is also located 1.1 kilometers from Gardi Sugdub⁴¹. According to the 2010 census, there are 502 people living in the island. The community of Gardi Muladup has similar ambitions as the people of Gardi Sugdub to relocate to the mainland⁴². According to community leader Atilio Pérez they began thinking about their relocation around 6 or 7 years ago, in conjunction with their diaspora in Panama City (although the diaspora no longer exists as an organized group).

The community owns between 10 and 20 hectares of land that could be used for their relocation. Their main problem is that the land is not adequate to relocate the community since it is very far away from the coast and does not have access to a road. Atilio and one of the sailas from his community attended the meeting organized by DS at Gardi Sugdub in order to learn more about the relocation of Gardi Sugdub and spread the word in his own community.

⁴¹ Measures based on tools provided by Google Earth.

⁴² Information provided by Atilio Pérez, one of the main community leader working toward the relocation of the community of Muladup. Gardi Sugdub, September 23, 2016. This community is referred generally as Muladup; however, since there is another community in Gunayala also called Muladup, located close to the border with Colombia, in this report we use its formal name of Gardi Muladup to avoid confusion.



Atilio Pérez (center), community leader from the community of Gardi Muladup speaks at the meeting organized by Displacement Solutions at Gardi Sugdub on September 23, 2016. One of the sailas from Gardi Muladup is seated on the left. Photo by Carlos Arenas.

b. Digir (Isla Tigre):

The island community of Digir is located approximately 1.1 kilometers from the mainland. The closest community is Niadub (Isla Diablo), located around 4.1 kilometers from Digir⁴³. The community leaders we talked to in Digir mentioned that they plan to relocate their community, but they have not yet worked out any of the specifics yet⁴⁴. “Our dream is to be there”, Professor Belisario Serrano told us.

The population in the community has been growing as in other communities. According to the 2010 Census, there were 784 people living in Digir. One of the benefits that the people from Digir see in relocating is that they could focus more on agricultural production. They are currently very invested in agricultural projects, such as a project promoted by the Guna General Congress to recover ancestral seeds that for several reasons people do not use anymore. There are also three women’s groups that are agricultural producers (each group has 11 members). When some young people go the mainland to work on their land, they build provisional “chozas” (huts), and they have been talking about the benefits of moving to the mainland, as they could be closer to their fields. This community does not benefit much from tourism, and they also mentioned that there is a lot of coral bleaching as a result of the high water temperatures.

⁴³ Measures based on tools provided by Google Earth.

⁴⁴ Interview with community leaders Adrian Pérez (Argar), a member of the production commission at the Guna General Congress, and Professor Belisario Serrano. Digir, September 22, 2016.

The community leaders said that they have a lot of expectations about the relocation of Gardi Sugdub. “If we don’t see it, we don’t believe it. We need to see how they do it for us to learn little by little”⁴⁵ they concluded. They were very appreciative that Blas López shared with them Gardi Sugdub’s experience with their relocation project so far.

c. Yandub (Narganá):

The community of Yandub has very clear differences compared to other Guna communities. Due to its own historical developments that go back to the 1920s, some of its inhabitants consider this island as the “civilized” place in Gunayala. Yandub and Corazón de Jesús were at the center of the acculturation project promoted by the Panamanian government, the Catholic Church and protestant missionaries with the support of some local Guna leaders. That process of forced acculturation led to the successful Tule revolution in 1925⁴⁶. As a result, Guna cultural traditions in Yandub today are not as strong as in other Guna communities. The community does not have a “Casa del Congreso” (local Congress house), so they don’t meet daily to hear the songs of the sailas, or to talk about any local matters, as all other Guna communities do. Women of this community do not wear their traditional dress, and the sailas call themselves “administrative sailas”, as they only administer the community without being the keepers and promoters of their history and cultural traditions.

According to the 2010 census there were 1,215 people living in Yandub (Narganá). The longest part of the island measures 674 meters and the widest 346 meters⁴⁷. “We know that someday we need to go back to the mountains”, one of the sailas said⁴⁸. “There have been times when some areas of the island are so flooded that the water reaches our knees, but Corazón de Jesús is lower and gets flooded more often than here”, he continued. “This island was not as big as it is now, it has landfilled a lot, using garbage, sand, plantains peels, etc., which has resulted in the buildings not being very stable”.

The people at Yandub have considered the possibility of relocating to the mainland. According to the sailas, finding land is not a problem. However, they said, it is necessary to do a feasibility study to determine the best place to relocate, but they will first need to obtain resources to pay for the study. The sailas were clear that while it is important to consider the idea of relocating, it is not for this generation but for the next generation of local leaders. They also see the importance of relocating the community as a way for people to return to agricultural activities that have decreased over time in Gunayala. They also emphasized that a key factor for relocating was money, which would need to come from the Panamanian government or another organization.

2. Communities where relocation is not yet on their agenda, and where there is no consensus among the community members about relocating.

⁴⁵ Interview with community leaders Adrian Pérez (Argar), a member of the production commission at the Guna General Congress, and Professor Belisario Serrano. Digir, September 22, 2016.

⁴⁶ Howe, James (1998). *A people who would not kneel. Panama, the United States and the San Blas Kuna*. Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

⁴⁷ Measurements based on tools provided by Google Earth.

⁴⁸ Meeting with Griseño Garcia (1st saila), Eligio Ossa (2nd saila), Samuel Mora (3rd saila), Juan Salazar, advisor. Yandub (Narganá), September 22, 2016.

a. *Niadub (Ticantiki or Isla Diablo):*

The community of Niadub is located approximately 700 meters from the mainland⁴⁹. According to the 2010 census, there are 772 people living in the island, but the records of the local health center for 2016 show that the population is 1,037. According to first saila Seferino Morris, the community of Niadub is not currently planning to relocate to the mainland⁵⁰. However, he said that if the community at some point liked the idea of relocating they could prepare to do so. He pointed to the fact that when there are high tides an area of the island gets flooded, but he doesn't feel that it is as bad as in other communities in Gunayala. During the winter people do not travel from there toward Playón Chico because the waves are too big. "The population on the island keeps growing and there is not enough space, so the only option is to infill. In Niadub people are always infilling", Morris said.

According to saila Morris, it is important to raise awareness in the community about the relocation because people cannot control nature. There are stories that tsunamis will come, but nothing has happened so far and they keep hoping that nothing will happen. Finally, saila Morris mentioned that during the 1980s three families decided to move to live in the mainland as a result of rumors about a natural disaster. However, when it didn't happen, those families decided to move back to the island.



Landfilling in Niadub (Isla Diablo). This is the typical way landfilling is done in Gunayala to expand the area of the islands. The structure on the right is the typical latrine used on Gunayala's islands. Photo by Carlos Arenas.

⁴⁹ Measurements based on tools provided by Google Earth.

⁵⁰ Interview with first saila Seferino Morris. Niadub, September 22, 2016.

b. *Corazón de Jesús:*

According to the 2010 Census, there are 574 people living on Corazón de Jesús which is connected to Yandub (Narganá) by a 100 meter long bridge, and is located only 350 meters from the mainland. The longest part of the island measures 225 meters and the widest 176 meters⁵¹. This island is significantly lower than Yandub (Narganá) and according to several testimonies it easily floods when there are high tides. According to first saila Ismael Garcia, the environment has changed a lot, but relocation is not a topic that his community has discussed yet⁵².

VII. Opportunities, challenges and pitfalls of the relocation of Guna communities in Gunayala

5. Opportunities:

- a. *Land:* In general terms - and unlike the situation in many other countries where climate displacement is a huge challenge - land is not a major obstacle for the relocation of Guna communities from the islands to the mainland. The Guna people are the collective owners of the Gunayala region. At the same time, individuals, families, and some organized community groups can also privately own specific plots of land in any of the 49 communities. Each community needs to make their own internal arrangements to acquire the land needed for the relocation, which may range from one member donating privately owned land to the community as some people did in Gardi Sugdub, to exchanges of plots owned individually and by the community, or to purchases by the community, as in the case of Playón Chico. However, these arrangements may not be as simple and easy as it was for Gardi Sugdub. As a result, in some cases some assistance may be needed to facilitate the arrangements to obtain land to be used for the relocation, including the purchasing of individual or family land by the community.
- b. *Organizational tradition:* Traditionally, the Gunas have been a very organized society. This is clearly one of their cultural assets and social capital would be extremely helpful during relocation.
- c. *Strong sense of agency:* Historically, the Gunas have proven that they can speak for themselves and do not need others to do so. As a result, they tend to have a proactive attitude for any project they consider necessary and they do not wait until someone else does it for them.
- d. *Increasing role of women in agriculture:* There is a very important trend going on in Gunayala. Women are starting to return to agriculture. Relocation to the mainland could make this trend even stronger and potentially produce a radical change in Guna society. In fact, women were the agricultural producers before their move to live on the islands, and the masculinization of agriculture was a very important

⁵¹ Measurements based on tools provided by Google Earth.

⁵² Meeting with saila Ismael Rojas. Corazón de Jesús, September 22, 2016.

cultural shift that occurred around the mid nineteenth century. Now, the possibility of returning to the mainland could mean the resurgence of women as the main agricultural producers, or at a minimum to play a role as important as men in agriculture.

- e. *Guna professionals with the capacity to support relocation efforts:* The Guna people have a very impressive pool of very competent professionals such as sociologists, biologists, forestry engineers, lawyers, architects, agronomists, environmentalists, theologians, educators, etc. many of whom have experience and capacity to support different aspects of the relocation efforts. They could and need to provide culturally appropriate technical assistance for the relocation of Guna communities. However, some may need also specific training on the complexity of relocating communities, as well as external support during that process.

6. Challenges:

- a. *Relocation is not an individual enterprise but a collective one:* Relocation among Guna communities in Gunayala is less of a problem of physical distance between the islands and the mainland, but is more of a socio-cultural one⁵³. Obviously, the shorter the distance from the island to the mainland makes the physical process of moving easier once the decision to move is made. However, a closer examination of the communities of Gardi Sugdub and Playón Chico illustrates interesting socio-cultural aspects of the Guna communities' understanding of the need to maintain a close physical space in their living arrangements in order to maintain their communities – leading to the conclusion that the relocation should be of the whole community to the same physical area.

As noted above, the community of Gardi Sugdub island is located 2.5 kilometers from its port on the mainland. The Carti port is the hub for the main economic activity in the area, as it is a place where all tourists arrive and depart from the area⁵⁴. However, the Gardi Sugdub islanders do not choose to inhabit the area surrounding the port on the mainland despite its central economic role and its location alongside the paved road that connects it to Panama City. Every morning people who work at the Carti Port travel from Gardi Sugdub and then in the evening they return to the island. The community of Playón Chico is located only 150 meters from the mainland and it has been connected by a pedestrian bridge for about the last twenty years. Despite the short distance and the bridge, no one in Playón Chico currently lives on the mainland, even though the school and the airport are located there. Perhaps the most compelling reason for the connection to

⁵³ Saila Luis Layans mentioned to us that due to cultural reasons, individual and spontaneous resettlements do not happen in his community. This fact could be true for most of the Guna communities in Gunayala. Meeting with Playón Chico's first saila Luis Layans. Playón Chico, September 21, 2016.

⁵⁴ The fact that no one lives on the mainland makes this case very unique, and clearly would facilitate planned relocations. Sometimes it is hard for some people to understand that moving Guna communities from the islands to the mainland there is no problem with host communities, because there are not host communities, as no one lives in the mainland. There are a few Guna communities that are located on the coast, that never moved to live on the islands. However, it is very unlikely that an island community would relocate where those coastal communities are located since each island and coastal community owns land on the mainland.

the islands is the strong bond that Gunas share among themselves by living close to each other and by being active members of a historical community. It seems that it is not possible consider oneself as part of a Guna community if you live physically isolated from the other members of the community as well as its cultural institutions and traditions. This pattern is also adhered in the cities where Gunas migrate.

In addition, it is perhaps the belief that moving to wild areas is not an individual enterprise, but a collective one. It is less about the physical fear of going into wild areas to live alone, despite real fears of wild animals, insects and snakes, but the lack of community.

- b. *Selection of an adequate site for the relocation:* People from several communities commented to DS that the selection of the relocation site is sometimes very difficult and requires the technical assistance of experts to make sure that the selected site is adequate for the purpose of the relocation. For instance, it should be located on higher ground and have access to fresh water, but not too far from the coast considering that the ocean is their main source of food, income related activities, and way of communicating with other communities.
- c. *A participatory approach to planning of the community and housing design:* It is well documented that participatory planning has proven to be a very important aspect in relocation processes. However, participatory planning is not easy, and governments and many times private architects and planners do not have a tradition to truly include the voice of those who are relocating. In Panama, the deputy Minister of Housing was originally very receptive to Displacement Solution's suggestion to have a participatory approach to the relocation of Gardi Sugdub, and he even publicly announced that it would be done in this way. But while Ministry officials have been more receptive than usual to meeting with members of the community, in practice there is little evidence of genuine participation by the community. Surveying a community is a tool to get information about a specific group of people, but it does not mean that the group is actively participating in the relocation process.

7. Pitfalls:

- a. *Reducing the relocation of the community to a housing program:* As we have stated in our previous reports, this is perhaps the most common mistake in the process of relocating a community. Housing is obviously the main and most visible component of a relocation, but it is far from being the only one. Proper infrastructure and a range of other initiatives must also be undertaken.
- b. *Prioritizing the technical over the organizational:* The previous experience of Playón Chico trying to relocate to the mainland perhaps demonstrated the limits of prioritizing the technical aspects of the relocation over the construction of a strong grassroots organization that envisioned and led the relocation process. In the 1990s some Guna professionals and other leaders among the diaspora of Playón Chico living in Panama City came up with the idea of moving the community from the island to the mainland, given the growth of the community and the lack of space on the island. As a result, they obtained the assistance of a very skilled and dedicated

architect to design the new community. The idea of relocating was then presented to the community of Playón Chico which supported it. However, the effort didn't materialize perhaps in part because of the absence of a grassroots push, and especially because of the lack of support from the government.

VIII. The need for action by the government to support relocation and to start implementing the Peninsula Principles in Panama

Since 2014 Displacement Solutions has been calling on the Panamanian government to apply the Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement within States regarding the relocation of island indigenous communities in Gunayala, but until now this call has gone unanswered. The Panamanian government has made several promises to the community of Gardi Sugdub, but no concrete actions have been implemented yet, and it is far from seeing and addressing the problem in a holistic way.

It is important to remember that the Advisory Committee of the United Nations Human Rights Council recently highlighted the importance of the Peninsula Principles for this type of situation regarding climate displacement. According to this committee - which is the research arm of the Human Rights Council - : “The normative framework developed to date such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement within States provide a solid foundation for the protection of the specific needs of those internally displaced by climate change in line with a human-rights based approach and are consistent with international human rights standards and humanitarian law”⁵⁵.

The Peninsula Principles (PP) were drafted and approved in August 2013 by a group of international experts under the leadership of Displacement Solutions and included grassroots leaders of communities facing the daunting challenges of climate displacement. The Principles are based on three main pillars. The first pillar is national governments, which have the primary responsibility to protect and address climate displacement. A second pillar is the international community, with the understanding that if a country cannot offer protection to its citizens facing climate displacement, the international community could be called for assistance and the international community has the duty to assist. The third pillar is the communities affected by climate displacements who are called to play a leading role in their relocation. As we have showed in this and previous reports, communities in Gunayala in need of relocation have been actively working to find solutions. The Panamanian government should take immediate action to respond to these communities in need. The Peninsula Principles not only offer the protection needed, but a roadmap about what to do. However, should the Panamanian government arrive at the conclusion that the situation of climate displacement is beyond their control, it should call the international community for help. Inaction is not an option.

It is understandable that governments of small nations such as Panama may not have the resources or the technical expertise to address the challenges of relocating climate-affected communities or those at risk from sea level rise and other climate change related factors. Last year the United Nations Climate envoy Mary Robinson stated: “States facing climate-related displacement within their borders require significant financial support and technical expertise

⁵⁵ Human Rights Council Advisory Committee (2016). *Report of the Advisory Committee on its seventeenth session*. A/HRC/AC/17/2. Advanced Edited Version, 7 September 2016. Page 23.

to develop solutions that provide the rights of those affected. The Peninsula Principles provide a normative framework, based on human rights, to address the rights of internally displaced people.⁵⁶ The Panamanian government should start addressing climate displacement seriously by adopting the Peninsula Principles as the normative framework to be used to address climate displacement situations in Gunayala and beyond.

IX. Conclusions

Little by little more island communities in Gunayala are expressing their desire to relocate to the mainland. Throughout Gunayala the reasons we heard regarding their desire to relocate were similar: sustained population growth over the years has resulted in a lack of space on the islands, and sea level rise as a result of climate change has increased their vulnerability to the impacts of high tides and storms.

The community of Gardi Sugdub has already done a lot to prepare for relocation and many of the necessary elements are in place. What the people from Gardi Sugdub are waiting for is government action: 1) to fulfil the government's promise to build 300 houses for the relocation; and 2) to complete the health center and school which are essential services required for the relocation to be successful.

This report documents how the community of Playón Chico is now the second island community to initiate a process to relocate. Although their efforts are not as organized or advanced as the community of Gardi Sugdub, they have other factors that could facilitate the success of their relocation effort. These factors include proximity to the coast, the fact that the island is already connected by a pedestrian bridge, that some infrastructure already exists on the mainland, and the experience of a group of people living on the island and in Panama City that were involved in their previous attempt to relocate approximately 30 years ago. We have no doubts that Playón Chico has started a process that is irreversible.

Relocation in Gunayala should not be expected to be a spontaneous migration of individuals from the islands to the mainland. Relocation in Gunayala is a collective enterprise, and that is why it requires the support and assistance of the Panamanian government and the international community. If Guna communities are not assisted now in their preventive relocation to the mainland, when the sea level reaches a trigger point or when a natural disaster strikes, the communities would probably move to Panama City since they have family and community networks of support there. It is likely that most of them will end up living in the poorest neighborhoods around the capital city, without access to their traditional livelihoods and community way of life.

The relocation effort of the Gunas and experience gained can provide many valuable lessons for the almost forty other island communities in the region that eventually will also have to be relocated. In order to facilitate the process of sharing these lessons, DS invited one of the leaders of the relocation in Gardi Sugdub to travel to other island communities during this visit with the idea of spreading news of their experience throughout the region while we met with leaders from other island communities to discuss the issue of relocation, as well as inviting one

⁵⁶ Canzi, Germana (2015). *Q&A with Mary Robinson: What is climate justice?*
<http://roadtoparis.info/2015/07/29/qa-with-mary-robinson-what-is-climate-justice/>

of the leaders from Gardi Sugdub to attend an international workshop in Geneva on planned relocation. Displacement Solutions is committed to assisting the community of Gardi Sugdub in their relocation efforts, and now also the community of Playón Chico in theirs. It is hoped that this report will provide the groundwork for our involvement with that community and others where plans to relocate are less advanced. As a result, DS will continue assisting those other Guna communities as they organize and start working toward their relocation.

X. Recommendations

In our two previous reports, Displacement Solutions has provided recommendations to the Panamanian government, many of which remain relevant as they have not yet been addressed. The following recommendations should therefore be read in conjunction with them:

Recommendations to the Panamanian Government

1. Develop a participatory relocation plan in close collaboration with the communities of Gardi Sugdub and Playón Chico to guide the relocation process. As noted in previous recommendations, successful relocation relies on participatory planning. Given the autonomous status of the Gunayala region, the federative-like character of each Guna village and the best practices from other relocation processes, relocation plans should accord a primary role to the communities themselves. While the role of technical experts is also important for the success of relocation, the Guna community needs to be a leading force behind relocation planning, fully supported by the Panamanian government with financial and technical assistance.
2. Speed-up the process of constructing 300 houses on the mainland for relocation. The Ministry of Housing should accelerate the process of fulfilling the government's process to construct 300 houses at the relocation site. While it is acknowledged that this process takes time, the project should not be allowed to be buried in bureaucratic delays and obfuscation. A more transparent approach to keeping the community fully informed about the status of the project and involving them in the project design and implementation should also be adopted.
3. Take all necessary measures to finalise the new mainland school complex so that it is ready to open without delay. As noted in the report, water is perhaps the main barrier from preventing the school at Carti from operating. That said, the issue of water needs to be addressed holistically, with the three main construction sites in mind: the new school, the new health center and the new settlement for the community.
4. Resolve outstanding logistical aspects regarding the maritime and ground transportation needed to move approximately 550 children and teachers daily between the island and the mainland school. The Panamanian government should work closely with the Gardi Sugdub community to finalize transportation plans in a way that guarantees the safety of the children, and the long term benefit to the community. One option would be for the Panamanian government to develop a voucher program to reimburse the owners of boats at Gardi Sugdub for the cost of gasoline to transport the children every day from the island to the mainland. It is clear that the two buses that the Ministry of Education is planning to use would not be enough to transport the

children and teachers from the port to the school and back. Since the community would benefit from having its own bus, perhaps the government could provide a soft loan to the community to buy an additional school bus. If this option is adopted, the Panamanian government could also develop a voucher program to reimburse the community for the cost of gasoline to use a bus owned by the community.

5. Find a prompt and definitive solution to the health center (Minsa-Capsi) to guarantee the finalization of its construction and its full and satisfactory operation as soon as possible. At least two issues should be considered:
 - a. The health center for the community of Gardi Sugdub needs to be protected immediately, and construction should resume soon. Millions of dollars have already been invested in the building and should not be wasted by allowing the building to be further looted and destroyed and being allowed to deteriorate to the point of no return.
 - b. Changing the purpose of the building is not an acceptable solution, and if this option is seriously considered, it should be to keep in mind that the local indigenous community owns the land where it was built, and they should decide what to do with the building. The community of Gardi Sugdub approved the project in the first place because they supported the idea of having a health center, and any proposed change in the use of the building should be determined by the community itself.

Recommendations to Specific Panamanian State Institutions

1. The National Assembly should become actively involved in the planned relocation of communities in Gunayala. Legislation supporting the planned relocation processes of climate displaced communities needs to be implemented following the guidelines set by the Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement within States.
2. The Comptroller General's office should make a public correction to the inaccuracies contained in the public statement made last year regarding the location of indigenous communities in the area where the Minsa-Capsi at Llano-Cartí is built. It also should focus its energies in guaranteeing transparent use of public funds in any project regarding the relocation of Gardi Sugdub and other communities in Gunayala.
3. The Comptroller General's office should speed up the approval of the contractual addenda that were requested by the construction company that is currently building the school complex at Cartí to guarantee the work is finished as soon as possible. There is no excuse to delay a very important construction project as a result of its own internal bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Recommendations to the Inter-American Development Bank

1. Provide resources and technical assistance to support the relocation of the Guna communities from their islands to the mainland. As demonstrated in this report, the

communities of Gardi Sugdub and Playón Chico are leading this process, and their experiences could guide other communities in their future planned relocation processes.

2. Since the school complex is a project funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, make contributions to finding a holistic solution to the water problem in Carti taking into account that water would be needed by the new school, the health center and by the relocated community. One option could be that the bank finance the cost of the materials needed (evaluated at around US\$40,000) for a new aqueduct for the Gardi Sugdub community to bring water from springs located in the area of the community of Acuatapu. That water should be used to benefit the new relocation site and the Gardi Sugdub island, and the community could contribute labor. If this is done, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) could also work with the Gardi Sugdub community and make the necessary investment to upgrade the current aqueduct to be used exclusively for the new school and health center.
3. Ensure that an adequate solution is implemented regarding the maritime and ground transportation of the children to the new school complex in Cartí.
4. Guarantee that projects requiring community participation do not leave community members uninsured. This is a very common complaint about projects implemented by the Bank among indigenous peoples. Since almost no one in an indigenous community has health insurance, the Bank should add a collective health insurance cover requirement to all its projects where it asks for community involvement in the way of labor. This is a basic requirement that all private employers and contractors have to fulfil, and the Bank should lead by setting a good example.

Recommendation to the Guna General Congress

1. Since the Guna General Congress is going through a very interesting process drafting its first development plan for the entire Gunayala region, the issue of the planned relocation of island communities to the mainland should be included.

Appendix



Google Earth's view of Gardi Sugdub, and surrounding communities, the port of Carti and the relocation site.



Google Earth's image of Yandub (Narganá) and Corazón de Jesús.



Google Earth's image of Yandub (Narganá) and Corazón de Jesús, and the bridge that connects the two islands.



Google Earth's image of Playón Chico (Ukupseni).



Google Earth's image of Niadup (Isla Diablo)



Google Earth's image of Digir (Isla Tigre).



Aerial view of the island community of Playón Chico around year 2008. The school is located to the right of the runway on the mainland. The community owns land toward the end of the runway on the lower right side of the picture, but near the coast. Photo taken from the Internet.