HIGHER GROUND

How one indigenous community set its own course through climate change

BY ZACHARY SLOBIG

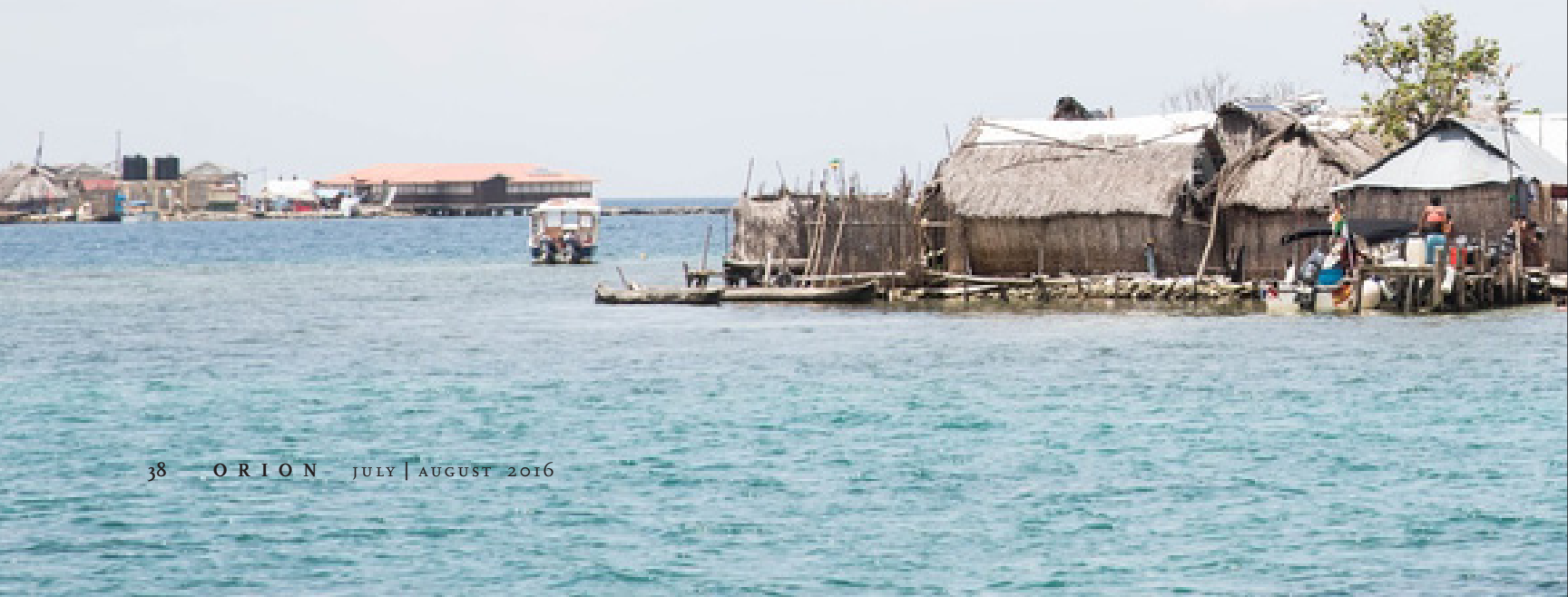
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRETA RYBUS

Every night of the week, for several hours, the *sailas*—the elected local leaders—take their post at the center of the room to hear concerns, mediate conflicts, and offer solutions and reassurances. A banner above them reads UN PUEBLO QUE PIERDE SU CULTURA, PIERDE SU ALMA (a village that loses its culture, loses its soul). On a sweltering Monday evening in April of last year, five of the seven sailas sat shoulder to shoulder on a rough-hewn bench and dutifully listened to a diverse array of gripes and worries from several dozen men.

There was talk of mismanagement of the community bank account. A man in a red soccer jersey expressed concern for the condition of the cemetery that the village keeps on the mainland. Members of the community had failed to contribute *chicha*—the traditional homebrew—for the fiesta. A scolding secretary on the far side of the room read each of the seventeen offenders' names from a ledger. A tall man wearing a cap with an Italian flag stood and cleared his throat. "Nobody is going after the people who aren't working on the land," he said with frustration. "We should fine them all double."

This is the Casa de Congresso, a steeply pitched building with reed walls, a woven-palm roof, and a packed-earth floor that gives the place a loamy air. It is the largest structure and heart of the community of Gardi Sugdub, one of fifty-one tiny low-lying island communities in the Guna Yala archipelago of Panama. Dozens of benches—ample seating for several hundred—all face inward like some tropical Quaker meetinghouse. I sat off to the side next to two translators, with whom I played a game of multilingual telephone—first Guna to Spanish, then Spanish to English. Before me, on the building's center posts, hung paintings of revered and long-deceased sailas. Spanning the room between those posts were several worn hammocks reserved for the current sailas, presumably used to find repose from the business of leading an indigenous community on the cusp of big changes.

The island of Gardi Sugdub is something shy of a kilometer square and home to about a thousand people. Radiating out from the Casa de Congresso, almost every inch of the island not used as footpaths—there are no vehicles here—is occupied by a structure of some kind. Trees are few. There's a primary school, a small Baptist church, two very rustic guesthouses, a few *tiendas* with basic supplies, and the rest of the island is jammed with



multigenerational houses where occupancy can easily be determined by the number of hammocks dangling from the rafters. A dozen seems about average.

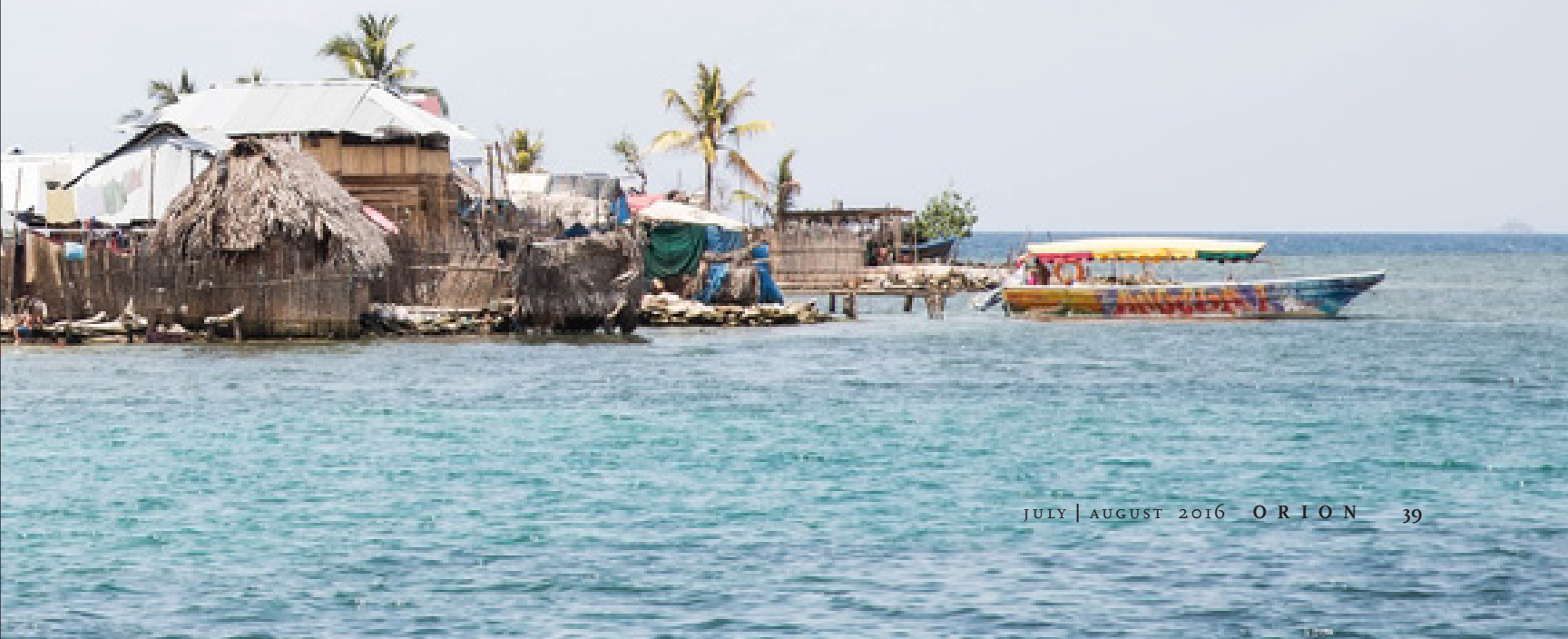
Most houses are little more than a crude assemblage of reed walls with roofs of some combination of tin, tarp, and palm. The few houses built of concrete block draw suspicion of their occupants possible involvement in the drug-smuggling trade that thrives in this Caribbean archipelago of more than three hundred islands. Outhouses dot the shores of Gardi Sugdub, hovering a few feet above the coral on rickety catwalks. Food wrappers and plastic bottles bob about and form a thick ring around the island. Gardi Sugdub is bursting at the seams with humanity. "There's no more space here," Guillermo Archibold, an agronomist who lives on the island, told me. "This idea of moving—it's more than ten years old."

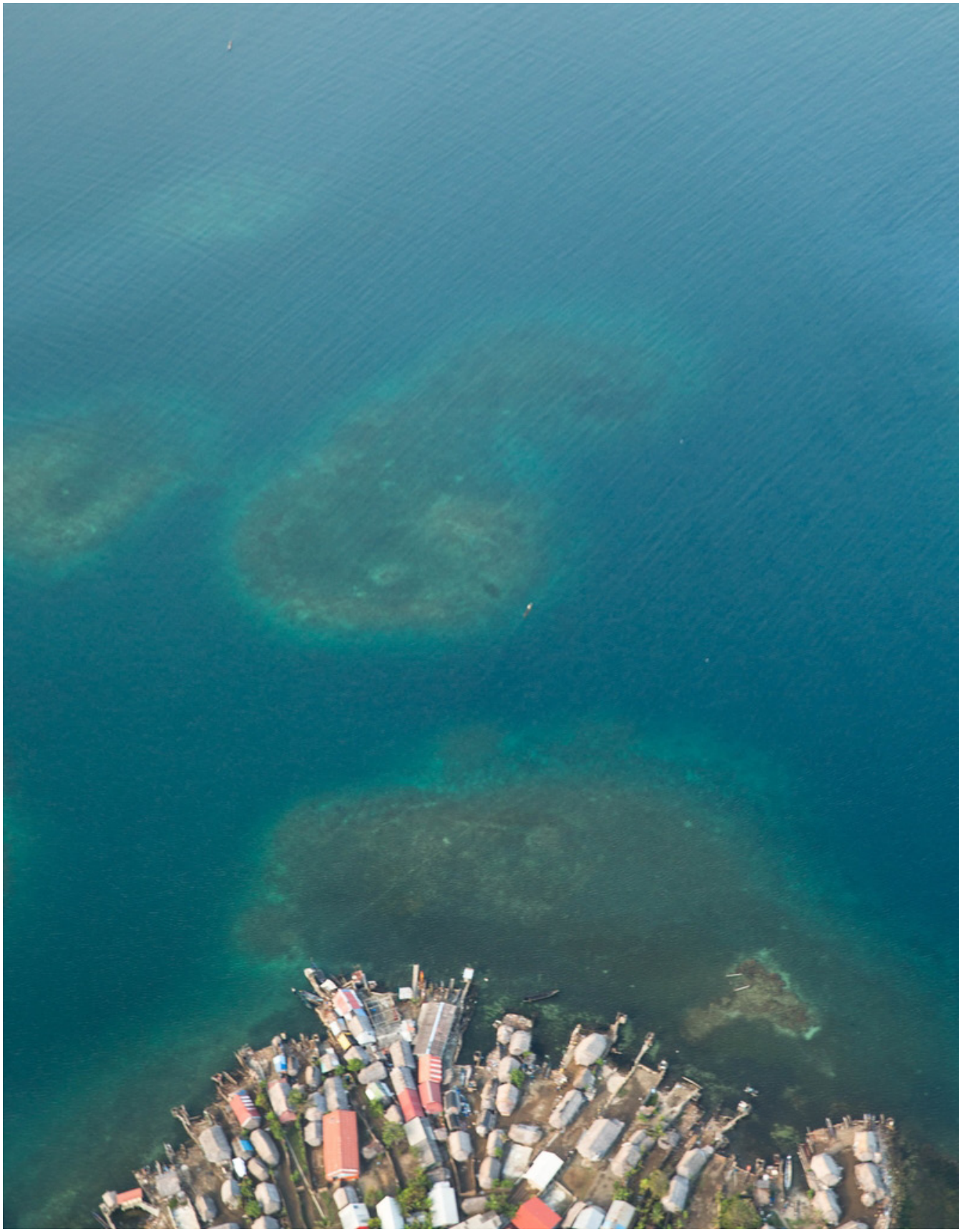
As the population continues to grow, rising sea levels are chewing away at Gardi and the other islands of the Guna Yala archipelago year after year. My visit came just weeks after Cyclone Pam hammered and flooded the island nation of Vanuatu, leaving more than 100,000 homeless. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that hundreds of millions of people in developing countries will be displaced by the end of this century. The Guna people need no scientific reports to know that the tropical storms that arrive every winter are getting more destructive. And yet years of harvesting nearby coral to infill the edges of their islands in order to make them bigger has left Guna communities even more vulnerable to the storm surges that regularly wash across the open ground. The winter of 2008 was the worst in memory—a storm surge that lasted two weeks tore across the entire archipelago, destroying homes and schools. When the water receded and the footpaths ceased to be rivers, many Guna were awakened to the fact that climate change must be addressed when one's home is just a few feet above sea level.

Some have never recovered from that storm. Luis Murphy, a Gardi Sugdub saila, has an intense gaze and the faint shakes that are common in early Parkinson's cases. He took me on a brief tour of his home, which sits right on the island's northern edge. I followed his bare feet to what was once the kitchen. "As you can see my house is leaning over and at any moment it could collapse," he said. "When it rains, it just comes right through. I'm thinking about joining the group that is looking to relocate, but I don't know if I will get to see that or if I will die before that happens."

For Murphy and others, the verdant mainland beckons—just a brisk half-an-hour canoe paddle away. The people of Gardi have been preparing to resettle on a hilltop about one kilometer inland. This is the land to which the man in the Casa de Congresso meeting was referring: land that belongs to the community and that they have been working in evenly shared labor shifts clearing brush—in the beginning by hand, with little more than machetes. Here, they've hacked away at the forest to carve out a place where they hope their grandchildren might have a better life. People of the Gardi are pioneers—the first to begin a move that will be unavoidable for all of the twenty-eight thousand Guna people. While there is not a collective sense of urgency among these communities, they are watching the inhabitants of Gardi Sugdub closely as they make their own decisions about when and how to move.

The ancestors of the Guna people, originally from northwestern Colombia, moved north into what is now Panama beginning in the sixteenth century. They eventually settled on the ribbon of land between the coastal San Blas Mountains and the Caribbean. In the early 1800s, the Guna began to migrate to the nearest





islands, with Gardi Sugdub among the first to be populated. Precisely why those coral islets became Guna home base is unknown, but "the motives for this move . . . seem to have been the pull of trade and the push of insects, snakes, and disease," Guna scholar and anthropologist James Howe writes. None of these islands have freshwater sources, so the pioneers returned regularly to the mainland to collect water and tend to their subsistence crops.

Tierra firme is a place of spooky unknowns for many Guna now. One afternoon, over a beer with Ansberto Ehrman in Gardi Sugdub, I learned of the catalogue of fears that, for some of his people, populate the landscape of the mainland. Ehrman was born in Gardi, but after a career as a schoolteacher on his home island and others, he settled in Panama City, where his daughter is the president of a vibrant Gardi diaspora group. He told me of river rays camouflaged to match the color of sand, night prowling *tigrillos*, and stalking caymans. There's also a large firefly, he said, that the Guna believe contains *el espiritu del diablo*—"the spirit of the devil." The biggest boogeyman though is the threat of mosquito-borne diseases that the Guna people of the 1800s fled. To date, the Panamanian government has yet to conduct the epidemiological-health-survey work that would determine what exposure to vectors—such as zika and malaria—the mainland resettlement site contains.

The landscape of the mainland is woven deeply into the Guna cultural DNA, however, as Guna sociologist Jesus Alemancia points out. "All the scenarios in the traditional songs of the Guna are of the forests, the rivers, and the mountains," he told me. "Not the islands. We're not going back to a place where we never were. It's the return to the process we went through to go to the island."

Both the archipelago where the Guna now live and the vast swath of coastal mainland where they will resettle are part of a unique autonomous region, which the community brokered following a bloody uprising against the Panamanian government in 1925. The Guna are widely considered to be the most independent indigenous group in all of Latin America, and in recent years delegations of indigenous leaders from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica have come to Guna Yala to learn firsthand how the Guna have maintained their independence. The Guna's fierce sense of self-determination has served them well as they have navigated the uncharted territory of their pending move.

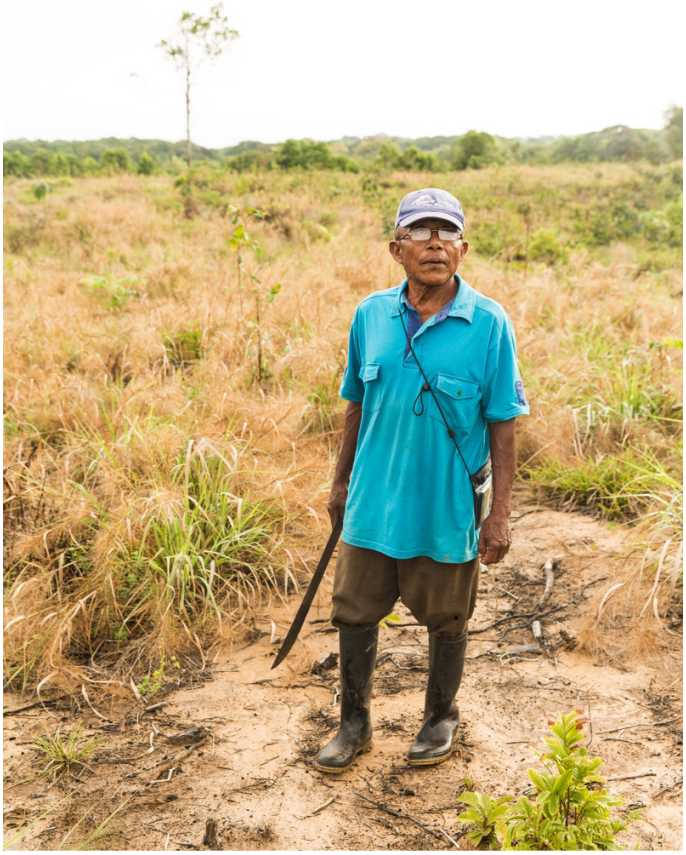
Displacement Solutions, a Geneva-based nonprofit that helps guide the resettlement process for communities in the wake of conflict, disaster, development, and—increasingly—climate change, is working with Gardi Sugdub to prepare the community for the transition to the mainland and to prod the Panamanian government to help make this happen before disaster strikes. The nonprofit sent human-rights lawyer Carlos Arenas and anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith to Panama to lead workshops about the challenges of displacement and resettlement—and to tug on the ears of government functionaries, to get them to take notice of a community pretty far off the radar of most bureaucrats in the capital. As dire as things may seem for Gardi Sugdub, Oliver-Smith and Arenas say that the community is unusually well positioned to become the first successful climate change–induced resettlement. The people are sovereign, organized, and have the land they need to carve out a new life. They've moved forward with planning and site selection without government assistance. Oliver-Smith and Arenas, in fact, are betting that Gardi could become a crucial case study in a scenario that will become all too familiar in the coming decades.

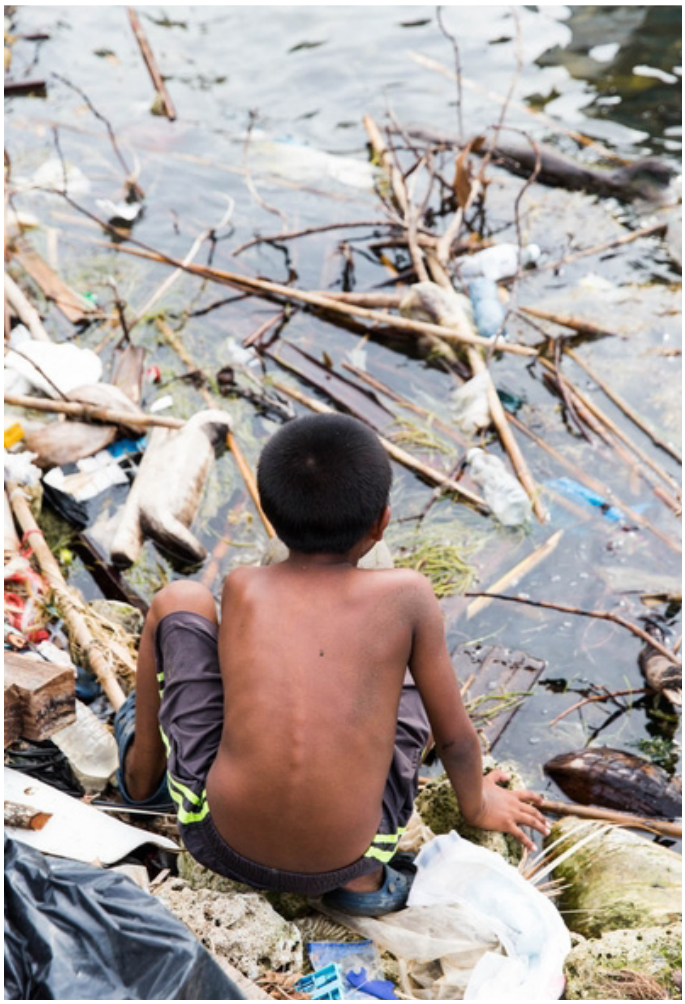
Some 50 to 200 million people, mostly in subsistence coastal communities, could become displaced as soon as 2050, the United Nations estimates. Just this May, reports from the South Pacific confirmed that five of the Solomon Islands have returned to the ocean. Though the submerged islands were relatively small and uninhabited, other islands in that archipelago have lost large swaths of their inhabitable area since 2011, and an exodus has begun. Earlier this year, in Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, some eight thousand miles east of the Solomons, a small rural community received a $48 million federal "climate resilience" grant to resettle to higher ground. The people of Isle de Jean Charles, most of them indigenous like the people of Gardi, will likely become the first climate-refugee community in the United States—but only if they can untangle the logistical and political complications that foiled three previous resettlement plans.

Large-scale resettlement due to rising sea levels is no longer a thought experiment, some hypothetical slow-motion calamity in the hazy future engulfing remote coastal villages. This is Mumbai and Shanghai. This is Piazza San Marco in Venice. This is Manhattan and Miami. "There's still time to do this right," Arenas told me. "A successful relocation for Gardi could become an international model for climate-displaced people worldwide."

On the morning of our second day in Gardi Sugdub, Anthony Oliver-Smith was due to lead his community workshop in the small Baptist church on the north side of the island. As I wandered around the narrow footpaths, people were clearly getting ready for something else of importance. Women and girls dressed in their brightest, most intricate *molas*, little boys had combed their hair, and everyone with handicrafts to sell laid them out carefully in front of their houses. "*El crucero esta aqui*,"

Islands in the Guna Yala archipelago (previous spread and at left) are bursting at the edges, with structures covering nearly every bit of space. To increase land area, the Guna people have built out the islands with coral mined from nearby reefs.





a boy told me as he helped his mother arrange beaded trinkets on a small folding table. The arrival of a cruise ship may happen only every couple of months, but when it does, over the course of a few hours a month's worth of income can be earned. I wondered how that economic dynamic would change when this community was no longer so strategically positioned as a quick stop for camera-toting cruise goers.

The local Baptist preacher, a Guna man from the community, had made his small church available to Arenas and Oliver-Smith that morning because he had gone to a neighboring island where a visiting Baptist preacher—a gringo—was giving out eyeglasses. "Because the Guna are blind," Blas Lopez, a Gardi community leader and key contact for Displacement Solutions, deadpanned from the back row of the clapboard-walled, tin-roofed building. Forty or so of his neighbors from the island had come to participate in the meeting. Oliver-Smith—tall, neatly goateed, professorial—arranged a screen and adjusted a projector, his button-down oxford shirt already soaked with sweat from the morning heat.

Oliver-Smith opened with a discussion of the scholarship that has been produced regarding resettlement issues. The track record of resettlement isn't good, Oliver-Smith had told me earlier. By and large, resettled communities are impoverished. Inadequate planning, insufficient resources, and weak legal frameworks all contribute to the likelihood of failure for resettlements. "It's a terribly complex process," he said, "but I really don't think this is impossible to do right. The process must be open, flexible, and participatory."

Resettlement as an academic field really got its start during World War II, with Alexander Leighton's study of the Poston War Relocation Center, the Japanese-American incarceration camp in Yuma County, Arizona, where some seventeen thousand people, mostly uprooted from Southern California, were forced to live for four years. Nothing about that situation was open, flexible, or participatory. In the seventy years since, social scientists have studied resettlements all over the world in order to get a sense of what happens to the social, cultural, and economic structures of communities dislocated by conflict, development, and disaster.

Oliver-Smith showed an Oxfam-produced video from the Carteret Islands near Papua New Guinea, where a thousand people will soon have to leave their homes because of sea-level rise. "It's Guna Yala!" joked Blas Lopez at the establishing shot of a palm-studded island surrounded by clear blue water. The similarities between these island communities don't stop at appearances, of course. "The islands are sinking and the population is growing, and we know that we are not alone in this fight," the video's main subject says. "Climate change isn't just about science and statistics, it's about people and human rights." Several in the audience nodded.

"We can see it's happening to our brothers there too," Jose

Davies, a respected elder and *argar,* or interpreter for the sailas, said from a few rows back. "This is very good for us to reflect on." In the very back row, Victoria Navarro, who—like Jose Davies—sits on the neighborhood committee that's steering the process in Gardi, stood to speak. "We've been working on this for five years," she said. "We should make a documentary too to show our kids how hard we've worked.

Oliver-Smith shared the story of Shishmaref, Alaska, where several hundred residents live in a remote coastal Inuit village no longer protected by sea ice. Storm surges have whittled away at their town, sending houses toppling into the sea. Like Gardi, that community voted to relocate over a decade ago, but despite extensive coverage in the international press, there's been no move. Securing land for the relocation has proven difficult, so the community has built seawalls and dragged houses back from the brink. "See, unfortunately, up in the States, we're not any better at dealing with this," Oliver-Smith told the gathered Guna. "Nobody's really been able to successfully negotiate a resettlement necessitated by climate-change adaptation."

Development manager Ernesto Harris Tejada (opposite top) at the proposed site of a new Gardi neighborhood; in the absence of sanitation systems, waste is thrown into the ocean (opposite bottom); men arrive at Gardi Subdug with fish for sale (above).

The sun sat low on the horizon the next morning as Oliver-Smith, Arenas, and I boarded a small wooden boat for the quick trip to the mainland resettlement site. Aboard were most of the members of the neighborhood committee, three of the sailas, and several children. The boat bounced on the chop, sending an occasional spray over us. A woman toward the front pointed at a spot in the thickly forested hills that rose sharply from the coast—the area they'd chosen for their new village, within some of the best-preserved primary forest in Central America. As we pulled up to the dock, the hopeful pioneers chatted excitedly—this was a glimpse into the future of their community, something that they'd talked about for years and only now were beginning to see take shape.

A few trucks ferried us up the hill, from which I could just barely make out the very top of the mast of a sailboat anchored

offshore, at the Cartí port. It was a windy morning and dust from the road and building sites whipped around in little funnels. An Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)–funded hospital sat frozen on the hillside in its gaping incompleteness. At a school site though, also funded by the IDB, several clusters of workers clanged away on rebar, working on foundation columns. Another worker piloted a backhoe.

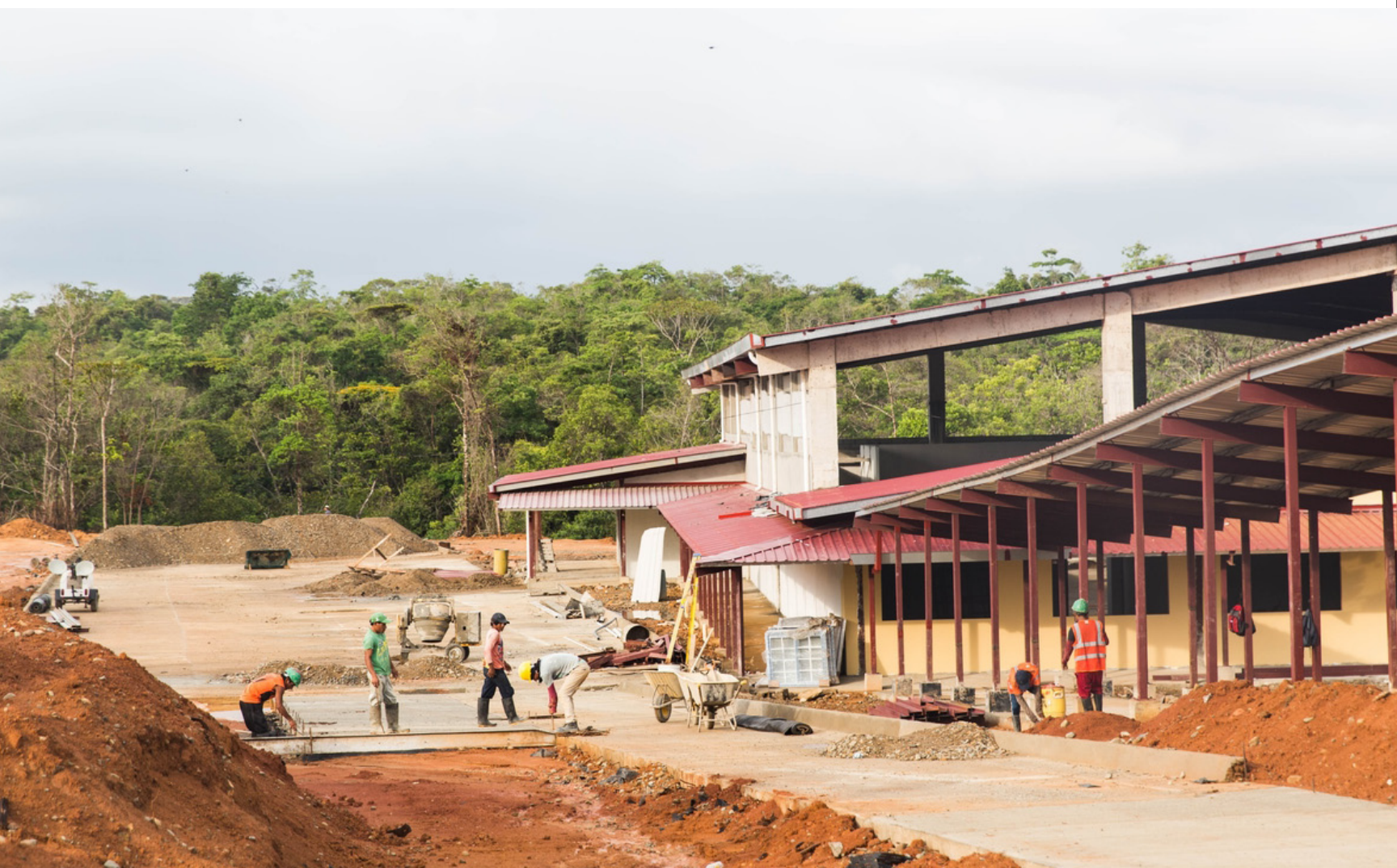
While Oliver-Smith, Arenas, and I stopped to talk with Calixto Colman—a Guna architect hired by the Gardi community—most everyone who had been with us on the boat proceeded directly to the area that will be the new settlement. They followed the new road behind the school and hospital buildings down into a steep creek ravine and back up again to hilly land about a half-kilometer away. Victoria Navarro, two other traditionally dressed women, and two girls led the way.

While I walked with Colman and the others along the road to the settlement site, I wondered what this new community would be called. Oliver-Smith had told me the story of a small town named Bella Vista Del Rio—"beautiful view of the river"—that had been displaced by a dam development in Mexico. The community›s new settlement was twenty-three kilometers away, high up on an arid plateau, without the river anywhere in sight. When the community rebuilt their town in its new location, the main thoroughfare was again called River Boulevard, and the new town was named Bella Vista Del Rio anyway.

"You could say, wait a minute . . . " Oliver-Smith said, "but this is fundamental, I think, to surviving radical change—to maintain some sense of continuity to a past that's gone. You're not trying to live in the past. But you use the past to make sense of the present, and to establish some sense of continuity. You can't just turn your back on who you were. You keep it alive by reinterpreting it; you don't jettison the symbols."

This is what Oliver-Smith calls a "restructuring of the social geometry"—something he says happens in any displacement situation. Three basic questions frame a displacement: Who are we? Where are we? And, what is our relationship to each other? When a community can answer each of these questions, they're on the road to what anthropologists like Oliver-Smith call "emplacement." Communities are not just *in* a place, they are *of* a place.

Pondering what a resettled community might call itself becomes a fundamental question of identity, then. Gardi Sugdub translates to "island of crabs," and the crabs in these waters are massive, knotty creatures with bodies the size of small dinner plates. They are harvested the same way the Guna have done



it for generations: young men with strong lungs free dive for the crabs with sharpened spikes. Gardi only has two crab divers these days, Ansberto Herman told me. No one I asked on the island knows what the new settlement will be called. Mostly people called it La Barriada, "the neighborhood."

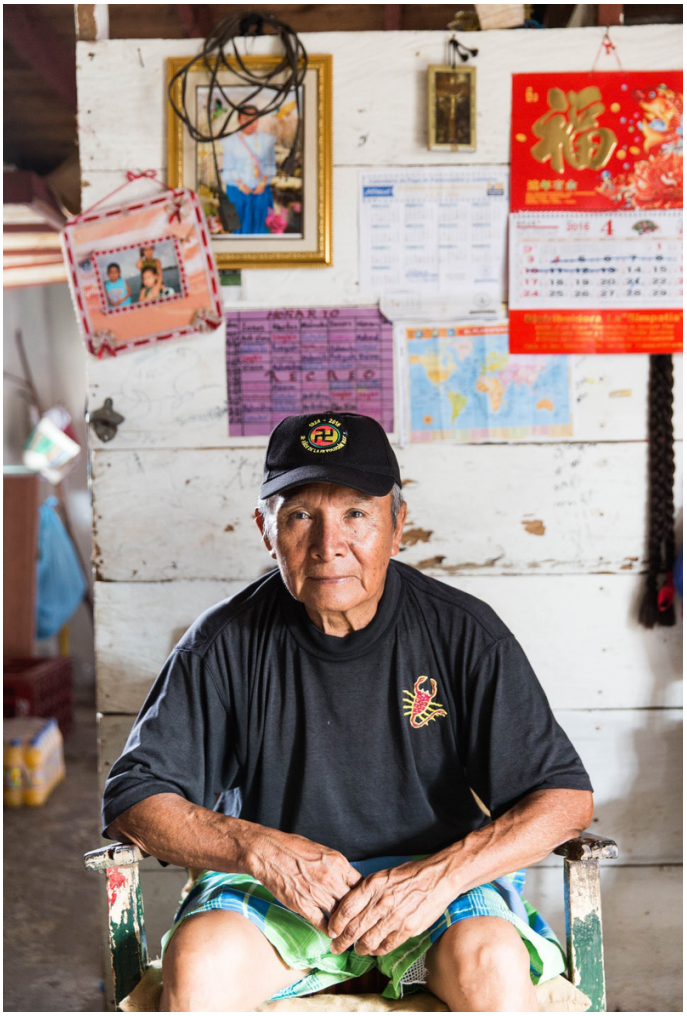
We followed Colman down into the ravine and back up again along the dirt road. He explained that members of the community had pooled their money to hire him to grade and terrace the land. They'd grown tired of waiting for any signs of movement from the government, so they contracted him—he'd been working on the adjacent school site—along with one of the backhoe operators to break ground on La Barriada. Just a few months earlier this was a dense thicket, but on this morning an idling backhoe belched smoke at the entrance to a freshly cleared hilltop. The road continued on, leading to several other large cleared areas where family plots of 450 square meters each will sit.

But clearly, this was just the beginning, Colman said. "Over here we don't know where the water is going to come from, then there's the aspect of the trash," he said, thinking aloud. "There are so many necessities that we are going to see that we need, and we have to prepare for all of it." The folks visiting from Gardi that morning seemed unfazed though—the pioneer spirit was running high. The potential to build a thriving community with plenty of space for growth had cast a spell over the visitors, and perhaps Colman as well. He joked about marrying into the Gardi community in order to get a little slice of the pie.

We caught up to the rest of our party to find little clusters of Gardi settlers chatting about the future. Saila Pablo Preciado came over with a wide smile and told me that suddenly all this felt real. "It looks like it's really going to happen," he said. I asked him if he knows where his plot is. He laughed and was silent for a moment. "The captain is the last one to know his place, so I'll be the last one to know where I'm living."

When I spoke with Victoria Navarro about how the identity of Gardi Sugdub would fare with such a radical uprooting, she looked at me firmly and narrowed her eyes. "There can be changes, because the customs that we are used to now may not be the same customs over here," she said in Guna, while her granddaughter Evelyn latched onto her legs. "But the future of our children and grandchildren is always on our mind, because that is why we are doing this. Our identity is never lost. We are who we are, and it's going to be the same here."

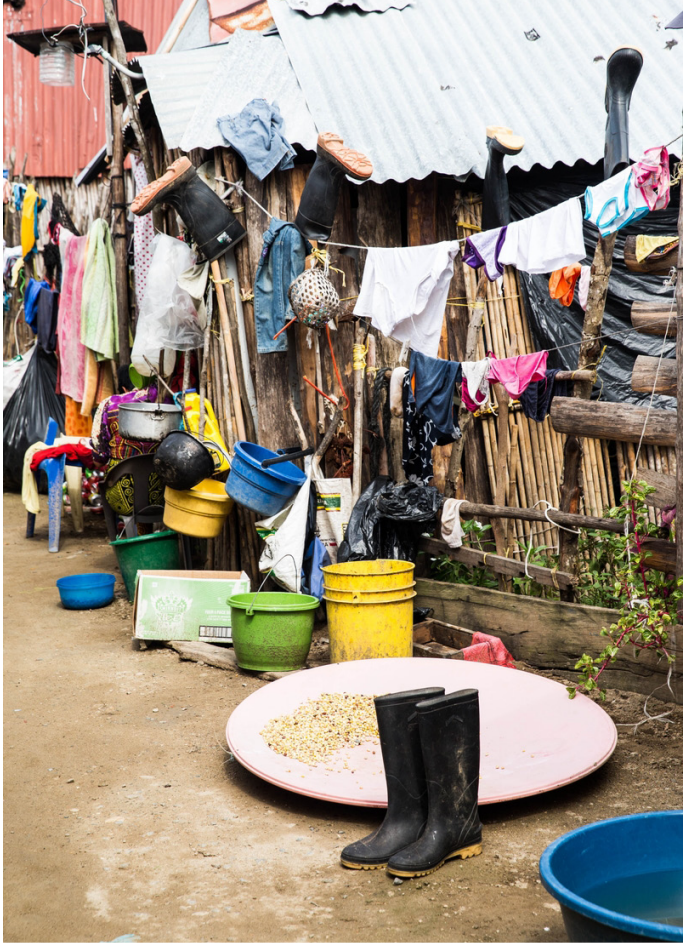
A few days later in Panama City when I spoke with Arenas about that visit to La Barriada his eyes brightened. "It's clear to me that the community has reached a point of no return," he said. "This is not an idea. The relocation of Gardi Sugdub is happening."

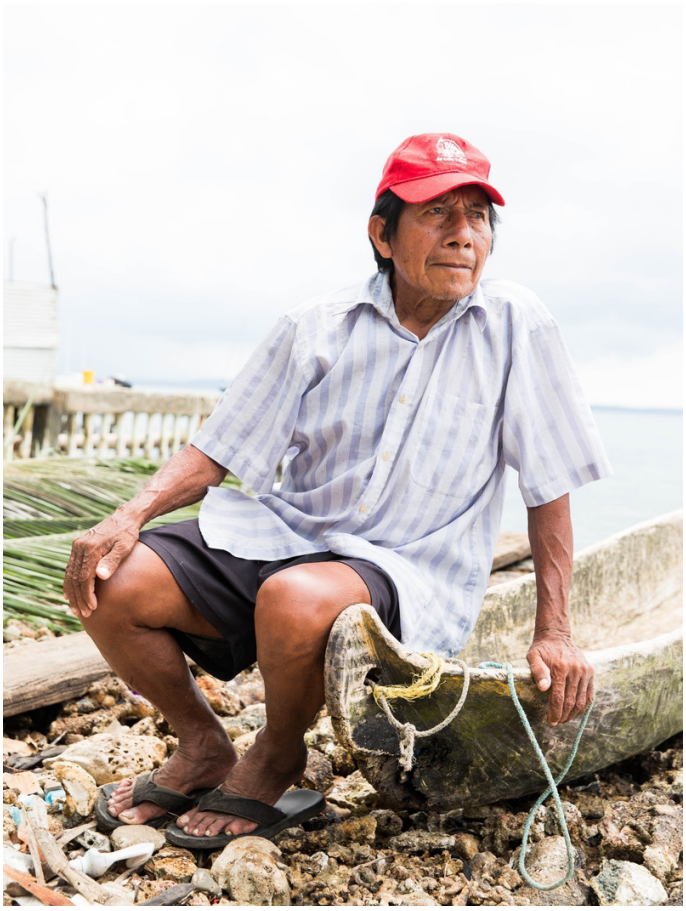


It's quite unclear how supportive the Panamanian government will be in the Gardi community's relocation, however. In 2010, the Ministry of Housing, under former President Ricardo Martinelli, set aside $2.4 million for resettling the Gardi to the mainland. Martinelli has since been run out of office on charges of rampant corruption, and those funds have vanished. However, Arenas believes that the current administration under Juan Carlos Varela has signaled greater commitment to indigenous communities.

I spent six days with Oliver-Smith and Arenas in steamy Panama City—a metropolis of 1.5 million people, all glittering skyline surrounded by a swath of tropical rainforest—shadowing them as they scurried between meetings with government

Workers prepare the grounds of the new school at the relocation site on the mainland (opposite left); Guillermo Archibold (above), an agronomist on Gardi Subdug, photographed in the living room of his home.





officials. They gently tried to hold these people accountable, they cajoled, and they facilitated communications between ministries that operate in silos. It quickly became clear from these meetings that no single government authority is tasked with sorting through the cases of Gardi and the other Guna communities that face resettlement. The Ministry of Housing seemed like a good place to target, though.

We navigated a labyrinthine building to find the offices of Itzamara de Carrasquilla, the head of the department of architecture within the Ministry of Housing. This office had drawn up blueprints titled "Nuevo Cartí" that plotted the first sixty-five houses to be constructed with the funds that had been set aside by the Martinelli administration and since become obsolete. Some details of the blueprints themselves indicated a lack of coordination between the government ministries—the plans called for a school tucked within the houses, for example, while the Ministry of Education had already begun to build the school near the main road, a kilometer away from the village itself.

"We want to tell you that any interventions that the government does in this area have to be holistic and integrated," Arenas told Carrasquilla, who sat at her desk surrounded by a dozen identical desks. "If the Ministry of Housing reopens the project and studies the report, you'll see this process that the Guna community is going through is of global interest."

Carrasquilla listened to Arenas and Oliver-Smith make their case and watched a video that Arenas had shot with his iPhone on that windy day we visited La Barriada. "Wow, they're advancing quickly," she said. "Well, if there's no participation they're going to do it their own way." She promised to communicate a sense of urgency to the leadership in the ministry. "I just want to leave this message for you, that there's still time for the different institutions to work together with the community," Arenas said.

Arenas's plea to Carrasquilla must have volleyed through the bureaucracy with unusual speed, because the next day the vice minister of housing, Jorge Gonzalez, became available for a meeting. "We're here to emphasize that this process must be integrated and holistic," said Arenas. Gonzalez nodded behind his ample desk. "Of course, we are going to work with them, we're not going to plan the projects from over here in this office," Gonzalez said. "Maybe the reason you saw little progress was that it was a lower priority, but now it's a high priority. The first nine months have been tough for us with the transition to the

Homes on Gardi Subdug overflow with peoples belongings (top left); Luis Murphy (bottom left), a *saila*, or elected leader, at the back of his often-flooded property; Elain Arias (opposite) harvests a fruit locally called *marias*. Many families have property on the mainland, where they grow fruits and vegetables on small *fincas*.

new administration, but fortunately in this case, the land is already there, we just need to gather the funds and get started."

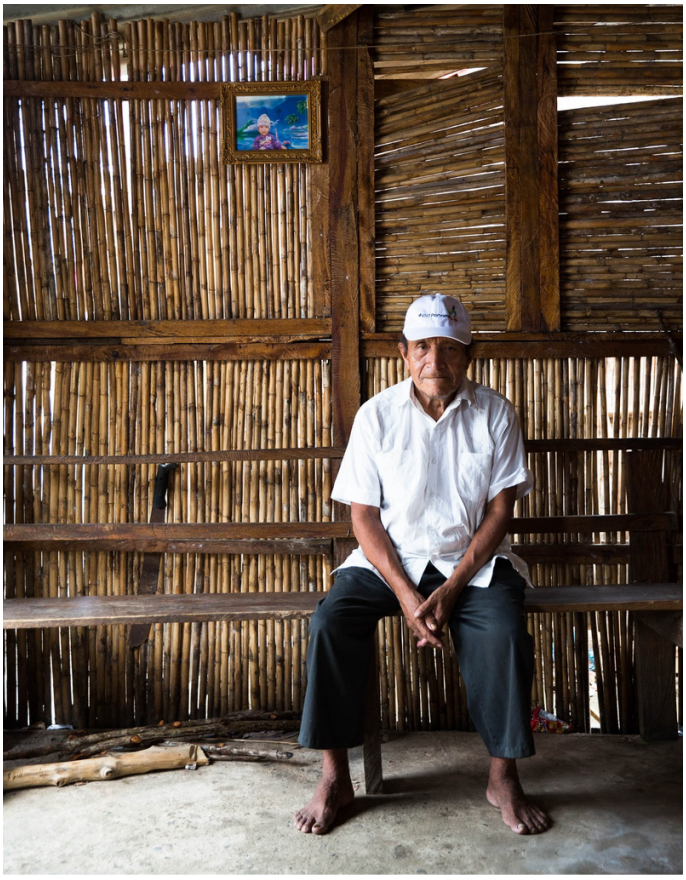
Arenas and Oliver-Smith left that meeting in fairly high spirits—Gonzalez had even confirmed that he would visit the community the following month. "But it's the community participation that's so important," Oliver-Smith said in the cab on our way to the next meeting. There's an old joke about how you conjugate the word "participate" in Spanish, he said. "I participate, you participate, he/she participates, we participate, they decide."

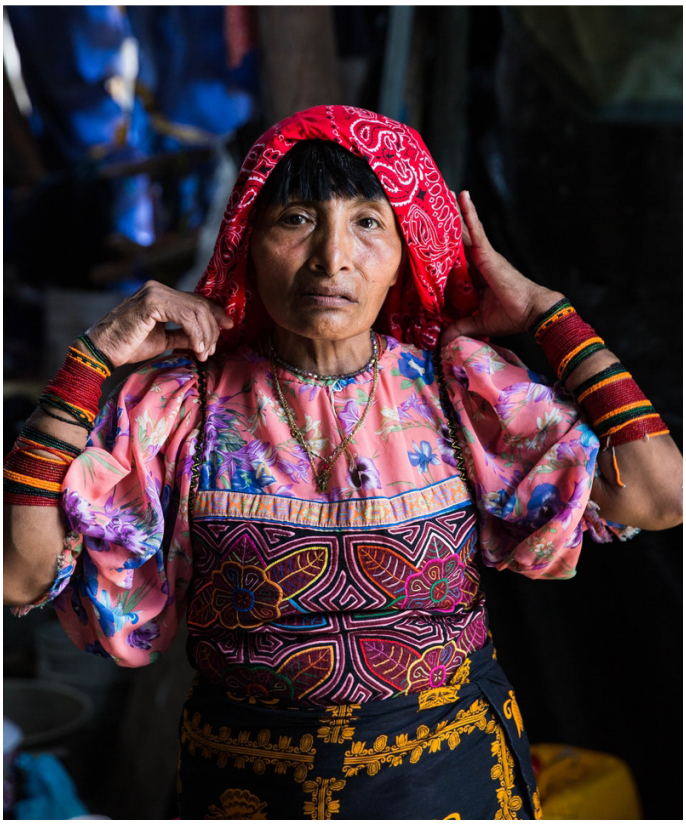
The days in Panama City unfolded in the hazy blur that descends with tropical heat. Arenas fielded phone calls from functionaries and from allies within local nonprofits as we darted around the city, scribbling names and numbers in his spiral-bound notebook. The architects in charge of the school project—which will include forty-one classrooms for twelve hundred students—told us that they would soon reach the 30 percent completion point. The epidemiologists promised to begin a study of the vector potential at La Barriada, and the official in the Ministry of Health offered an oddly precise estimate of completeness for the long-stalled hospital project: 54 percent.

The agency I expected to take charge in the case of Gardi Sugdub was the Ministry of the Environment's newly formed climate change committee. Its members had agreed to sponsor a Panama City workshop led by Oliver-Smith similar to the one he had conducted in Gardi, but this time tailored to government functionaries and civil society. In the hallway outside I had a conversation with Mirta Benitez, the agency's climate change analyst. She indicated that her office had little interest in taking the lead here.

"It's not the Ministry of the Environment that has the last word," she told me. "It's actually all the institutions that need to make these decisions—health, education, housing—but it can't just be from the Ministry of the Environment." In fact, she said, the position of her office is that climate change isn't the issue in Gardi Sugdub—the problem is overpopulation. I could nearly hear her bureaucratic rubber stamp slapping the case of Gardi "ineligible for funds."

Certainly overpopulation and rising sea levels are both at play here, but the science on sea-level rise is clear enough. A 2003 Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute study showed that sea levels in Guna Yala have increased an average of 2 centimeters annually since 1907 and 2.4 centimeters annually since 1973.





Based on aerial photos, these islands have lost 50,000 square meters over the last thirty-five years. "You go to Guna Yala," Arenas told me, "and you see that those communities live on the edge of the ocean. I think that the community has been lucky that no disaster has happened, but I am convinced that that could happen any moment."

As the various ministries within the Panamanian government dawdle, the clock continues to tick. The rising seas won't wait for committees to be formed or budgets to be secured or new administrations to formalize action plans. "There's no such thing as natural disasters," Oliver-Smith told me more than once. "Disasters are fundamentally social. The reason they occur is because you have a society, or a community, or an individual who is in a condition of exposure or vulnerability."

My visit to Panama City was in the week following the Summit of the Americas, during which the city had been swarmed with international journalists. Welcome posters and banners still lingered all over town, many featuring smiling Guna in traditional dress. "They use our image to portray Panama, the national identity, so how can they give us such a small part of the budget?" Aiban Velarde Chiari, Guna Yala's representative in the National Assembly, asked, shaking his head. Chiari had married into the Gardi community and was quite familiar with the work of Displacement Solutions. He said that he had even used it in his statements on the floor of the assembly. "I spoke to the president about this and told him all about how organized the community is," he said. "It's a perfect pilot program. I want to present in the assembly a proposal to make a policy for all people affected by resettlement."

Chiari had also been at work on a book of poetry inspired by Guna Yala, and he was eager to share some of his verse with us. "I will include all the experiences with my community, because with the Guna, it's like we're a home, a house, like a universal cosmic home," he said. "If my house is being threatened by climate change then this will have to be part of my book." There in his office in the National Assembly building, he read briefly from his manuscript: "You are like a full moon and my hands can barely touch you / Don't go and disappear through the waves."

Jesus Alemancia, a Guna sociologist with family ties to Gardi Sugdub, invited us to meet him in the glittering Multiplaza Pacific shopping mall. We sat at a café flanked by Armani and Louis Vuitton stores—a strange setting for a discussion of the fate of Gardi. Alemancia keeps close tabs on the Gardi diaspora

Pablo Preciado (top), a *saila*, and Victoria Navarro (bottom), who sits on the neighborhood committee that's steering the relocation of the people of Gardi.

in the capital and is something of an advisor for them. He seemed concerned that the Gardi community is too eager to resettle and hasn't fully thought through all the details.

Oliver-Smith wondered aloud how the community planned to divvy up the plots. By lottery? First come, first serve? Would they recreate the island community block by block?

Alemancia said no system had been agreed upon and patience was quickly thinning. "They say, 'Why are you talking to me about planning now, when we have always lived this way?'" he said. "'Why break our heads with this? Let's just go. We came from the coast, and we survived, why wouldn't we survive now?'"

The harsh realities of climate change are only partially responsible for the urgency many Guna feel—La Barriada is a seductive vision and, particularly for those living in the capital, it's something of a promised land, a place of plenty where they will truly *vivir el buen vivir* (live the good life). Rolando Mendez Perez was born in Gardi but moved to the city of Colón at four years old when his parents split up. We met in the building owned by the Gardi diaspora in the rough Calle Diez y Siete area of Panama City—it's part community restaurant, part meetinghouse, and on this particular Sunday it was full of people who had come to watch the results of the lottery on national television and to meet with the two visitors from Displacement Solutions.

Perez has lived in Panama City for twenty years, raised five daughters there, and is now a grandfather many times over. The Guna though, he said, like to live outside the city. "My idea is to take my family to the resettlement site so I can grow my own food," he told me. "My grandkids are the ones who will enjoy that place. The Guna don't think only about now, they think about the future. Our leaders and sailas teach us something very important—they show us that the mountains and our environment, that's where we preserve our food source. Here in Panama City they have refrigerators and stocks of canned food, and over there, our fridge is the mountain—there's the meat, the fruit, everything."

As a child, Perez visited Gardi during breaks from school. His aunts there spoiled him so badly that it was always hard for him to return to the city. He wants to give that experience to his grandkids on the new land. "I have a vision of that place," he said. "I imagine a natural, fresher environment, and I imagine my culture united."

Perez's is a romantic vision of the undemanding pastoral life, far from the clamor and noxious exhaust fumes of Panama City, and I too found myself captivated. His eyes watered ever so slightly when he described that place, which still exists only in the collective consciousness of a people pushed to build it—where all troubles and wants fade, where a proud indigenous culture will continue to pass along traditions, where old songs will be remembered. What Perez describes could be naïve fantasy, but, in a sense, it's what anthropologists like Oliver-Smith would also call a successful resettlement scenario, something that has thus far remained only a hopeful notion.

The midday heat settled in at Gardi diaspora community center, fans spun on the walls, and people huddled around bowls of *sancocho* stew. From a television stacked atop beer crates, the national lottery was announced. There were no lucky winners in the room. Three women—one dressed traditionally—collected cash, calling out names and marking figures in a notebook. This is how they've funded the clearing and grading of La Barriada. A small pile of crumpled five- and one-dollar bills grew in the center of the table, inching this community closer to a resettlement on higher ground.

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Moth

Drawn by a candle's stammering,
some promise of glimmer now guttered,
a moth on the screen this morning
held fast through the night, its intricate patterns
flocked arrangements in dust.
In this world of forms, how amazing, really,
to have in a lifetime several.
Caterpillar. Chrysalis. Or is it cocoon?
Does *molt* apply? Or, given such changes,
rending? Whatever the casing,
did it hold her shape after,
the way, say, of a plaster cast
sawed from a healed arm or clavicle?
Imagine waking to the wonderment
of wings, their slow unfolding,
instinctive flight from twiggy branch or trunk,
from some place visible, solid.
Soon, with enough morning sun, she'll resume
her brief, perilous dance, her motor
silently cranking, no mind clicking,
never knowing that to rise
into such light, her vision no longer
blocked, she first had to surrender
to a small unhasped vault.

—Deborah Cummins