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Water Governance Strategies in the Guna Yala Community's Climate Relocation



Abstract: The GEF CReW+ project in Panama focuses on enhancing governance within the drinking water and sanitation sector of the Iserbayala community, marking a crucial step in their planned relocation from ancestral islands to the mainland. With a holistic governance approach, the project ensures the preservation of the community's cultural heritage, livelihoods, and environmental stewardship during this significant transition. Through meticulous planning and extensive consultation, community members are equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to navigate their new environment effectively. By centering indigenous perspectives and integrating traditional wisdom into climate adaptation strategies, this initiative establishes a groundbreaking precedent for resilient governance models in indigenous communities worldwide. This experience note highlights the innovative strategies and transformative potential of the Guna Yala relocation project.

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Water Governance Strategies in the Guna Yala Community's Climate Relocation

Experience of the GEF - sponsored

An integrated approach to water and wastewater management in the Wider Caribbean Region using innovative solutions and sustainable financing mechanisms (GEF CReW+ Project)

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The GEF CReW+ project is a partnership project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) that is being co-implemented by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 18 countries of the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR). This project builds upon its previous successful phase “The Caribbean Regional Fund for Wastewater Management (CReW)” project (2011-2017). GEF CReW+ is being executed by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the Organisation of the American States (OAS) and the Secretariat of the Cartagena Convention (CAR/CRU) on behalf of the IDB and UNEP respectively. The GEF CReW+ project provides innovative solutions and mitigation strategies for untreated water to improve public health and ecosystem services.

The objective of the GEF CReW+ is to support Panama in its institutional development and management capacities to face the challenges of the water and sanitation sector, and the application of financial mechanisms and innovative technologies for the integrated water and wastewater management. This experience note focus on the activities aimed at strengthening the governance of the drinking water and sanitation sector through the development of an instrument for the application of water resources and water and sanitation legislation in the Nuevo Cartí community, considering the Guna cosmovision. The activity take place as part of the Government efforts to relocate the Carti Sugdupu community, which is the first community displaced in Panama in a planned manner and as a measure to adapt to climate change.

THE EXPERIENCE

Issue

The Guna Indigenous Community is part of the Guna Yala Region, one of the six indigenous regions in Panama. These regions represent special political divisions with their own governments and internal regulations, regulated by Comarcal Laws. In particular, the focus is on the Gardí Sugdub community in Guna Yala, located in the Mulatas Archipelago in the Caribbean Sea. In Gardí Sugdub, approximately 2,500 people live and largely depend on tourism and fishing activities; and due to its insular location, it has a transport terminal to accommodate both the Gunas and tourists.

The Gardí Sugdub community faces a significant climate problem; due to rising sea levels, the island has lost territory, which is projected to significantly affect the community in the future years. Additionally, the Guna population has increased, leading to overpopulation on the island, which could increase the risk of flooding and health problems. Regarding water resource management and solid waste, residents of Sugdub have been disposing of their solid and liquid waste into the sea, a common practice in other communities in the Guna Yala region. In view of the situation, the Panamanian government has developed a plan where most residents will be relocated to the mainland, specifically to a new settlement called Isberyala.

The Isberyala community will be the first experience of relocating a Guna community from an island to the mainland. Comprehensive planning has been carried out, including environmental considerations, usage, conservation, and maintenance of water resources, as well as wastewater and domestic waste treatment. Studies have been conducted as part of the Isberyala housing project to determine an appropriate water supply location and ensure access to the new community.

The relocation involves a lot of planning, but also it means the community will need to change their practices, specially when it comes to the management of water resources and its disposal. The GEF CReW+ project activities respond to this need, with the development of Local Legislation and Best Practices Guide and the Popular Guide "*Dii agued Igar*". The objective of producing the Local Legislation and Best Practices Guide and the Popular Guide "*Dii agued Igar*" is to provide the community with normative and educational tools that address the use, conservation, and maintenance of water resources, as well as wastewater and waste treatment.

Addressing the Issue

Elaboration of the document. The initial step involved a thorough review of the "Recommendation of Instrument for Local Approach to Regulations in Accordance with Applicable Local Law in the Region.". These insights were instrumental in delineating the pertinent aspects to be integrated into the Local Legislation and Best Practices Guide for the Isberyala Community—an invaluable resource guiding the development process.

Consultations were conducted with documents shedding light on the Guna people's profound worldview concerning nature. These texts encapsulate the sagacious insights of the revered Gunas, affectionately known as "Saglas," who serve as custodians of their community's wisdom and knowledge. Drawing from these invaluable resources, coupled with insightful interviews and consultations, two pivotal documents were meticulously crafted. These documents, encapsulating the essence of Guna wisdom and addressing the unique challenges faced by the Isberyala community, were subjected to rigorous scrutiny and validation. Two participatory workshops, orchestrated with the future Isberyala community, provided a forum for collective review and refinement, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of all stakeholders were duly acknowledged and integrated.

Community Linkage. Local collaboration plays a pivotal role in orchestrating activities effectively. By fostering direct communication with traditional leaders, local authorities, and the Isberyala community's board of directors, logistical hurdles such as transportation, meals, and lodging are navigated smoothly. In navigating interventions within indigenous communities, tapping into the expertise of local professionals is indispensable. The Guna professionals serve as vital bridges, linking Western approaches with indigenous traditions. Moreover, understanding the community's intricacies, alongside the context of relocation, is key for the success of the GEF CReW+ project team.

Guna Local Congress. The forthcoming Isberyala community will comprise members of the Gardí Sugdub community, thus making them integral to the Guna Local Congress. This congress, overseen by the Sagla (spiritual leader-guide), operates with its own dedicated team. In coordinating workshops, interviews, and field visits, seamless collaboration was fostered with the Guna Congress through designated liaisons, serving as conduits between the technical team, the congress, and the community.

Key Actors. In collaboration with the liaison, pivotal figures within the Isberyala housing project were identified, comprising educators, youth representatives, community leaders, and the project's board of directors. This diverse ensemble collectively scrutinized the draft document titled "Local Legislation and Best Practices Guide for the Isberyala Community." Teachers played a crucial role in elucidating the document's contents, recognizing that many workshop participants struggled with comprehending Spanish, the language in which the draft was initially composed, rather than their native Guna tongue.

The board of directors of the nascent Isberyala community primarily comprises seasoned educators from the Sugdub community, possessing extensive professional acumen and life experience. Their invaluable

insights were instrumental throughout the document preparation process, drawing from their firsthand observations of the community's organic growth over the years.

The inclusion of young individuals slated to relocate to the Isberyala community was also paramount. Thus, their active involvement in both crafting and validating the document was pivotal. Both teachers and community leaders assumed mentorship roles, nurturing the young participants' contributions during the workshops.

Socialization Process. The process of socialization unfolded through two workshops, both convened at Ommagged Nega, a sacred site where reverence is paid to the spirits of Nature. This sacred space also doubles as the Local Congress, serving as a nexus for community discourse on matters of communal and regional significance. Selecting Ommagged Nega as the venue ensured the active participation of traditional authorities, who enriched proceedings with their profound insights.

The inaugural workshop, spanning from April 1st to 3rd, 2022, was dedicated to the presentation, review, and critique of the documents. Subsequently, the validation workshop took place on June 2nd and 3rd, 2022, heralding a pivotal moment in the project's journey. On June 2nd, a diverse cohort comprising Guna professionals, esteemed professors from the University of Panama and the Specialized University of the Americas, representatives from the Ministry of Environment of Panama, Ministry of Education, and the Panama Tourism Authority converged to engage with the consultancy documents. On June 3rd, the culmination of community validation occurred, with community representatives and traditional Guna authorities from Gardí Sugdub lending their imprimatur to the documents.

Integral to this process was the active participation of future Isberyala residents, who shaped the Good Practices Guide and the Popular Guide of the Isberyala Community in accordance with their unique needs and informed by the timeless wisdom of their ancestral culture. These documents, crafted with an eye towards local and global realities, embody a harmonious fusion of tradition and modernity, reflecting the ethos of the Isberyala community.

Innovation in Environmental Management. The Local Legislation and Best Practices Guide is a groundbreaking resource for Panama's Guna indigenous community, harmonizing indigenous norms with Panamanian environmental laws and international policies. It represents a profound recognition of indigenous wisdom in promoting sustainable environmental management. Complementing this, the Popular Guide "Dii agued Igar" provides a captivating educational tool for children and youth, emphasizing the importance of waste management and water conservation within the Isberyala community while preserving the Guna language and cultural heritage.

These documents hold significant potential for broader impact beyond Isberyala, serving as catalysts for advocating sustainable practices across Guna indigenous territories. They underscore the importance of community collaboration and meticulous planning in fostering effective working commissions dedicated to environmental preservation. By empowering the community and instilling a sense of ownership, these guides pave the way for innovative sustainability practices rooted in Guna tradition and wisdom.

Moreover, the Local Guide not only serves as an educational cornerstone but also stands as a cultural treasure, capable of being expressed through various indigenous artistic mediums. Its value extends beyond legal frameworks, encapsulating the enduring richness of Guna heritage and tradition while advocating for holistic environmental preservation efforts.

RESULTS AND LEARNING

The activity conducted was successful, largely due to the respectful and sensitive approach of the technical team. All aspects related to the preservation of Guna traditions and daily life were carefully considered, ensuring that the document preparation process aligned with the community's values and practices. Recommendations focus on further strengthening respect, inclusion, and active participation of communities, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are duly valued and considered at every stage of the process.

To achieve appropriate engagement, starting with an intercultural dialogue where the community's opinions and experiences are listened to and valued is crucial. Additionally, understanding and respecting the community's governance systems, social organization, and cultural processes are essential.

Agendas should be tailored to the community's pace and timing. Ensuring that all necessary information is provided and allowing the community enough time to process and discuss this information before making important decisions is vital. This may mean that more time is needed to reach agreements and make decisions together, but the result will be a more sustainable solution coherent with the community's needs and values.

It is fundamental to avoid proposing solutions that are incompatible with Guna culture. This culture has its own way of seeing and understanding the world, and the solutions proposed should align with these perspectives. Otherwise, solutions could be rejected or prove unsustainable in the long run.

Recognition and respect for culture and way of life are crucial. Involving community leaders and members from the outset to gain a comprehensive understanding of their needs and expectations and establish a trusting relationship is essential. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that each indigenous community is unique, with its own history, traditions, and challenges. Therefore, thorough research on the specific characteristics and needs of the community should be conducted before the project's initiation, as was done in a previous diagnostic study.

Collaborative work with the indigenous community helps identify the needs and issues in the area and develop solutions and strategies participatively.

Active participation of adults and youth is crucial for a broader reach and understanding of the importance of proper toilet use, septic tanks, and solid waste recycling. Youth participation in these processes allows for continuity and generational transmission of acquired knowledge and practices. This promotes long-term sustainability and enhances community resilience to environmental and health challenges. In conclusion, the lesson learned is that a participatory and culturally appropriate approach is essential for the success of any environmental education and behavior change project in indigenous communities.

REPLICATION

The replicability of the project hinges on the thorough documentation and dissemination of experiences and lessons learned, both locally within other regions and internationally as described in the results section. This entails crafting reports and educational materials that can be utilized by other indigenous communities to tackle similar challenges and replicate successful solutions.

Ultimately, the sustainability and replicability of this project in Gardí Sugdub rely on active collaboration between the community and external stakeholders involved in the project, as well as the adaptation and customization of solutions to the specific needs and conditions of the community. With proper management and documentation of experiences and lessons learned, it's feasible to generate sustainable and replicable solutions that contribute to the sustainable development of indigenous communities.

SIGNIFICANCE

This experience holds immense significance as it aids the Guna Yala community in their meticulously planned relocation due to climate change, specifically by providing crucial guidance and insights into the proper utilization and management of water resources in their new mainland environment. The relocation of the Guna Yala Community not only addresses immediate climate challenges but also establishes a pioneering example for climate adaptation strategies among indigenous communities across the region. Furthermore, the thorough planning and consultation process undertaken for this relocation project serves as a beacon for ensuring the cultural preservation and overall welfare of displaced populations. By emphasizing the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and perspectives into climate resilience initiatives, this project highlights the imperative of collaborative endeavors in mitigating the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities.

REFERENCES

www.gefcrew.org

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KEYWORDS

What 2-5 keywords could be used to help others search and find this experience note? Please provide at least one of each of the following:

- ◆ Guna Yala
- ◆ Climate change adaptation
- ◆ Indigenous Communities
- ◆ Water Management

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