

Sustainable theory and practice at the Human Impacts Institute

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The Human Impact Institute works with young girls in Los Angeles.

While working as the program director at the [Lower East Side Ecology Center](#) in New York City, Tara DePorte saw the same problem again and again -- many groups working on environmental issues were duplicating efforts by launching similar initiatives. "For instance," DePorte explained, "one university is researching the impact of green roofs on the urban heat island effect, another nonprofit is working to build green roofs, and another group is researching the impact of water retention on green roofs, but none of them are coordinated in their efforts." What if there was a connector, providing translation and mediation between groups? That's the aim of a newly-formed nonprofit DePorte runs with Director of Outreach and Advocacy, Tristan Jones: the [Human Impacts Institute](#). "We see ourselves as 'environmental translators' where we take information from each sector and translate it to the appropriate terms and formats for other sectors to use, apply and disseminate," said DePorte, noting that the academic language often used in reports creates a barrier for general public use.

By focusing on building collaborative partnerships and adopting an ethos of resource sharing, the Institute hopes to plant the seeds of environmental education, community development and



sustainable practice in places like South Africa and New York City. Currently, the Institute is collaborating with the Rural Women's Movement (RWM), an activist organization focusing on land reform and economic development in South Africa.

In this partnership, the Institute develops environmental leadership training for women and HIV/AIDS orphans. "These two groups are highly underrepresented, particularly in the context of tribal governance in rural areas," DePorte said. "These are also amongst the most vulnerable populations, particularly when dealing with climate change vulnerability, water scarcity, disease and access to natural resources for survival, let alone income generation." In workshops, the Institute focuses on developing the linkages between local environmental issues (particularly water, waste and climate) and RWM's existing programs on women's land rights and economic development.

DePorte represented RWM at a recent water and energy conference. The Institute recognized that RWM doesn't have experience in this sector, so they took the event as an opportunity to discuss the connection between these issues and the work that RWM was already doing. Additionally, the Institute has a training scheduled for January to work with ten women representing rural communities in South Africa to develop interview and story-documenting skills. "This will help the women to monitor the needs and impacts of RWM programs in their community," DePorte explained.

What makes the Human Impacts Institute unique is their resourceful way of bringing together university students and grassroots activists, and their open-source policy, making their curriculum and research data available free of charge. These methods speak to a need for sustainable forms of knowledge-transmission to help foster new ideas and practices, from the ground up.

Photo credit: Human Impacts Institute.