

# Earth Rights Institute Living Lab *Journal*

**“Gaining Sustainability in Guatemala”** by Zachary Towne-Smith

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María’s laugh is infectious. In Kaqchikel I can’t quite catch the innuendo, but giggles erupt among all the native San Marquenses. She has been involved in entrepreneurial projects of local and aid-based origin for decades. Thanks to her and her relationships, we were able to assemble this diverse group of local and international leaders. In our weekly meetings we are designing innovative solutions to live better and more sustainably.

This Earth Rights Institute Living Lab program ([www.erilivinglab.com](http://www.erilivinglab.com)) continues to evolve as it empowers local communities and re-conceptualizes the role and meaning of “experts” in the search for sustainable solutions.

Together we are engaging in Holistic Action Planning for Innovation (HAPI), a methodology created by the Guatemalan association Imagitlán, that combines tools from creative problem solving, human centered design, project management, and popular education. By embarking upon this journey as a group, we are seeking to catalyze systemic change as we practice to become creative and informed leaders in the sustainable development movement. Our influence will be felt from the local to the global scale, revolutionizing development processes from the ground up, and from the top down.

This Living Lab is happening on benches and long tables strung along the veranda of the Konojel Community Nutrition Center. The view of Lake Atitlán across the street has been a steely gray reflection of the cloud scarves of the 3 brother volcanoes. Without so much sun, it allows a more fluid atmosphere, a nice way of encapsulating and cushioning the creative risks





we've been sharing this month, for four hours every week. We've been lucky the rain hasn't spattered the tin roof too much during the sessions. When it does, it drowns out all of our conversations and translations in English, Spanish, and the Maya language Kaqchikel spoken by most locals here in San Marcos la Laguna.

María worked with organizations Konojel and JUSTA ([www.justacollective.org](http://www.justacollective.org)) to convene this group, ensuring that the table would represent as many different perspectives as possible. The twelve regular attendees include young women and men seeking entrepreneurial opportunities, local political leaders, international residents working on community development and appropriate technologies, spiritual

guides, and elderly experts in local agriculture and history.

In this relational model of sustainable development we seek to remedy the errors of past attempts to develop communities. We begin with relationships of mutual respect and collaboration. Then we let the local leaders, incorporating the perspectives and ideas of committed and knowledgeable outsiders, determine what needs their community is facing, and how they want to make use of available opportunities to resolve them. Once trust was established this methodology has proven to be hugely productive.

After five sessions—the results have been impressive, though they are still largely qualitative.

Where once the younger women were hesitant to share, they have now become integral elements of the process (due in part to their sharp wit and ready smiles). Isabel is a young woman who shared early on that she had no dreams as a child. As we explore the context and causes of the lack of educational opportunities, she tells us that this is the first time she's thought about her family's problems in the larger context of the community.





In our most recent session Juan, an elder who works to share his agricultural expertise with youth, helped us understand the historical context of San Marcos. He had some important insights on why development was delayed in this isolated town, and how the residents began to lose their land after the constitution of 1986 went into effect. He also shared how difficult it was to start the local middle school, and how it was nearly empty for the first few years,

though now it bursts at the seams. This is just a sampling of all the stories that shed light on the reasons behind all the divisions in the community.

As we looked over all this information scrawled across newsprint fraying at the seams, we once again asked ourselves questions:

- Is the scarcity of practical learning experiences at the root of our problems, or does it go deeper?
- Why is there so little demand for services in the community?
- Why is San Marcos so divided?
- How can we organize ourselves to generate jobs that are accessible and sustainable?



Through much considered deliberation we decided to create new opportunities for youth and women to learn culturally and environmentally appropriate trades. Although the solution has yet to be created, the group has developed success criteria, which can be translated into indicators once the action plan is put in place.

It remains unclear how María and this small but diverse group of leaders will find answers. Maybe they will put the industrial size solar dehydrator to work; or sell rocket stove installations on credit; or build a cooperative library of skill, knowledge, and tool exchange.

The young women run off together into the kitchen to heat up our snack donated by the Municipality. They chat and laugh, sprinkling merriment as they stir the Incaparina (a soy-based atoll). Today is Saturday, a light day compared to the 60 lunches they prepare, serve, and clean up after every day during the week.

Their determination to be a part of positive change in their community is clear as they continue to show up, day after day, with no monetary compensation. For the first time in their lives they are dreaming, and analyzing, and imagining something more. They are committed to implementing solutions that will impact these difficult issues, and improve their quality of life. The final 4 hour session will use lunar (imaginative) and solar (critical) thinking to:

- Crystalize their motivations
- Trace a critical route to achieving their dream
- Develop and assign dated action steps about how to get there

You can find out how this process turns out and learn more about Earth Rights Institute Living Lab by taking our online course—free for the initial trial period. We look forward to seeing you there!

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