


Territorial Development Series



The Evolution of Action Research for Territorial Development

Nurturing an intergenerational
and multicultural environment

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La evolución de la Investigación Acción
para el Desarrollo Territorial:
nutriendo un entorno intergeneracional
y multicultural

The Evolution of Action Research for Territorial Development: Nurturing an intergenerational and multicultural environment

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Miren Estensoro García

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Chapter 4

Being a facilitator of facilitators: capabilities of action researchers for systemic transformation among urban policymakers

*Miren Estensoro García*¹

Abstract

Sustainable urban transition requires new governance in urban policymaking, as well as new capabilities for urban policymakers to construct these new modes of governance. The case of Bilbao Next Lab shows that systemic Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD), which involves different levels of hierarchy of policymakers in the same city council, helps start the organizational transformation processes that are necessary to fulfil the *facilitative policymaker* role. This chapter focuses on examining the specific capabilities of researchers that facilitate the individual and collective capacity-building processes of urban policymakers. Moreover, it contributes to Costamagna and Larrea's (2018) definition of the individual capabilities of facilitative actors. Additionally, it contributes to the development of a systemic approach within ARTD and makes explicit ARTD's contribution to urban sustainable transitions.

Resumen

Ser facilitador de facilitadores: capacidades de las personas investigadoras para la transformación sistémica entre las personas hacedoras de políticas urbanas

La transición urbana sostenible requiere una nueva gobernanza en la elaboración de políticas urbanas, así como nuevas capacidades de las personas hacedoras de política para construir estas nuevas gobernanzas. El caso de Bilbao Next Lab muestra que la Investigación en Acción para el Desarrollo Territorial (IADT) sistémica que implica a diferentes personas de diferentes niveles jerárquicos del mismo ayuntamiento, ayuda a iniciar los procesos de transformación organizativa necesarios para que las personas hacedoras de política puedan cumplir con su rol de actores facilitadores. Este capítulo se centra en las capacidades específicas de los investigadores que facilitan estos procesos de desarrollo de capacidades. Además, contribuye a la definición de capacidades individuales de los actores facilitado-

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res de Costamagna y Larrea (2018). Asimismo, el capítulo permite seguir desarrollando la aproximación sistémica de la IADT y hace explícita la contribución de esta a las transiciones urbanas sostenibles.

Laburpena

Erraztaileen erraztaile izatea: ekintza-ikertzaileen gaitasunak hiri-politiketako arduradunen eraldaketa sistemikorako

Hiri-trantsizio jasagarriak gobernantza berri bat eskatzen du hiri-politikak egiteko orduan. Baita politika egiten duten pertsonak gobernantza berri horiek eraikitze gaitasunak izatea. Bilbao Next Laben kasuak erakusten duenez, udal bereko maila hierarkiko desberdinetako pertsonak inplikatzeko dituen Lurralde Garapenerako Ekintzako Ikerketak (LGEI), lagundu egiten du politika egiten duten pertsonak erraztaile izateko beharrezkoak diren antolamendu-eraldaketa. Kapitulu honetan, politika egiten duten pertsonen gaitasunak garatzeko prozesu horiek errazten dituzten ikertzaileen gaitasun espezifikoak aztertzen dira. Costamagna eta Larrearen (2018) aktore erraztaileen gaitasun indibidualen definizioa garatzen laguntzen du honek. Halaber, kapituluak LGEIren hurbilketa sistemikoa garatzen jarraitzeko aukera ematen du, eta horrek hiri-trantsizio jasagarriari egiten dien ekarpena esplizituki jasotzen du.

Being a facilitator of facilitators: capabilities of action researchers for systemic transformation among urban policymakers

1. Introduction

Urban challenges arising from major global transitions require dealing with complexity, as well as co-creation processes for systemic learning and transformation among territorial actors (Swilling & Hajer, 2017; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2016; Elmqvist *et al.*, 2019). New multilevel and multi-actor urban governance modes are needed as urban policymakers face the challenge of facilitating complex policymaking processes (Estensoro, 2020). But how can action research help urban policymakers with this challenge?

Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) proposes an individual and collective capacity-building approach as an emerging strategy for dealing with the complexities of territorial and urban development (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014; Costamagna & Larrea, 2018; Larrea, 2019). One of the main arguments in this study is that systemic action research (Burns, 2007; Larrea, 2019) increases the transformative potential of these capacity-building processes by running parallel but interconnected processes that incorporate the different levels of the hierarchy of policymakers from the same city council.

I analyse here four action research processes conducted within Bilbao Next Lab (BNL), a policy laboratory created in 2013 that addresses inclusive and sustainable competitiveness in Bilbao through action research. A team of researchers facilitated the four processes, and I coordinated them all. Different urban policymakers were involved in each process: the mayors of the three Basque capitals (Bilbao, Donostia and Vitoria-Gasteiz), councillors of Bilbao's City Council and the technical staff of Bilbao's economic development agency (Bilbao Ekintza). In addition to the specific objectives of each process, all of them had the common goal of developing the facilitation skills of policymakers for new modes of governance.

The research shows that a systemic approach to facilitating these four ARTD processes enabled the Bilbao City Council to start a systemic transformation process regarding the role of policymakers. However, this also called for specific capabilities from facilitative researchers. When Burns (2007) describes systemic action researchers acting as *brokers* to connect parallel but related processes, he refers to specific capabilities of action researchers. The focus of this chapter's discussion is on describing these capabilities and further exploring the individual capabilities of facilitative actors as defined by Costamagna and Larrea (2018).

In the chapter I wrote for *Roots and Wings I* (Estensoro, 2020), I analysed the specificities of doing AR in cities, taking into account the multi-scalar reality of the territory and also the case of BNL. In that chapter, I pointed out that one of the challenges of BNL is to develop urban policymakers' facilitation capabilities. This challenge is the focus of my analysis in the present chapter.

As a researcher, I take the position of an outsider action researcher doing second-person action research. The data gathered for the research comes from research notes, documents (reports, proposals, PowerPoint presentations, minutes) prepared for workshops with policymakers, and from documents systematising the process.

The remainder of the chapter is organised as follows. In the following section, based on a literature review, I argue that the role of policymakers in addressing sustainable urban transition needs to be reformulated. A conceptual section on this new role follows, and then a systemic approach to action research is presented. Then, the four action research processes are described and a discussion is provided. The final section concludes with final reflections and further research possibilities. The writing is in the first person. When referring to my ex-

perience, I use the first-person singular, and when referring to the action research team involved in the case, I use the first-person plural.

2. New governance for urban sustainability challenges

A global trend towards urbanisation is also noticeable in Europe. Although small and medium-sized cities concentrate most of the population, climate change and unsustainable energy consumption are directly linked to an increase in urban populations (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022). However, this troubling reality implies a greater potential for carrying out interventions that enable sustainable and green development.

As shown in Estensoro (2020), urban agglomeration economies involve a wide range of territorial actors (governments, companies, entrepreneurs, universities, etc.), which increases the transformation capacity of urban areas compared to non-urban territories. Due to their proximity to actors, including citizens, cities have the potential to become key actors in managing global transitions, such as the green transition. Additionally, most of these actors, who are based in cities or have their institutional headquarters there, have objectives and an area of influence that extends beyond city limits. As a result, they also have an increased capacity to influence the development trajectory of broader territories and even foster connections with global networks that support urban transformation. The recognition that more attention needs to be paid to urban environments in order to carry out transition processes requires, however, a greater focus on current governance models.

We do not view governance as a mere instrument but rather as a new way of *governing* sustainable transition processes through novel relationship models (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2016). *Sustainable urban transition* is defined as the ability of multiple actors to launch, accelerate, and facilitate transformative processes to create solutions that directly and effectively address urban sustainability challenges at the city level (Elmqvist *et al.*, 2019). According to Swilling and Hajer (2017), *entrepreneurial urban governance* is the key to managing sustainable urban transition processes. This governance approach considers establishing priorities and experimenting through collective and systemic learning. So, in addition to co-constructing solutions, entrepreneurial urban governance models must also create a new culture of relationships among the actors involved to increase their capacity to implement sustainable urban transition processes. These are processes in which actors' roles are negotiated and renegotiated (Wittmayer, Avelino, van Steenberg, & Loorbach, 2017). Challenges vary and emerge continuously, and therefore, cities must be able to transform their roles and the resulting relationship models in an adaptive way.

Moreover, it is important to recognise that achieving sustainable urban transition requires adhering to a multilevel approach in territorial sustainability strategies (Estensoro & Larrea, 2016; Larrea, Estensoro, & Pertoldi, 2019; Estensoro, 2020). Place-based (Barca, 2009) and subsidiarity approaches to multilevel governance are key instruments for increasing the transformative potential of urban governance modes. This is done by providing urban governance with territorial frameworks that enable cities to increase their capability to manage global transitions. However, these changes also mean added complexity.

Consequently, there are several barriers to successfully developing *transitional governance*. One of them is that experimental or transitional governance requires breaking with closed institutional cultures and opening up to new political models through dialogue and the participation of various actors. The organisational culture itself of urban governments is one possible obstacle (Kanellou, Radošević, & Tsekouras, 2019; Fastenrath & Coenen, 2021), and this paper focuses on this aspect. Developing the capability of city government teams to facilitate these evolving governance models represents a challenge (Estensoro & Larrea, 2023).

3. Urban facilitative policymakers

The facilitator concept defined by Costamagna and Larrea (2018) has inspired the facilitative policymaker figure that is used in this study. Facilitative policymakers may have two profiles: facilitative politicians and facilitative managers. The first group, according to Costamagna and Larrea (2018, p. 72), consists of politicians who interpret *their position as one which entails, in addition to making their own decisions regarding policies, constructing processes of dialogue with the other territorial actors, in which they can co-generate solutions to the territory's problems*. Facilitative managers are those who, as managers of an organisation (e.g., government officials or managers of public agencies), have territorial development as the goal of their organisation and thus *create the conditions that enable this and [also create] other organisations in the territory to reflect, to decide and to take action*.

City government teams and policymakers who need to facilitate multi-actor and multilevel governance processes for sustainable urban transitions need to engage in systemic learning processes, the outcome of which is often difficult to predict (Swilling & Hajer, 2017). Consequently, acting as facilitators in these processes is one of the biggest challenges for policymakers; it is not enough for them to merely learn about facilitation. Additionally, they must foster learning opportunities for urban and territorial actors. Following Costamagna and Larrea's definition, actors learn through reflection, decision-making, and action. To meet this challenge, the facilitator is someone who, at a given point in the territorial/urban development process, takes on the task of creating the conditions that will enable actors to reflect, decide, and act (Costamagna & Larrea, 2018).

4. Systemic action research as a strategy for systemic transformation

Urban policymakers' transformation into facilitative policymakers requires a systemic transformation within urban public entities such as city councils. As noted before, favourable organizational and institutional conditions are necessary. The case of BNL that I present in section 5 shows that when facilitated in a systemic way, the participation of different profiles of policymakers from the same city council involved in different capacity-building processes increases the potential for collective capacity building and systemic transformation. If facilitated through action research, this potential for systemic transformation calls for a coherent systemic approach to action research too. It is about a parallel development of connected change processes facilitated through action research (Burns, 2007). As Larrea (2019, p. 7) states, this means that *the challenge here is how to keep the parallel strands linked, so they do not evolve into a summing-up of projects*.

Maintaining parallel yet connected processes calls for knowledge of the complex dynamics of the whole system. Indeed, facilitative researchers contribute to the process by understanding the complexity of the system and bringing this perspective into the dialogue with the other participants (Larrea, 2019). According to Burns (2007, p. 93), *a key role for an action research facilitator is to have a view of the whole, 'to broker these connections,' and to support the development of emergent inquiries*. This leads to the following research question: What specific capabilities are required for the *brokering* role played by facilitative researchers? This research aims to identify the specific capabilities that researchers undertaking systemic AR need to facilitate systemic change processes in which policymakers develop capabilities to act as facilitators of entrepreneurial urban governance.

To answer the research question, I consider the individual capabilities of facilitative actors defined by Costamagna and Larrea (2018) as the central analytical framework for the analysis. These authors refer to the following facilitation capabilities: (i) the capability of rallying others,

(ii) the capability of reading the process, (iii) the capability of inducing others to reflect on the process, and (iv) the capability of supporting the reflection-action-reflection transition.

5. Bilbao Next Lab: four parallel and connected processes

The urban policy laboratory known as BNL was established in 2013 to address Bilbao's inclusive and sustainable competitiveness. Action research is the methodological approach used in this lab (Estensoro, 2020). Various challenges have been addressed in the lab, but there is one that has been recurrent every year: the limited capacity of the city council team to fulfil their role as facilitators of multi-actor and multilevel governance.

Thus, a common goal of the four action research processes on which this analysis focuses was to strengthen urban policymakers' capacity to act as facilitators. As coordinator of the research team at BNL, I was involved in all the processes. Different researchers participated in the different action research processes, but I was the one coordinating each team, thereby getting an overall view of the processes. Table 4.1 shows the four processes in chronological order and lists the participants, their specific facilitation capabilities, the time period, and the number of action research workshops related to each process.

This section describes each process, the reasons for creating the space, and the issues addressed. It also shows the connection between the spaces and specifies the knowledge that made those connections possible.

The different spaces described are monitored by the Tractor Group. This group meets once a month and is made up of representatives from the Bilbao Ekintza Management Team (councillor and CEO) and Orkestra researchers. BNL's main goals are established in this space, and the other spaces are monitored as well to ensure a global vision.

Strategic Sectors (SS space)

The goal of developing facilitative capabilities for urban policymakers was first established in the action research space involving the Strategic Sectors area of Bilbao Ekintza. The team's main policy area is promoting the sectoral specialisation of Bilbao's economy. Since 2018, a central aspect of this team's work strategy has been creating and facilitating multi-agent spaces for the co-design of strategies, projects, and actions. Orkestra's action research workshops have focused on developing the team's skills to fulfil this role. To achieve this, various concepts and approaches have been employed, including *entrepreneurial discovery processes*, which are linked to the smart specialisation strategies promoted by the European Commission (Estensoro & Larrea, 2023), as well as *living labs*, which involve citizens in innovation projects.

The knowledge co-generated in the SS space was integrated into the other spaces described later. For example, the work carried out using the living lab approach to experiment with citizen participation served as the basis for working on this aspect within the Mayors and Councillors (MC) space discussed further below.

Talent and Employment (TE space)

At the beginning of 2019, Bilbao Ekintza's Talent and Employment team was tasked with a project that would allow the co-design of employment and talent policies in response to the skills mismatch in the digital sector. Since employment and talent policies are primarily the responsibility of the Basque regional government, ensuring multilevel coordination was

a key dimension of the project. The action research process was focused on addressing the challenge of policymakers' lack of expertise in the area of skills mismatches and on answering the need to facilitate multilevel coordination.

In this case, the research team, together with Bilbao Ekintza, also took on the role of facilitation and, therefore, contacted the actors and participated in the workshops directly with them. There was also a space for the researchers and the agency's technical team to reflect on the challenges of undertaking such co-facilitation and to make decisions about the facilitation actions that should be undertaken by both the agency and the research team. The most valuable knowledge for the other action research spaces was how multilevel governance and facilitation of the respective governance spaces were accomplished. Moreover, the task of establishing a distinction between the facilitator roles of Bilbao Ekintza and the researchers was valuable for the rest of the processes.

Mayor and Councillors (MC space)

Bilbao's competitiveness strategy extends beyond the purview of the city council's economic development area. This action research process aimed to create a shared vision of Bilbao's competitiveness strategy among the Mayor's Office and city councillors. In the MC space, the goal of becoming an intergenerational city was identified as the main goal for achieving sustainable development. The main reason for promoting this city model was to address the severe demographic and ageing issues the city is facing. However, the complexity behind this challenge made it necessary to incorporate transversal urban policy management. Furthermore, to promote an intergenerational city, it was proposed that citizen participation be implemented as a priority dimension in transversally facilitated tractor projects. Consequently, in addition to the shared vision mentioned above, this action research space focused on developing facilitation capabilities in two specific areas: collaboration among municipal areas and facilitating citizen participation.

Likewise, developing facilitation capabilities among the most senior policymakers in Bilbao's City Council meant putting value on the work carried out with the technical team. The objective of becoming facilitative policymakers had to be backed by a change in the organisational culture of the city council, and if the Mayor supported this, all the better. In this sense, this space served as a legitimiser.

City Councils of the three Basque capital cities (CC space)

The main reason for promoting a new model of relationship among the city councils of the three Basque capitals (Bilbao, Donostia and Vitoria-Gasteiz) was their difficulty in managing urban development challenges together. The CC space enabled them to work together to identify common challenges and design a governance model that would facilitate collaboration to address those shared challenges. Furthermore, the process led to the formulation of collaborative projects that addressed common challenges involving different territorial actors. At the time of this chapter's writing, the implementation of these projects was still pending, however, their design brought with it new opportunities for collaboration among the urban policymakers involved.

On the one hand, this space had to make it easier for the three city councils to collaborate and support each other while each city underwent its own transformation process. On the other hand, multi-agent spaces would have to be facilitated in each city to address the challenges of each collaborative project. One of the main challenges when forming the pro-

ject teams and prioritising the challenges of the collaborative projects was ensuring multi-level coordination with the regional government strategies. The lessons learnt from facilitating multilevel coordination, which were taught in the TE space, were central to addressing this challenge. Likewise, seeking complementarity among the three cities was based on the work carried out in the MC space.

Table 4.1. Action research spaces in Bilbao Next Lab

AR space	Policymakers	Facilitation capabilities (starting to be) developed by AR	AR time period	Number of AR workshops
Strategic Sectors (SS)	The technical team of the Strategic Sectors area of Bilbao Ekintza	Facilitation of entrepreneurial discovery processes and living labs in specific sectors.	EDP: Jan 2018-Feb 2019 Living Lab: Jan-Oct 2021	EDP: 8 Living labs: 6
Talent and Employment (TE)	The technical staff of the Talent and Employment area of Bilbao Ekintza	(Co-)Facilitation of multilevel and multi-agent spaces for the co-design of digital skill policies, mainly through vocational training.	Jan 2019-Jul 2022	Monthly Orkestra and policymakers' meetings: Jan 2019-Jul 2022 Co-facilitated workshops with actors: 2019: 3 2020: 2 2021: 5 2022: 3
Mayor and City Councillors (MC)	Mayor of Bilbao City Council City Councillors of Bilbao City Council	Facilitation of transversal and participative projects to address challenges linked to the objective of promoting an intergenerational city (thus addressing the demographic challenge), through: (1) Co-definition of a new organizational model (2) Co-definition of transversal and participative project proposals.	Jun 2021-Jun 2022	3
Basque City Councils (CC)	Mayors (3) from Bilbao, Donostia and Vitoria-Gasteiz City Councils Policymakers from the mayors' offices (1 from each)	Facilitation of collaboration with the other two cities to address common urban challenges, through (1) the definition of governance for collaboration, and (2) the co-definition of collaboration project proposals.	Oct 2021-Jul 2022	6

6. Discussion of the case

In this section, I refer to a set of capabilities that shed light on the research question posed earlier. First, I share critical incidents that occurred during various action research processes within BNL. The lessons learnt from those incidents, now conceptualised, have contributed to further developing Costamagna and Larrea's (2018) definition of individual facilitation capabilities.

6.1. *The capability of making political knowledge explicit and integrating it*

It is true that we need the City Council to also have a story of competitiveness, and I insist on the need to have a space for reflection in which the Mayor is also present. (Councillor, 26.02.2021)

The quote is from the councillor for Economic Development, Employment and Commerce, who recognised the need to activate the MC space during a Tractor Group meeting. As previously pointed out, the Tractor Group serves as the main decision-making space and tracks the activities of other action research processes. The councillor is the member of the Tractor Group with the authority to make this decision. After several months, it was the first time that he took a step forward and proposed to the mayor to activate the new action research space together with the rest of the city councillors. When he accepted, I understood that he had considered that the conditions for creating the space existed at that moment and not before.

As the process in the MC space progressed, the facilitation provided by the councillor had to be adjusted:

All participants have stressed the importance of collaborating across areas, but this matter depends on the major. He is the only one who can decide. We [meaning the Tractor Group] must think about how to do this and come up with a proposal so that this idea becomes a reality... and we need to act quickly because the upcoming elections are getting closer. (Councillor, 06.03.2021)

This decision involved preparing a document drawn up by the research team and discussing and agreeing upon it with the Tractor Group. The document contained a methodological proposal for the development of a transversal organisational model in the city council, which the councillor would later present to the mayor.

As process facilitators, it is our responsibility to identify when it is necessary and possible to get policymakers to make decisions. A key element of this is knowing as much as possible about the political circumstances policymakers are dealing with at any given time. This is especially important when working with elected policymakers or politicians. Our job is to make their experiential knowledge or knowledge about the political context explicit and integrate it into the action research process.

Politicians constantly weigh the political costs of their decisions as well as the potential benefits or negative impacts. The pressures of the proximity of the elections, the uncertainty about whether they will be part of the teams running for election, the competition between elected officials, the need to stand out through achievements, or the responsibility to use budgets efficiently are situations that influence these political conditions. Moreover, political conditions evolve and may change within the same legislature.

Hence, it seems that 'political knowledge' would help manage the reflection-action-reflection transition described by Costamagna and Larrea (2018). According to them,

supporting the reflection-action-reflection transition involves finding a delicate balance that both alleviates the pressure on actors to take action and allows them to overcome too much reflection. When facilitating processes with politicians, their experience-based knowledge of the political context must be considered in the discussion. It allows us to gauge the amount of pressure we can exert on the reflection-action-reflection transition. This knowledge does not always appear explicitly, and for politicians to be able to share it, appropriate spaces for dialogue based on trust between researchers and politicians are needed.

6.2. *The capability of rallying policymakers through hierarchy*

The president of Orkestra and the mayor of Bilbao met for lunch on the 4th of March 2021. In his conversation with the mayor, the president addressed two issues. On the one hand, he supported the councillor's proposal to create the MC space. On the other hand, Orkestra wanted to invite the mayor to join the CC space. After this lunch, they continued to meet, and the councillor also attended some of these meetings. The AR process with city councillors started on the 29th of June 2021, and the first workshop with the three mayors took place on the 4th of October 2021. It was the president of Orkestra who opened the workshops together with the mayors of the three Basque capital cities.

ARTD processes enable the democratisation of policymaking processes (Oliva, 2022), and leadership and hierarchies become blurred when dealing with the complexity of shared challenges faced by the actors involved in these processes (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014; Costamagna & Larrea, 2018). However, this does not mean there is no hierarchy among policymakers or researchers. In fact, the case of BNL shows that the 'smart' use of individual hierarchies can help build the collective dimension of action research processes. The president's facilitation actions enabled action research processes to take place. To achieve this, the research team had to be placed on an equal footing with the highest level in the hierarchy of city councils, the mayors.

The case shows how connections with policymakers in the highest positions are very frequently made based on the hierarchical position of researchers. Consequently, the use of hierarchy can help build the necessary trust between facilitative researchers and actors, and it can be a key factor in developing the capability of rallying actors, as described by Costamagna and Larrea (2018). As noted by these authors, facilitative actors possess the capability to rally territorial development actors, and the relationships (including trust) that facilitators are able to build with policymakers over time are key to being able to use this capability.

6.3. *The capability of considering personal and emotional conditions*

I felt a little let down when you said it was time for me to take on the facilitation of the meetings with actors on my own... I would feel more at ease if you said you'll continue supporting us, albeit with less intensity... (Policymaker from the Talent and Employment area, 06.10.2021)

Now that I have this responsibility, we need to establish a working dynamic between Bilbao Ekintza and Orkestra that takes my time into account. Instead of holding weekly meetings with less focus, I would rather hold meetings every two weeks with more commitment. (Policymaker from the Tractor Group, 21.02.2022)

These are quotes from two policymakers participating in the SS and TE spaces. In both spaces and corresponding processes, there was a time when policymakers had to take over facilitation without the support of the researchers as co-facilitators. This meant that even though the spaces for reflection-action with Orkestra continued to exist, policymakers had to take on the role of facilitators in spaces with actors without our presence. In subsequent coordination meetings between the research team and Bilbao Ekintza, I invited both policymakers to reflect on what caused their feelings of 'loneliness,' and we agreed on actions to overcome them. I used different systematisation documents (which included their own quotes) to reflect on what had happened during previous meetings and help them look at reality objectively.

There is a key lesson to be drawn from this: if policymakers have to take over the facilitation role and commit and develop feelings of belonging to the capacity-building process, the facilitative researcher must not only consider the availability of time or financial resources, but also assess the situation and guarantee the necessary emotional conditions. Once the actors (in our case, policymakers from Bilbao Ekintza) have been mobilised, the transformative potential of action research depends heavily on their feeling of belonging towards the capacity-building process and, above all, to the AR process. Consequently, facilitative researchers must pay careful attention to policymakers' capabilities and sensitivity and 'pamper' them to achieve this.

Costamagna and Larrea (2018, p. 96) refer to the capability of *inducing others to reflect on the process* [so that] *what actors read in the process may coincide with what the facilitator reads*. The dialogue with policymakers during workshops and coordination meetings was a successful channel for inducing them to reflect personally and empathetically on the process.

6.4. *The capability to establish and encourage connections among parallel processes*

The need and opportunity for making a connection was made explicit by a policymaker participating in the Tractor Group:

It is impossible to define project proposals with councillors and the mayor from scratch... the efforts to define priorities together with territorial actors must be considered... I think that we must share these priorities with them and make sure we are taking advantage of the synergies among the different processes. (Policymaker from Bilbao Ekintza, 03.06.2022)

This other quote from the councillor participating in the Tractor Group, who also participated in the CC space, shows a clear connection:

I have learnt from you [referring to Orkestra] what it means to be a facilitative policymaker... I agree with Orkestra that we should take on this role also in the collaboration projects among the three cities. (Policymaker from the Bilbao City Council, 10.05.2022)

Some of the connections among the four action research processes have been described in Section 5. However, these two quotes are examples of two types of connections that favour a systemic approach. The first one is incorporating the decisions or advances made in one process into other processes. For example, the sectoral specialisation areas prioritised in the processes facilitated by the technical team of Bilbao Ekintza were considered in the project proposals co-defined within the MC space. The second quote shows

another type of possible connection: applying knowledge co-generated and corresponding new capacities in one process to other processes. The lessons learnt in the SS space about how to support policymakers to take on the role of facilitators were shared in the TE space. As a result, the *process knowledge* that facilitative researchers 'accumulate' supports the systemic transformation of the role of policymakers. Establishing these two types of connections among the different action research processes within the BNL was necessary to facilitate the systemic transformation of the role of policymakers who had to take on a facilitative role.

Establishing connections is a key issue for *reading the process*, one of the capabilities of facilitative actors according to Costamagna and Larrea (2018). As described by these authors, the capability to read the process is about knowing how to connect situations and events that may seem independent of each other and being able to make decisions to continue facilitating the process. The case shows that, if the aim is to facilitate a systemic transformation, two types of connections are valuable and necessary. Encouraging them and creating the conditions for them to be recognised and making them explicit would be a key issue.

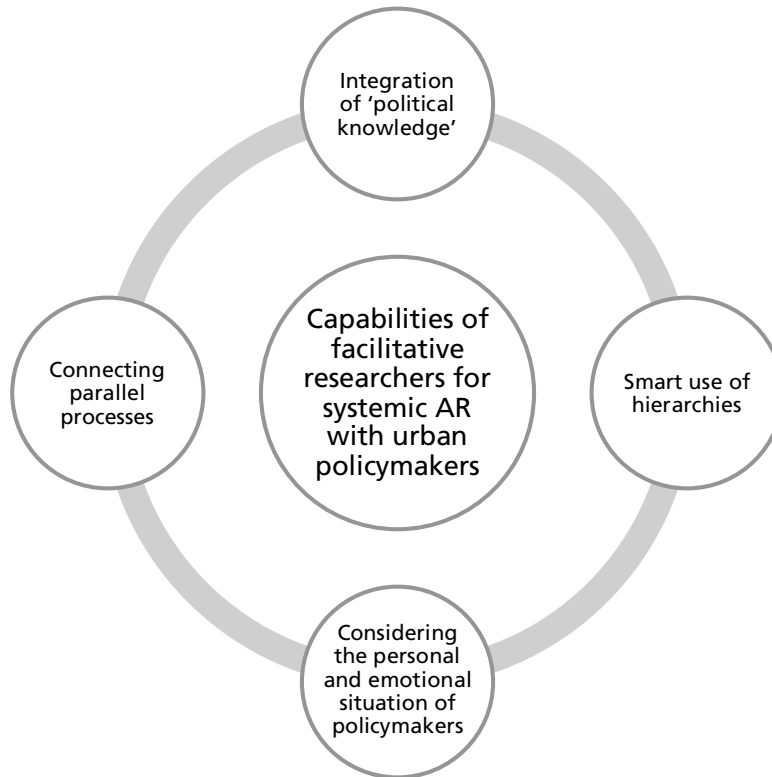
7. Final reflections and further research

Urban policymakers should facilitate the construction of *entrepreneurial governance* for sustainable urban transition (Swilling & Hajer, 2017). This chapter focuses on the role of action research and on the capabilities of facilitative researchers who help develop the facilitative capabilities of urban policymakers through systemic action research. In addition to contributing to the systemic approach, this chapter highlights how ARTD can help addressing urban transitions such as the green one and discusses the role of cities and urban policymakers in them.

The case analysis demonstrates that systemic action research is appropriate for transforming the role of urban government entities, such as city councils. The participation of policymakers with different profiles from the same city council, involved in different capacity-building processes, but all facilitated in a systemic way, boosts collective capacity building and systemic transformation. However, it should be noted that the action research approach must incorporate a systemic dimension too: systemic change requires a systemic way of doing action research that facilitates the systemic capacity building of policymakers.

In this sense, this study contributes to a better understanding of the capabilities required for facilitative researchers working with systemic action research (*brokers*, according to Burns, 2007). This contribution further strengthens Costamagna and Larrea's (2018) definition of facilitative actors' capabilities and reinforces the systemic view of ARTD. The integration of 'political knowledge,' the smart use of hierarchies, as well as the consideration of the personal and emotional situation of policymakers and the different types of connections between parallel processes, are key lessons for fulfilling the role of the facilitative researcher (see figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Facilitative researchers' capabilities for systemic AR with urban policymakers



Source: Author's elaboration.

But how do facilitative researchers develop these own capabilities? Obviously, action research processes are the primary context for developing facilitation capabilities efficiently. However, supporting the internal capacity building of researchers as well as securing resources for the production of academic outputs are also of key importance for developing our capabilities. In fact, the combination of all these elements may prove to be the most effective way.

Future studies could consider analysing additional action research cases involving urban policymakers to validate the findings presented in this chapter and explore other conditions that may help develop facilitation capabilities.

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