



# Action Research for the Simultaneous Transformation of Governments and their Territorial Governance

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## Abstract

Given the complex eco-social challenges humanity faces, deep transformations in policy and politics are needed to support necessary transitions. A key aspect is reshaping how governments interact with territorial actors when addressing complex challenges—an outward change that also requires inward transformation within governments. While action research (AR) offers frameworks for organisational change (e.g., Coghlan and Brannick 2001; Greenwood and Levin 2007), the Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) approach focuses on transforming inter-organisational relationships within a territory. However, all these contributions often overlook the need to integrate both inward and outward transformations. This paper draws on the case of *Bilbao Next Lab*—a policy laboratory to foster urban competitiveness through ARTD—to contribute to the AR literature and propose a new framework for simultaneously addressing government and territorial transformation. The analysis is focused on a year-long process involving seven reflection–action cycles within two dialogue spaces with policymakers from *Bilbao Ekintza*, the economic development agency of Bilbao City Council. These spaces involved both technical staff and senior policymakers. The findings highlight the importance of addressing both territorial and organisational complexity in action research processes aimed at fostering inward and outward transformations. More open, horizontal, and participatory forms of interaction within governments can promote the joint participation of members of higher and lower positions in collaborative governance spaces, thereby strengthening territorial praxis by bridging reflection and decision-making with action. Furthermore, when these different profiles engage in territorial spaces, the effectiveness of collaborative governance tends to increase.

**Keywords** Action research for territorial development · Governments · Facilitation · Organizational transformation

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## Introduction

Given the complex eco-social challenges that humanity faces, it is crucial that policy and politics undergo deep transformations to contribute to the required transitions.

Among other methodologies to address the transformation of governments, action research for territorial development (ARTD) is an approach to action research where researchers work with regional and local policymakers. It is not a theoretical or conceptual proposal applied in certain territories; rather, it is the result of systematising action research experiences and has thus been developed in an emergent manner, following the needs of stakeholders and researchers. In this paper, we present a new development that can make this approach better suited to respond to the difficulties faced by policymakers when addressing complex challenges.

The paper is based on an action research process that started in 2023 and is still ongoing, facilitated by two of the authors of this paper and action researchers in Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness working with policymakers of the City Council of Bilbao in the Basque Country (Spain). The goal of the process was to develop a collaborative governance for KIBS (Knowledge Intensive Business Services) involving several territorial actors. Once the process had been completed, these two facilitative action researchers worked together with the third author through five sessions to problematise their process. In these discussions, they concluded that while the ARTD cogeneration framework (see Fig. 1 in section 2.2.) had proven helpful in understanding the local government's relational work with (external) territorial actors to develop collaborative governance, it did not help to comprehend the transformation inside the government that these processes require.

The rationale in this paper is that the frameworks that action researchers adopt as referential when facilitating a process, either consciously or unconsciously, affect how the process is facilitated. Simultaneously, action researchers might generate context-specific processes that are inconsistent with their initial frameworks. This is an indicator that the framework did not consider all the nuances of the case and can be improved. By learning about those "inconsistencies" in the framework, more actionable frameworks can be provided. Likewise, we believe that working to create more actionable frameworks, based on the context-specific experience of the facilitative researchers, can contribute to improve action research processes in different contexts, transcending the local sphere in which this case is focused.

From this perspective, the research question that inspires the paper is the following: What features help facilitate the inner and outer transformation of governments through action research? We answer this question using an ARTD framework that is more comprehensive than its predecessors as it addresses both inward (inside the government) and outward (the government with other territorial actors) cogeneration and transformation. The action research literature already has frameworks that specifically focus on organisational transformation (Coghlan and Brannick 2001: 19; Greenwood and Levin 2007), and ARTD provides a cogeneration framework (see Fig. 1) for transforming the inter-organisational relations within a territory. In this context, this paper contributes to the action research literature in that it brings together the two perspectives, helping action researchers working with governments address transformations both within the government and in its territorial governance simultaneously.

To share the new framework, we first present the core concepts and frameworks that inspire the proposal. We then introduce the case, provide a thick description, problematise

the process, and finally, through its discussion, we suggest a new framework. We close the paper with some final reflections about the implications of improving theoretical frameworks departing from context specific processes.

## Relevant Concepts and Frameworks

This paper explores the intersection between two bodies of literature, one on collaborative governance and the other on action research for territorial development. Therefore, one of the contributions of this paper is the exploration of this intersection, which has some parallels with the intersection that Bartels and Wittmayer (2019) explore between policy analysis and action research.

To conceptually frame the paper we first present the concept of collaborative territorial governance, which is at the core of the case, and the literature that inspires it. After arguing that such inspiring literature has been developed through methodologies other than action research, we present, in a second subsection, action research for territorial development, drawing the intersection with collaborative governance. To close this section we provide specific definitions of several concepts later used in the discussion.

### Collaborative Territorial Governance

The term *Collaborative territorial governance* is used in this paper to refer to the spaces and procedures required by territorial actors to solve a territory's problems together. This term and definition are inspired on the work of a specific community of researchers working in the intersection of collaborative governance and action research for territorial development (Arrona et al. 2018; Arrona 2019; Arrona and Larrea 2022; Larrea et al. 2024).

As argued in Larrea et al. (2024), these authors have framed their contributions in the so-called shift from government to governance (Klijn and Koppenjan 2015), as they collaborate with policymakers to experiment with collective problem-solving strategies that could replace traditional and hierarchical forms of government. A relevant inspiration in that path has been the literature advocating for collaborative forms of policymaking and service delivery through a new relationship between governments, stakeholders, and citizens (Ansell and Gash 2008; Blomgren 2011; Emerson et al. 2012; Batory and Svensson 2019). The involvement of citizens and societal actors in governance and public policymaking is seen as a means to promote learning and innovation, coordinate the actions and resources of relevant actors, improve decision-making processes, and deepen democracy through increased participation and deliberation (Sørensen and Torfing 2021).

Some other relevant inspirations from collaborative governance literature that Larrea et al. (2024) introduce as relevant for the aforementioned intersection with action research are the following. One is 'conceptual pluralism' (Ansell 2019), as it has introduced the discussion between policymakers and researchers that there is no univocal understanding of collaborative governance and its main features. Another inspirational framework is provided by Batory and Svensson's (2019) five main dimensions in which approaches to collaborative governance differ (the participants, the leaders of the processes, inclusion, scope or durability and normative assumptions). The integrative typology by Emerson and Nabatchi (2015), focused on the importance of how collaborative governance is formed and initiated,

has also been influential. Specifically, their distinction between self-initiated, independently convened, and externally directed collaborative governance regimes. Finally, a key concept that has influenced the action research for territorial development conducted in the case is Sørensen and Torfing's (2017) distinction on the metagovernance of networks. Metagovernance refers to the role of primarily state actors in governing networks through deliberate facilitation of collaboration and the establishment of norms and rules that will facilitate such collaboration (Sørensen and Torfing 2009; Sørensen et al. 2015). One of the main influences regarding metagovernance is that of Bob Jessop, who defines multispatial metagovernance as "attempts to govern the government and governance of socio-spatial relations" (Jessop 2016, p. 8) thus connecting with the multilevel governance perspective of action research for territorial development (Larrea et al. 2019).

The authors that have inspired the approach to collaborative governance in this paper use a variety of methodologies, blending theoretical analysis with empirical case studies. Works by Sørensen and Torfing (2009, 2017) often combine conceptual frameworks with case study analysis, exploring, for instance how governance networks work or how metagovernance can guide collaborative processes. Their research is focused on improving the effectiveness and democratic nature of these networks through both theoretical insights and practical examples. Similarly, Ansell and Gash (2008) use case study analysis with a very robust comparative dimension to identify key dynamics in collaborative governance across different settings. Other studies, like those by Batory and Svensson (2019), employ systematic literature reviews to clarify the concept of collaborative governance, or, like Ansell (2019) develop conceptual analysis. Together, these works contribute both theoretical frameworks and practical insights into the dynamics of collaborative governance.

Although some of the previous authors write about collaborative knowledge generation, participation or problem solving, which are relevant features of action research, none of them openly embrace action research as their methodology. The core difference between these methodologies with action research is that the aim of action research is not to analyse, understand, describe, categorize or conceptualize collaborative governance, but directly transform it through the research process. To better share this differential feature, the next section focuses on the ARTD framework that shares the perspective of the transformation process, the cogeneration framework.

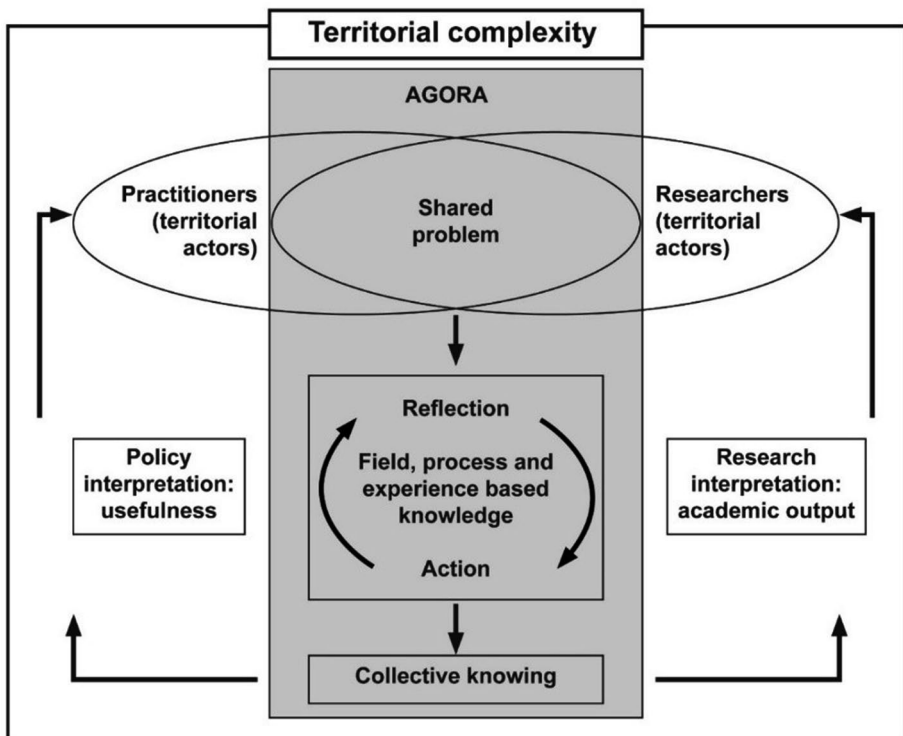
### **Process Conceptual Framework: the ARTD Cogeneration Framework**

The previous concepts related to collaborative governance can help policymakers make sense of the action research process and the elements we seek to transform through them. At the same time, facilitating these processes requires action researchers to have their own process frameworks, as we need frameworks that help us reflect on "how" we want to transform collaborative governance.

In this paper, the term *process conceptual frameworks* refers to frameworks that action researchers use to represent their action research processes. Process conceptual frameworks represent how action researchers enact the general principles of action research. These frameworks often represent relevant ideological/epistemological positions of the authors that clearly influence the process, and often relate to the approach, family, or tradition of action research that inspires the authors. For instance, action research approaches in the Global South (see Freire 1996) are more political than socio-technical approaches to action

research developed in the Global North (Pasmore 2001). Action research for territorial development, that inspires this paper, was initially defined as an attempt to move away from positivistic assumptions. The goal was for it to be a methodology for not merely the observation and analysis but also the realization of territorial development. In time it has incorporated features of interpretivism (participants construct objectified realities, such as new governance modes for territorial development) and of critical social sciences (introducing the ideological dimension to the research process) (Karlsen and Larrea 2021). This means that ARTD has the potential to transform collaborative governance but it has limitations in terms of theoretical analysis or comparative analysis if we compare it with the methodologies mentioned in the previous section.

Our key argument is that these frameworks are often used in the action research literature to explain the initial design of the action research process or to present the process described through the different stages. We problematise these uses, arguing that even though action research processes seldom correspond exactly to their intended design, few articles revisit the inspiring framework to reformulate it and offer a more nuanced version that may prove useful in specific situations. Nonetheless, we believe it is in the emergent nature of action research not only to transform the work of stakeholders but also of action researchers. We interpret that Figs. 3 and 4 presented in the discussion in this paper are revisions of Fig. 1



**Fig. 1** The cogeneration framework for action research for territorial development. Source: Karlsen and Larrea (2016)

that we make with the aim of critically upgrading our methodological frameworks through lessons learnt in this specific research process.

Though process frameworks are often inspired by well-known frameworks in the action research literature (Coghlan and Brannick 2001: 19; Greenwood and Levin 2007) in this case we depart from a more specific action research process framework, the cogeneration framework of action research for territorial development (ARTD) (Karlsen and Larrea 2016), which was proposed based on industrial democracy (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Gustavsen 1992) and is also clearly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (Freire 1996). It has been used in the Basque Country (Spain), the University of Agder (Norway), and Rafaela (Santa Fé, Argentina) since 2008 and this article proposes certain elements that could be added or modified in such a framework.

The core feature of this framework on which this paper builds is that it frames the action research process in the territory, addressing territorial complexity and proposing dialogue processes between territorial actors, including action researchers and other type of practitioners and organisations. This framework does not have a focus on what is happening in each of the organisations that participate in territorial development. That is precisely the contribution of this paper. Therefore, based on the evidence from the case, the later sections complement this framework to integrate the consideration of both inter- and intra-organisational dynamics.

## **The Interpretation of Hierarchy, Leadership, Complexity and Twofold Dialogue**

We complement the two previous subsections, that framed the intersection between collaborative governance and action research for territorial development with some specific conceptual clarifications.

### **Position Regarding Power and Hierarchy**

Facilitating a process is challenging when powerful actors, such as policymakers, are involved in praxis, and researchers sometimes need to take a critical distance towards stakeholders with a history of using hierarchical power, even when they express a desire to experiment with more horizontal relational dynamics (Arrona and Larrea 2018; Larrea and Arrona 2019). The first clarification is that in the case the goal is not to eliminate hierarchy, as it is considered relevant to make policymaking effective. Instead, the goal is to create more horizontal and participative relationships between those with different levels of hierarchical power and to reduce the hierarchical distance (Triguero-Sánchez et al. 2021), i.e., the gap that results in management being perceived exclusively as an authority figure that provides guidelines and answers that all employees must comply with.

### **Interpretation of Leadership**

The second clarification has to do with the concept of *leadership*. When reflecting on the case we consider that when power is used in more horizontal and participatory ways, a more collaborative leadership emerges. However, our experience in previous action research processes shows that policymakers are readier for collaborative leadership in their policy networks than within the government or agency, where hierarchy is more prominent (Karlsen

and Larrea 2012). The aim of the action research process in the case was to reduce this bias, which required a different set of skills to simultaneously work in inter and intra-organisational settings (Guarneros-Meza and Martin 2016; Estensoro and Larrea 2023).

### The Role of Complexity To Critically Revisit ARTD

Finally, the use of power, leadership styles, and capabilities are closely related to the type of complexity operating in a given environment. For instance, Snowden and Boone (2007) argue that, whereas hierarchical decisions can solve simple problems, these decisions do not work when it comes to complex challenges. In ARTD, territorial complexity is defined as a specific type of complexity in inter-organisational dynamics where different entities in a territory are autonomous but interdependent. Each entity has different interpretations of the problems at stake and their potential solutions, and none possesses the hierarchical power to instruct the others on what will be done in that territory (Karlsen and Larrea 2016). Action research in this context is a process to establish sufficient consensus to act and solve territorial challenges. However, the ARTD cogeneration framework (Fig. 1) does not take into consideration the complexity within governments and their agencies, which differs from territorial complexities, and consequently, it lacks a framework to facilitate action research at both organisational and territorial levels. The third clarification is, therefore, that there is a strong connection between the concept of complexity and the critical revision we make of the cogeneration framework of ARTD. This connection between intra- and inter-organisational dynamics has already been addressed in the governance literature (McNamara et al. 2019; Yeboah-Assiamah et al. 2022). These authors address power imbalances and fears of losing organisational identity, and argue that transaction costs, such as resource allocation, can negatively affect collaboration unless there is a high perceived need for interdependence or a high level of concern for the problem within the organisation. But as we argued for collaborative governance, not through the transformative lens of action research.

### Twofold Dialogue Spaces for ARTD

Concerning the organisational level, this has been focused on extensively in action research literature (Coghlan and Shani 2014; Revans 1982), and the territorial level has already been addressed by ARTD (see references throughout this section). However, the simultaneous consideration of both spheres is understudied in action research. This paper seeks to contribute to action research literature, and specifically to ARTD, with a framework that helps facilitate action research at both the organisational and territorial levels in a mutually nurturing relationship between these levels. Moreover, this framework can contribute to the corpus of literature on governance as long as it can shed light on how to facilitate simultaneously the intra- and inter-organisational dynamics that the scholars in this field have identified.

## Presentation of the Action Research Process

### Introduction To the Action Research Process

The concrete experience of ARTD used in this paper to problematise the cogeneration framework of this approach and reformulate is the case of Bilbao Next Lab (BNL). BNL is an urban competitiveness policy lab established in 2013 to address the inclusive and sustainable competitiveness of Bilbao. It is led by the city council and its economic development agency (Bilbao Ekintza agency) and, as mentioned above, two of the authors of this article have been involved in facilitating this policy lab since the beginning.

Thus, their direct and prolonged involvement has made them first hand witnesses of both, intra- and inter-organisational dynamics that have emerged in this context. Here, intra-organisational dynamics refer to the relational dynamics within the city council and Bilbao Ekintza, while inter-organisational dynamics describe the interactions of the city council and the with other territorial actors, such as provincial and regional government or public agencies, education and training centres, firms, cluster associations, or social entities. Against this backdrop, and in line with the explanations provided in the previous sections, presenting a single case study to illustrate the reformulation of an ARTD framework allows the authors to offer a detailed perspective—not only on the specific dynamics of the City Council and Bilbao Ekintza, and the transformations occurring within these organisations, but also on the process of problematisation and the reformulation of the framework itself. To develop this in-depth perspective, it is essential to clarify a number of issues related to this particular experience.

Since the beginning, the goals of the urban policy lab require new modes of relationship between the council and agency and other territorial actors, including other territorial government bodies (regional and provincial councils and their agencies), companies, cluster associations, and education and training centres. We refer to these relationships as the collaborative territorial governance mode of the policy lab. ARTD is the methodological approach applied in this laboratory, facilitated by Orkestra and specifically by two of the authors of this paper.

The paper focuses on a specific action research process developed during 2023. The aim of this process was to support the development agency team in designing and facilitating collaborative governance to support the knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) sector. KIBS are service companies that rely heavily on professional knowledge, their primary goal being to provide knowledge-intensive support for the business processes of other organisations. They employ highly skilled people and create quality employment. Moreover, cities are niches of opportunity for KIBS, as they tend to be located in urban environments. KIBS can be classified into three types: professional (accounting and legal activities or strategic consultancy), technological (computer programming and consultancy, architectural and engineering activities, R+D), and creative (including advertising and marketing) (Miles et al. 2018).

Greater Bilbao, the most populated urban area in the Basque Country, leads in the specialisation of KIBS and stands out for its concentration of employment in these activities, which accounts for 50% of employment in KIBS in the Basque Country as a whole. The Basque city of Bilbao is the most specialised in these activities and even more so in professional services, accounting for 34.3% of all employment in the Basque Country in this

sector in 2023. Due to this level of specialisation, the KIBS sector has been a fundamental focus of the city's competitiveness policy since BNL was first established.

The sector faces several complex challenges related to the lack of talent, the difficulties in connecting with the regional industrial fabric, and the absence of physical infrastructure in the city, among others. Additionally, another challenge has recurred every year over the last decade: the city council team's limited capacity to fulfil its role as a facilitator of collaborative governance. In the next section, we provide a detailed description of the action research process, whose goal has been to design and set up a collaborative governance to tackle the challenges facing KIBS and support their competitiveness while also developing facilitation capabilities among the city council's team. As we have mentioned before, this AR process has led to the problematisation and reformulation of the co-generation framework, which will be addressed in the discussion section.

## The Timeline of the Action Research Process

As summarised in Fig. 2, the process has been divided into three stages.

### Defining the Problem and Configuring Two Dialogue Spaces (January-February, 2023)

Since 2013, the city council of Bilbao (through Bilbao Ekintza) and Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness have been working to co-create policies to foster urban competitiveness through action research. The specific action research process presented in this paper, which started in January 2023, is the last stage of this endeavour, representing an outcome and a continuation of the pathway that started 10 years ago.

The initiation of this new stage of action research was inspired by Fig. 1, and more specifically, by the definition of a shared problem and the design of the agoras to address it.

In order to define the shared problem, the city council's goals for 2023 were first made explicit in a meeting in January of that year, when one of the policymakers in charge of BNL in the development agency stated:

“This year, we want the focus to be on governance for KIBS, receiving your support in the design of a governance model that will include different spaces involving different territorial actors.” Literal minutes, 19 January 2023.

Based on her proposal, we at Orkestra designed a plan that was discussed in a meeting with the city council team on 8 February. The quote below summarises our recommendation to policymakers:



**Fig. 2** A timeline of the action research process

“We propose an action research process in which the shared challenge and consequent focus will be on the design and implementation of collaborative governance to promote KIBS. Based on the cogenerative model, we will facilitate different cycles of reflection-action through two spaces: one with the Councillor and the General Director of Bilbao Ekintza, and the other with the technical staff. In each cycle, we will work on different key dimensions of collaborative governance addressed in the literature, including its facilitation.” Miren Estensoro, research diary, 8 February 2024.

To realise the agreements included in the proposal, we agreed to design an agora made up of two different spaces:

- a) Space for Facilitators (SF from now on). This space had nine members: seven from the technical staff of the development agency and two researchers from Orkestra (two of the authors in this paper).
- b) The Tractor Group (TG from now on). This space was established as an action research agora in 2019 to respond to previous challenges. It had six members: the City Councillor for Economic Development, Trade, Tourism, and Employment, the Director of the Development Agency, the Coordinator of the Area of Business Promotion in the agency, and a team of three researchers from Orkestra.

We proposed these two spaces based on previous experiences where we had established a similar structure. We felt this was the most feasible way forward. Given that the routines, agendas, time available, goals, and relational habits of the two groups were different, it seemed more practical to define two groups and connect their work through the facilitative work of action researchers rather than them all working in the same relational space. We will later problematise this decision.

### **Co-Designing the New Collaborative Governance (February- July, 2023)**

During this period, the members of the two dialogue spaces focused on praxis, represented in Fig. 1 in terms of continued cycles of reflection and action. After several cycles of reflections, which resulted in decisions that became actions, a new collaborative governance design emerged. Action research was developed through seven workshops in the SF and six workshops in the TG. Table 1 shows the result of each reflection-action cycle detailing the workshops celebrated in each of them.

An essential point in understanding how praxis evolved is that, following Fig. 1, three types of knowledge were combined in the process. One of these was the experiential knowledge of policymakers (politicians, civil servants, and the technical staff in the development agency). Their insight into political context and dynamics (especially from elected policymakers or politicians), the ins and outs of policy management, and the deadlines and procedures of public administration constituted key knowledge that was integrated into the process. For our part, we action researchers contributed to the process through disciplinary and process knowledge. Thus, we introduced literature that explores what collaborative governance means, as well as its main elements and how to build it, focusing on concepts such as collaborative leadership, facilitation, meta-facilitation, and collaborative spaces. Appendix 3 presents the specific literature references used in this period and for each reflec-

**Table 1** Reflection-action cycles in between February and July 2023

Reflection-action cycle	Workshops	Resulting actions from AR
First reflection-action cycle	21 02 2023 SF	Meaning and reasons for the collaborative governance (CG) for KIBS
	27 02 2023 TG	
	09 03 2024 SF	
Second reflection-action cycle	14 03 2023 SF	Design of CG spaces: definition of collaborative projects as one of the main outputs of CG spaces, and choice of facilitative leadership as a leadership model
	04 04 2023 SF	
	19 04 2023 TG	
Third reflection-action cycle	25 04 2023 SF	Design of CG spaces: list of agents, and calendar
	16 05 2023 SF	
	17 05 2023 TG	
	06 06 2023 TG	
Fourth reflection-action cycle	20 06 2023 TG	Design of CG spaces: facilitation approach Elaboration of documents and presentations for bilateral meetings by high ranked policymakers in TG Mid-evaluation of the action research process within SF
	11 07 2023 SF	
	19 07 2023 TG	

tion-action cycle summarized in Table 1. At the same time, we relied on our process knowledge to determine the whole structure of the collaborative governance and the different spaces, including the appropriate number of sessions and their duration and structure.

Consequently, during this stage, the highest-ranked policymakers, technical staff and researchers (following discussions with territorial actors), we agreed on a first version of the collaborative governance to be developed and generated the conditions for it to be feasible.

### Activating Facilitation by Policymakers (September–December, 2023)

The final goal of ARTD goes beyond the cycles of praxis and the resolution of the concrete problems agreed on. Indeed, the overarching goal is to generate collective knowing, a shared capability that enables territorial actors to solve territorial problems together. Although collective knowing includes action researchers as territorial actors, it is vital to avoid making processes dependent on them. To achieve this, the new collaborative governance required policymakers to facilitate the whole process without relying on action researchers. Consequently, this stage focused on generating new facilitation capabilities in practice. In this case, achieving collective knowing meant that policymakers could collaboratively work with *x*, *y*, and *z* without further need for action researchers to facilitate that process.

Making the new collaborative governance operational required two steps: (a) territorial actors had to join the collaborative governance spaces, and (b) policymakers had to take over from action researchers as facilitators of the spaces. To help with this, action researchers facilitated a process where policymakers developed facilitation capabilities. This process was again based on praxis or reflection-action cycles where policymakers facilitated the process and shared their challenges with action researchers to learn how to tackle them together. This approach ensured that actions were directly responsive to *on-the-ground* chal-

lenges, fostering continuous evaluation and adaptation. It was a tailored support to design and facilitate workshop or prepare strategic documents to be used in meetings, for example.

As a result of this stage, several decisions that had been undertaken in the first phase were reconsidered. The reflections in these groups led to creating a new ‘meta’ facilitation space (SMF in advance), comprised of members from both the SF and TG, who met in two workshops during 2023. The objective of the SMF was to share the progress of each collaborative governance space and to make decisions regarding those facilitation actions that required coordination among the different spaces and facilitators. Moreover, a member of the technical staff was nominated as a meta-facilitator to work with researchers in the SMF space.

Table 2 gathers the different reflection-action cycles of this period that included two workshops in the SF, three workshops in the TG and two workshops in the SMF. The table specifies the dates and spaces of AR workshops including the specific actions resulting from each cycle.

All workshops during the three periods were documented in systematization documents. Workshop participants were requested to complete an evaluation form to gather their feedback and assessments. These evaluations were incorporated into the systematization documents. Additionally, workshops were conducted both at the midpoint and at the end of 2023 to evaluate the action-research process itself. The mid-term evaluation took place within the SF, while the year-end evaluation was conducted in both the SF and GT groups. These workshops were also documented in corresponding systematization documents. These documents plus the research diaries of the authors who participated in the process are the data sources used in this paper.

**Table 2** Reflection-action cycles between September and December 2023

Fifth reflection-action cycle	08 09 2023 META 29 09 2023 TG	Facilitation challenges of the Bilbao Ekintza team	Facilitation actions for: The design of workshops for CG spaces by the technical staff The design of bilateral meetings by the Councillor and the Director Appointment of the meta-facilitator
Sixth reflection-action cycle	17 10 2023 SF 18 10 2023 TG 17 11 2023 META 24 11 2023 TG	Facilitation challenges of the Bilbao Ekintza team	Facilitation actions for: The design and celebration of workshops for CG spaces by the technical staff The celebration of bilateral meetings held by the Councillor and the Director Meta-facilitation of a policy-maker from Bilbao Ekintza
Seventh reflection-action cycle	12 12 2023 SF	Facilitation challenges of the Bilbao Ekintza team	Evaluation of the action research process and design of the project proposal for 2024

## Thick Description of the Case

In this thick description of the case, we focus on the simultaneous transformations that occurred in intra- and inter-organisational dynamics among high-ranked policymakers and technical staff within the action research process outlined in Sect. 3. As we proposed in the introduction, these episodes illustrate how engaging in inter-organisational dynamics through action research has brought about transformations not only in inter-organisational relationships but also in the relationships among members of the government organisation.

This analysis has been carried out in two steps. On the one hand, in Appendix 2, we provide an exhaustive description of the elements that describe the inter- and intra-organisational dynamics between both high-ranking policymakers and technical staff and detail how the action research process facilitated the transformation of these patterns. On the other hand, we present a thick description of four key elements, which, although may seem like minor changes at first glance, we believe reflect profound transformation processes and consequences regarding inter- and intra-organisational dynamics.

### Multi-Actor Territorial Spaces

Until May 2024, four governance spaces related to KIBS' four main competitiveness challenges were launched and named: Skills Mismatch, Connection with Industrial Fabric, Testing Models, and Physical Infrastructure. These spaces involved a total of 37 entities, with technical staff being in charge of facilitating them. As part of the three or four workshops held from November 2023, each space worked on a phase of reflection to reach an agreement on the specific sub-themes in each area that then became the focus of the collaborative projects co-defined for May. Once these projects will be contrasted and validated by the KIBS Forum, foreseeably in April 2025, these spaces will begin a new phase of implementing the projects. The KIBS Forum, facilitated by the Councillor and the General Director of Bilbao Ekintza and made up of senior and high-ranking policymakers, will be in charge of assessing the project proposals and supporting the implementation and follow-up of the collaborative projects.

Their willingness to accept this position is the first sign of transformation we consider, as this was an unusual role for them to play, and supporting collaborative projects would later challenge the usual ways of policymaking in terms of power and leadership.

### Transformation in the Roles of Participating Policymakers

Even though senior policymakers had participated in other collaborative endeavours promoted by Bilbao Ekintza before January 2023, this was their first experience as facilitators. In addition, they facilitated the process alongside technical staff. In previous processes, the role of the facilitator was attributed to technical staff, while the Councillor and the General Director were in charge of representing and sharing the position of Bilbao Ekintza and the City Council regarding the issues discussed in the forums. Essentially, they were expected to defend the organisation's interests, not to create the conditions for other territorial actors to defend theirs. Hierarchies were clearly defined not only between them and the other participants but even between each other, with participants knowing that in the presence of both, the Councillor's decisions took precedence over the General Director's views.

During thirteen meetings between the two senior policymakers and territorial actors outside their organisation (senior officials from different departments of regional and provincial governments, companies, technology centres, and cluster associations), this situation started to change in January 2023. In order to activate the collaborative governance among all these entities, both policymakers accepted that they needed to transform their usual role from actors into facilitators.

At a Tractor Group meeting held on 24 November, the Councillor said,

“It has required a great deal of effort, an effort I believed we could make, but I initially thought it was such a mess. However, it has happened; this is something new for me, and I didn’t know how to handle it. I have doubts and fears like they do (referring to the technical staff), but I felt very comfortable and confident and I recognised the legitimacy of the people we met. Indeed, from the first to the last meeting, we’ve improved a lot...”.

For the first time, in these meetings, the Councillor and the General Director needed not only to present a first proposal of the collaborative governance model but also to create the right conditions for all participants to negotiate the proposal. This negotiation process required them to begin integrating a process perspective. By adopting this view, they became aware and actively participated in translating the BE proposal to their interlocutors, facilitating the negotiation with them, integrating their suggestions and changes into the initial proposal, and, finally, activating the different collaborative spaces in accordance with the co-defined proposal. Leadership was transforming and the features of relational leadership emerged.

As part of the transformation of leadership styles, the division of roles between the Councillor and the General Director also changed. At a Tractor Group meeting held on 19 July, the Councillor agreed to jointly lead the meetings with the General Director:

“I have no interest in being the only visible face. Besides, we complement each other very well.”

Throughout the session, the Councillor and the General Director agreed to divide their roles for the thirteen meetings. The Councillor was in charge of opening the meetings, presenting the main objectives and the rationale behind the Collaborative Governance, and facilitating the discussion around the proposal. The General Director was responsible for explaining the main features of the process, including the spaces, the actors involved, and the deadlines. Both agreed to systematise the key messages from each meeting to ensure that all of them were incorporated in the final design of the collaborative governance. Following this distribution, the General Director’s decisions concerning the parts he was assigned to present took precedence over the Councillor’s opinions on the presentation of those parts. As a result, hierarchies were transformed to meet the needs of the process.

### **Mutual Impact of Spaces for Action Research**

The collaborative governance process considered two separate agoras within BE: the Facilitators Space (SF) for high-ranking policymakers and the Tractor Group (TG) for technical staff.

During the process, the dynamics between these two groups also changed. Previously, the TG was responsible for its decision-making, but through the process, the SF had an impact on the development of the TG meetings. Among other issues, the Councillor and the General Director agreed to select participants from different collaborative governance spaces for the TG. Nevertheless, this decision was not entirely up to them. The high-level policymakers made the decision based on an initial proposal prepared by the technical staff. A similar process occurred with the proposal presented to territorial actors during the thirteen bilateral meetings mentioned before. Even though the content of the documents discussed with these agents was agreed upon with the TG, the SF was in charge of drafting the initial proposal. This illustrates how the technical staff influenced the agenda setting and the decisions that were made in the TG. As we already pointed out, this represented a shift since these types of decisions were previously made solely by high-level policymakers.

### **Decision-Making Capacity of Technical Staff**

Another feature of governance that evolved through the process was the legitimacy of the technical staff of Bilbao Ekintza to meet territorial actors without the presence of high-ranking policymakers from their own organisations. In order to facilitate the four thematic collaborative governance spaces, the technical staff responsible for facilitating them first had to identify which agents from regional and provincial government departments, companies, technology centres, and cluster associations were eligible to join. Once the agents were confirmed, individual meetings had to be held with them either before or between each space's workshops. Unlike in previous projects, the technical staff was given the legitimacy to contact the agents directly and to conduct these meetings, even if those agents were high-level policymakers or held significant positions in the organisations. For example, a member of the technical team of Bilbao Ekintza and part of the team of facilitators of one of the thematic collaborative governance spaces directly contacted and met the General Director of one of the public agencies of the provincial government, which was something new. Prior to the start of collaborative governance, technical staff could not meet external actors in high-ranking positions without the permission of their superiors, and it was often the case that the Director General or even the Councillor would meet these actors because of their hierarchical positions. This direct contact made the process fast and efficient, and the Councillor shared this awareness when he stated the following (17th November, 2023-workshop SMF):

Our permanence (referring to the director and himself) at the head of BE is not guaranteed; you are the ones that will continue. In this context, it is essential for you to gain legitimacy with them (referring to the territorial actors that were part of the governance spaces).

### **Discussion Based on the Problematisation of the Action Research Process**

In this section, we begin by problematising the previous action research process. This will be our grounding for examining the cogeneration framework in the next section.

## Problematism of the Action Research Process

When the three authors of this paper worked together to problematise the action research process, one of them, who had been actively facilitating the process, said:

“Those wanting to conduct action research for territorial development face the need to transform [governments] internally too, and there is a gap in the literature, as inner transformation is not connected to the transformation of outer relationships. We need a systemic perspective” (working document, 24 January 2024).

That realisation prompted a reflection process about the fundamental differences when doing action research in a territory (based on inter-organisational relationships) and an organisation (thus, based on intra-organisational relationships). The main conclusion was that complexity doesn't play out in the same way across different settings. In territorial relationships, for instance, actors tend to operate with a degree of autonomy, even though they remain interconnected. Inside the government, however, the existence of relevant hierarchies often creates relationships of dependency.

Numerous authors in action research literature have explored organisational change. However, in the specific case of ARTD, recognising hierarchy as a distinctive element of the complexity that characterises internal relationships (within a government in this case) underlines the importance of, first of all, problematising the cogeneration framework and adapting it to help understand how to approach the construction of new relationships between the government and other territorial actors.

Hierarchy facilitates the agency of governments and is essential for achieving their goals. At the same time, when collaboration is needed to resolve certain issues, hierarchy should be used in ways that facilitate that collaboration. These inner dynamics in government hierarchies are relevant for territorial development because they also influence territorial governance, either consciously or unconsciously, as shown in the thick description.

This reasoning led to the acknowledgement that although Fig. 1, which had inspired the process, does not refer to the internal complexity of governments and how power, hierarchy, and leadership operate there, the facilitative action researchers had indeed dealt with power, hierarchy, and leadership, even if their insights were still tacit. Appendix 3 is the result of the exercise to make these tacit learnings explicit, and the conceptual contributions shared in the next subsection are built on this foundation.

## New Concepts and Frameworks for ARTD

When using Fig. 1, the first reflection that facilitative action researchers are invited to explore relates to complexity. It is essential that facilitators understand the relationships between territorial actors, who are autonomous but interdependent. Additionally, the internal or organisational complexity of governments and other territorial actors participating in collaborative governance is also part of territorial complexity. However, as we said before, in these cases, hierarchies may play a more prominent role, often involving relationships characterised by dependency.

The second reflection that can serve facilitative action researchers is understanding how these two types of complexity -territorial and organisational complexity- relate to each other. Based on the case analysis, we argue that when our action research processes and the corresponding facilitation explicitly and simultaneously consider both types of complexity, they

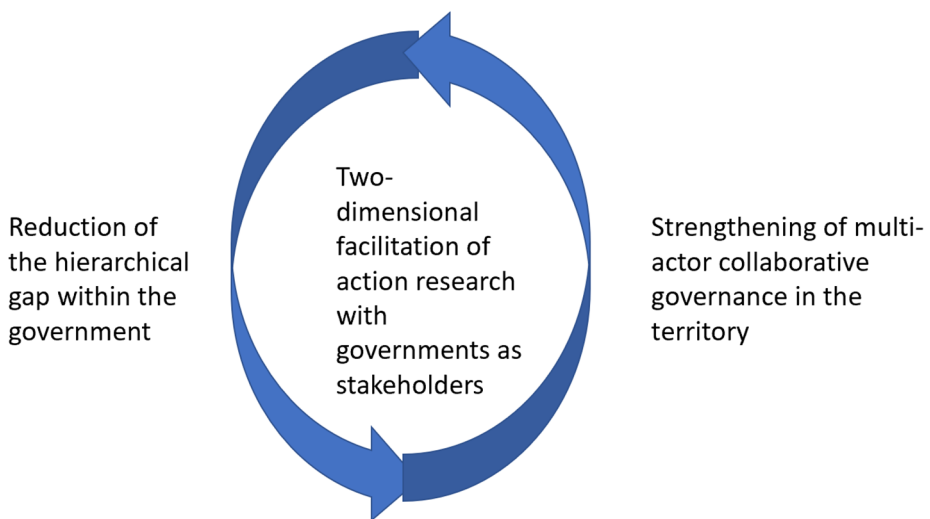
can have a twofold impact. On the one hand, it can reduce the hierarchical distance within the government that leads the process by encouraging more open, horizontal, and participatory forms of interaction. This helps transforming hierarchical structures and enables a more inclusive approach to leadership. On the other, it can strengthen the collaborative nature of territorial governance by facilitating spaces and procedures involving territorial actors to solve a territory's problems together. We have represented these concepts in Fig. 3.

We now further elaborate on these connections in order to provide more analytical tools for facilitative action researchers who want to engage with the simultaneous transformation of government organisations and their territorial governance. Our proposal is that they reflect on the features addressed in Fig. 4.

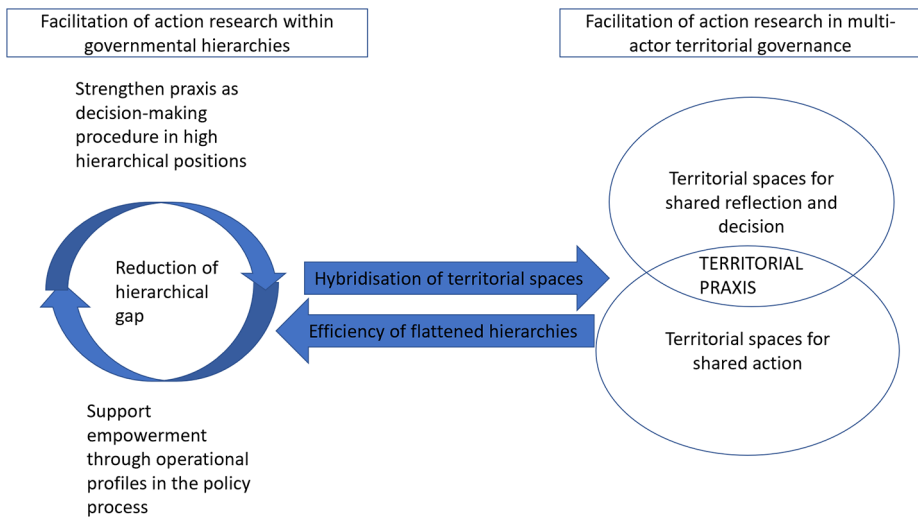
The left side of Fig. 4 represents the facilitation, through action research, of a process aimed at reducing the hierarchical distance within the government- more horizontal, and participatory forms of interaction. This was the result of:

- a) Strengthening praxis as a decision-making procedure in high hierarchical positions. As shown in the case, action researchers contributed to transforming the decision-making habits of high-ranking policymakers (TG) by systematically giving more centrality to the knowledge developed by the technical staff in the workshops (SF).
- b) Helping and empowering staff who were lower in the government to gain confidence in their proposals to high-rank policymakers.

We argue that these two processes nurtured each other in that the more empowered the technical staff were, the easier it was for them to make their proposals to high-ranking policymakers, and the more fluid the presentation of their proposals was, the easier it was for the high-ranking policymakers to work with them and integrate them into their decisions. Before the creation of the action research agora, the technical staff did not feel they had enough authority to directly discuss their contributions with high-ranking policymakers, and similarly, these policymakers were not used to integrating the voices of the technical



**Fig. 3** A two-dimensional facilitation of action research with governments as stakeholders



**Fig. 4** Twofold dialogue spaces: The connections between government hierarchies and territorial governance

staff directly into their decision-making. However, through the action research process, the technical staff felt more legitimised not only to present their proposals in the agoras where the high-ranking policymakers participated but also to contact them directly; at the same time, these policymakers started to see this participation and facilitative role of members of the technical staff as natural. Action researchers bridged the two spaces, taking the proposals from one to the other and communicating the resulting decisions. Examples of these decisions are the selection of the participants from the various collaborative governance spaces or the materials for the bilateral meeting facilitated by high-ranking policymakers described in the previous section. Likewise, the more proposals were integrated into the decisions by the TG, the stronger the facilitators’ empowering process became.

On the right side of Fig. 4, that represents twofold dialogue spaces for ARTD, we have depicted another connection that emerged in the processes documented in the thick description and Appendix 2: the reduction of hierarchical distance within the government led to the hybridisation of the territorial spaces. We define the hybridisation of territorial spaces as an emergent process where diminishing the hierarchical gap within the government encourages members of higher and lower positions to participate together in multi-actor collaborative governance spaces; at the same time, interacting in these inter-organisational contexts—characterised more by interdependence than strict dependence—*may contribute* to a reduction in hierarchical distance between government representatives.

Apart from the mutual impact of spaces for action research, the facilitative roles played by all staff and high-ranking policymakers in Bilbao Ekintza also contributed to reducing the hierarchical distance within the government. As described in the thick description, this new role was shared by both high-level policymakers and technical staff. Moreover, they will play that role in different and interdependent territorial spaces-KIBS Forum by high-ranking policymakers and thematic collaborative governance spaces by the technical staff. The fact of having flattened hierarchies will contribute further to that interdependence. The design of territorial spaces demonstrates that the KIBS Forum has a more decisive character

compared to the thematic collaborative governance spaces, which are more action-oriented. Nonetheless, there is a direct connection and influence among the different spaces, given that the thematic collaborative governance spaces are in charge of proposing and implementing collaborative projects to the KIBS Forum. Indeed, higher-ranking territorial actors are more likely to participate in the KIBS Forum, whereas lower-ranking actors are more commonly involved in thematic spaces.

Coming back to Fig. 4 we can conclude that fostering more horizontal and participatory interactions among facilitators (reducing hierarchical gaps) may support stronger connections between the collaborative governance spaces they facilitate. This shows how the hybridisation of dialogue spaces can enhance territorial praxis because it can avoid the disconnection between the following:

- a) Territorial reflection. Usually high-ranking representatives of organisations reflect together, and even take decisions and agree, but do not articulate the processes needed to act.
- b) And territorial action. Technical profiles staff from different organisations who meet in territorial governance spaces usually agree on how solutions to territorial problems could be articulated, but they do not have the capacity to decide.

We refer to the idea that linking territorial actors at higher and lower levels resulting from connecting corresponding territorial governance spaces often supposes to link spaces focused on reflection and decision-making with those oriented toward action (fostering territorial praxis, that refers to integrated reflection-decision-action).

Moreover, when these different profiles interact in territorial governance spaces—as illustrated by the empowerment of technical staff in the case of BNL—the effectiveness of collaborative governance increases. This may also require stronger connections between facilitator teams and policymakers across different hierarchical levels of the government body. In turn, this effectiveness can be reassuring for policymakers involved in the process (both from other organizations and from the facilitating government body), especially those who may hesitate to shift hierarchical relationships or reduce hierarchical distance.

## Final Reflections

The paper aims to highlight the importance of process conceptual frameworks in facilitating action research processes. In this case, of the cogeneration framework for action research for territorial development. Departing from our experience, this contribution constitutes an invitation to action researchers to continuously reflect on how these frameworks guide their action research and lead them to concentrate on certain features and not others when facilitating a process. Depending on both, the process conceptual frameworks from which the action researchers depart and the context in which they interact, the problematisation of frameworks can be infinite. In our context, this reflection has resulted in a problematisation of the cogeneration framework based on the aforementioned ARTD process to develop a collaborative governance for knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) in Bilbao.

This paper thus explores how inter-organisational and intra-organisational dynamics can interact transforming a local public administration in the context of collaborative

governance. Whereas academics typically address exclusively one type of interaction, this paper focuses on the integration of the analysis of both types. Regarding the intra-organisational dimension, the paper examines how hierarchical distance affects the development of relationships between high-ranking policymakers and technical staff, and how there is a potential to reduce hierarchical distance through action research at both organisational and territorial levels. This way, we are aware that these specific dynamics correspond to a single case and we do not claim that they are always applicable to other scales of governance, not even to other local contexts. However, what we do believe is that action researchers who want to engage with the simultaneous transformation of government organisations and their territorial governance and are interested in reflecting on their own practices, regardless of their context, can benefit from considering these frameworks that: on the one hand, are revisited and completed based on the experiences of other action researchers and; that consider tools that are truly useful to them in their practice.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, action researchers may develop context-specific processes that deviate from their initial frameworks, as these frameworks cannot account for all the nuances of a given case. Therefore, we encourage other action researchers to apply and refine these frameworks. We believe that further exploration of this connection between inter- and intra-organisational dynamics, through comparative analysis with other cases or between experiences at different scales of government, for instance, has the potential to bring about more far-reaching changes in the organisational culture of public administration. Thus, to expand the research about organisational shifts seems a necessary task in a context in which governments need to redefine their role in order to address the complexities of our times in collaboration with territorial actors. Some steps are already being taken in this direction through an action research for territorial development process where action researchers are collaborating with policymakers in the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, a provincial government in the Basque Country, to develop their strategic plan. The goal is for policymakers to integrate interdepartmental collaboration within the government with collaborative governance with territorial actors outside the government, i.e. county development agencies, firm associations, chamber of commerce etc.

Finally, apart from contributing to the literature, the paper has contributed to its authors. The fact of conceptualising our practice and redefining the co-generational framework has made us aware of certain aspects that we were taking for granted or developing through intuition. Our conclusion in this respect is that writing action research is a process that helps action researchers attain their experiential knowledge in ways that sometimes are not possible during the facilitation process and transform it into frameworks that can assist fellow action researchers in reflecting on their own practices.

## **Appendix 1. Cycles of Praxis (Reflection and Action) during the Action Research Process**

This appendix shows the different reflection-action cycles that were developed through the action research process. In each cycle, action researchers used their process knowledge to design and facilitate the workshops. They integrated specific disciplinary knowledge that could help practitioners reflect on their experiential knowledge, question it, be critical of how things were done, and finally, agree on specific actions oriented towards the new mode

of collaborative governance they wanted to construct. The following table shows the core features of governance that were critically addressed in each workshop from corresponding action research agora, references to the literature that were used to encourage critical reflection, the decisions agreed upon, and the actions that followed.

Reflection-action cycle	Workshops	Elements for reflection		Decisions and actions
First reflection-action cycle	21 02 2023 SF 27 02 2023 TG 09 03 2024 SF	What and why of collaborative governance	Torfig and Triantafyllou (2016), Ansell and Torfig (2015; 2021), Peters et al. (2022), Ansell (2016, 2019), Arrona and Larrea (2022)	Meaning and reasons for collaborative governance (CG) for KIBS
Second reflection-action cycle	14 03 2023 SF 04 04 2023 SF 19 04 2023 TG	Background, uniqueness, agents, leadership, outcome, and process	Ansell and Gash (2008), Bryson et al. (2006; 2015), Costamagna and Larrea (2018), Arrona and Larrea (2022)	Design of CG spaces, definition of collaborative projects as one of the main outputs of CG spaces, and choice of facilitative leadership as a leadership model
Third reflection-action cycle	25 04 2023 SF 16 05 2023 SF 17 05 2023 TG 06 06 2023 TG	Uniqueness of space, agents, and process	Ansell and Gash (2008), Costamagna and Larrea (2018), Omit Brugué (2015), Emerson et al. (2012), Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006; 2015), Costamagna and Larrea (2018), Arrona and Larrea (2022)	Design of CG spaces: list of agents, and calendar
Fourth reflection-action cycle	20 06 2023 TG 11 07 2023 SF 19 07 2023 TG	Facilitation, meta-facilitation	Costamagna and Larrea (2018), Arrona and Larrea (2022)	Design of CG spaces: facilitation approach Elaboration of documents and presentations for bilateral meetings by high ranked policymakers in TG Mid-evaluation of the action research process within SF
Fifth reflection-action cycle	08 09 2023 META 29 09 2023 TG	Facilitation challenges of the Bilbao Ekintza team		Facilitation actions for: The design of workshops for CG spaces by the technical staff The design of bilateral meetings by the Councillor and the Director Appointment of the meta-facilitator

Reflection-action cycle	Workshops	Elements for reflection	Decisions and actions
Sixth reflection-action cycle	17 10 2023 SF 18 10 2023 TG 17 11 2023 META 24 11 2023 TG	Facilitation challenges of the Bilbao Ekintza team	Facilitation actions for: The design and celebration of workshops for CG spaces by the technical staff The celebration of bilateral meetings held by the Councillor and the Director Meta-facilitation of a policymaker from Bilbao Ekintza
Seventh reflection-action cycle	12 12 2023 SF 22 12 2023 TG	Facilitation challenges of the Bilbao Ekintza team	Evaluation of the action research process and design of the project proposal for 2024

## Appendix 2. The inter- and intra-organisational patterns and their transformation through action research

	Senior Policymakers	Technical Staff
Intra-organisational relationship patterns	Main decision-making capacity based on proposals and implementation of the technical team	Dependence on higher levels to proceed as well as internal hierarchy within the technical team
Inter-organisational relationship patterns in collaborative governance spaces	Role of facilitators: more limited decision-making capacity and the need to assume the decisions negotiated and agreed on with territorial actors	Role of facilitators: decision-making capacity regarding facilitation actions
Main transformation in relationship patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decrease in their decision-making capacity: dependence on the progress of governance</li> <li>• Adopt a process perspective: become aware of the transition between different phases and operate as a team in which there is a distribution of roles among members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in their decision-making capacity: define and implement the majority of facilitation actions and influence processes facilitated by senior policymakers</li> </ul>
Contribution of AR to transforming relationship patterns	AR workshops for facilitation capacity building, specifically to address: preparation of meetings with external territorial actors, distribution of roles among them or governance design based on the changes discussed and agreed upon with territorial actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AR workshops for facilitation capacity building</li> <li>• Support the role of the meta-facilitator and the role of technical staff as facilitators of each governance space</li> </ul>

## Appendix 3. Conscious and Unconscious Facilitation of Hierarchical Relationships

	Conscious actions	Unconscious actions
<b>Actions that re-inforce hierarchy</b> These actions made the process feasible and also functional to the status quo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assume that the final decision concerning budget/resources /proposal of the action research project corresponds to the TG</li> <li>• Agree on the problem definition and other relevant decisions in the different praxis cycles with the TG before addressing it in the SF</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create two dialogue spaces that reproduce the status quo: TG with policymakers from the highest levels in the agency's organisational chart and SF with the agency's technical staff</li> <li>• Propose the coordinator of the Area of Business Promotion in the agency as meta-facilitator, without taking into account her hierarchical position</li> <li>• Guide the technical staff to help them respond to the expectations of the TG</li> </ul>
<b>Actions that transform hierarchy</b> These actions questioned/ were oriented to transforming the status quo throughout the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depart from the proposals of the SF in the decision-making processes with the TG</li> <li>• Open channels to give voice to the facilitators in new spaces and conversations with territorial actors of a higher hierarchical position</li> <li>• Explicitly address the relevance of reciprocity between the different groups in the meetings with the SF, questioning hierarchy</li> <li>• Explicitly state dedication imbalances between the TG and the SF, i.e., the TG dedicates less than the SF</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counteract hierarchical positions through facilitation (defining agendas and use of time) for the interaction between and within the two groups</li> <li>• Support the technical staff members who are 'lower down' in the organisational chart</li> </ul>

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