Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty

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Workshop 2

Synthesis of interactions between scholars and practitioners

What follows is a synthesis of the discussions, including major ideas, comments, further questions and challenges, that emerged from the interaction between the local/international scholars and the practitioners (politicians, civil servants, stakeholders) embedded in *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*.

1. Analysis of stakeholders: Who is in, who is still out?
   Issues of democracy

   **Initial response and reactions**

   *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is a living project that actively tries to involve its stakeholders, including a wide variety of actors and spaces to foster collaborative governance: citizens, reference centres, political actors (including the opposition), municipalities, researchers, business and societal organisations.

   **Thematic debates**

   The following comments and suggestions emerge from the discussion:
   - Criteria for inclusion: Who is to be involved? Those affected by the problem? Those interested? Those with the abilities, resources and power to influence the solution of the problem? The criterion being used by EE is “organised society”, those who have responsibility and therefore make decisions and deploy resources for addressing specific issues; people with practical experience. Innovation is also a criterion.
   - Knowledge is a criterion for including actors: knowledge provides causal ity for intervening. EE appears to be an open and inclusive initiative, but with contradictions. There is tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Most citizens are those with tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. And those with tacit knowledge know more than what they are able to express, but express less than those with explicit knowledge (business people, academics and...
politicians). A collaborative governance project has to lend a voice and empower those with tacit knowledge.

Diversity is beneficial for the development of CG, for it brings new perspectives. Listening to stakeholders is not enough; they have to participate.

- A stakeholder map (drawn up by the EE Think Tank) has shown that inclusion is not a dichotomic issue (who is in and who is out). Instead, what needs to be looked at is how a specific actor is represented, and how relations are established between different actors. EE shows changes in relationships between the Provincial Government and the universities, ‘county’ (comarca) agencies and the media.

- Some specifics about who is in and out:
  Municipalities (and county agencies) have been involved not from the start, but from the last two years. It is clarified that this relationship has been institutionalised after a long and tough process of negotiation. Interinstitutional relationships are not easy: each institutional actor tends to worry about its own interest, and in this sense it is difficult to promote collaborative governance processes. The topic that triggered agreement was fostering competitiveness between SMEs and medium-sized business though collaborative processes (principles, procedures, dialogue for co-creation of public policies). Topics now on the agenda: employability, circular economy, digital transformation, inclusivity of people in employment.
  Unions: they were voluntarily excluded from the start, because it was thought that, if included, processes would be slowed down.

Further questions, critical issues and challenges

- Registering participation appears to be needed. Projects look for ample representation from the different sectors of civil society, but there is not a rate of participation. If looked at by sector, most important actors are included, yet certain parts of society are being missed.

- Inclusion might entail some exclusion. Is inclusion always good? Contradiction: contrasting with the normal assumption that inclusion is good for collaborative governance, the reality shows that including everyone is difficult. There are limitations which cannot be overlooked. Exclusion is also needed when there is lack of reputation, history of corruption, lack of credibility.
- Self-exclusion is being shown. People who lack listening skills (and do not accept criticism) self-exclude from collaborating. Some self-exclusion is being seen at EE amongst the following groups: a) politicians: some of them tend to see collaboration as a weakness, and do not get involved; b) civil servants: some departments prefer to stick to a traditional culture rather than following collaborative governance culture; c) Large companies who think they do not need to interact collaboratively; d) Young people: not many young people are participating in EE projects. Why? Digital global technologies are changing the way young people interact with public institutions. Experimental projects are being conducted among youth movements. The intention is to develop an EE programme led by young people. Looking at the self-excluded, it appears that collaborative governance necessarily brings together stakeholders with different logics, rules and roles. Therefore, different means have to be developed to achieve an inclusive approach.

- Conflict plays a role. EE has a history of conflict management. Conflict with politicians (because of their resistance to change), with external bodies (because of their ambitions), with the conceptual design of the model (different understandings between politicians and academics), with some societal actors (because of a lack of common understanding about the intangible value of collaborative governance).

- The process is an ingredient in itself. Collaborative governance is done by interacting.

- Is collaborative governance the solution? We do not know. What we can state is that it is at least a learning strategy. There is no magic recipe, and we learn by doing. We need to keep learning about collaborative governance.

- Guaranteeing the sustainability of the initiative is a challenge. You want to involve many, but you also need to retain them. Looking for causality of involvement is good for making the initiative sustainable. EE appears to be a brilliant initiative, but one that requires great efforts to make it sustainable.
2. **The role of culture in interaction management:**
   What worked and what did not in aligning different stakeholders around common goals? Why do people engage in collaborative governance (efficiency, equality, social and economic growth)?

**Initial response and reactions**

Three major drivers for involvement in EE:
- An explicit declaration from the Provincial Government that the initiative will not be instrumentalised: cameras away!
- There is mutual acknowledgement of both sides’ authority.
- The Provincial Government makes a commitment to stakeholders on the assumption that the invitation is not only to deliberate, but also to provide input for public policies. Stakeholders have evidence that their input is being taken into account; they interact directly with politicians (i.e. at the Think Tank).

**Thematic debates**

The following comments and suggestions emerge from the discussion:
- The project is inspired, launched and driven by politicians (as compared to other initiatives, which are launched by technicians and to which politicians react reluctantly). Could this be because some of the leaders of EE are former civil servants? It appears to be that those pushing EE already know how things work. This suggests that the future of EE requires technicians as well as politicians to own the initiative.
- The goal is not only to solve problems that are relevant for the local community, but also to build trust and to change political culture. Changes in culture take time. As compared to many initiatives of this kind, EE is undertaking this long-term goal.
- “The glory of hybrid democracy”: the attempt is to link representative democracy with direct democracy, and also at the same time bureaucracy with democracy. This is a hybrid beast. A lot is being written about hybrid democracy, and EE may be a good example of it.
Further questions, critical issues and challenges

- To avoid incoherencies: when the message is given that collaborative governance is the goal, you have to behave accordingly on an everyday basis. If not, the Provincial Government will become the target of all protests.
- To differentiate political management from administrative management. This means that politicians have the function of keeping a constant dialogue with citizens, to know and represent them; and afterwards, with them, to establish criteria for political action. This is different from institutional management. At the same time, co-creation between politicians and technicians is needed. EE has been late in involving technicians.

3. The role of leadership: How to organise leadership? What skills are needed for leading collaborative governance?

Initial response and reactions

According to people from the Provincial Government, EE has shown that the kind of leadership that is needed for collaborative governance is as follows:
- An inspiring leadership that looks for commitment and the involvement of politicians, technicians and agents from the territory.
- A collective and distributed leadership.
- A deliberate form of decision-making that includes all the agents from a specific sector.
- A leadership that is co-created by a set of shared values. The values which they are attempting to develop are: collaboration, anticipation, experimentation, openness.

From the discussion, the following ideas emerge:
- EE shows some kind of collective leadership: there is personal leadership, but also collective leadership by the Provincial Government, which works as an umbrella; within it, different personal individual leaderships are being developed.
More specifically, different understandings/sources of leadership have been shown in the development of EE: based on traditional hierarchy, collectively built by different actors, professional (scholars have had an influence), visionary (a single actor strongly portraying a view), social (e.g.
Communicating vessels between the different leaderships have operated at EE.

EE is showing that collaborative governance builds collaborative leadership which generates energy around a view. Along with the spaces of reflection and of experimentation, collaborative governance builds spaces of strong cohesion which include vital as well as informal factors. Room for different types of leadership has to be allowed for in order to make collaborative governance happen.

**Thematic debates**

The following comments and suggestions emerge from the discussion:

- In collaborative governance, leadership has to be conceived more as a function than as a position. There are many people in leadership positions who do not lead, and people who are not in leadership positions but who do actually lead.

- EE shows that collaborative governance entails leading people with a strong political influence. For collaborative governance to succeed, and since time is needed for visible results and outcomes, there has to be somebody who is able to go through tough and conflictual situations.

- The paradox is that for collective leadership to happen, you need to develop a strong individual leadership which rests on collective interest. That helps individual leadership to move to collective. This is happening in EE, but it is necessary to explicitly set out how it is being done.

- Several aspects of leadership can be looked at, and one is the effort to achieve goals through others. If so defined, collaborative governance challenges leadership. We need a revolution in leadership, because we have been exerting a typical leadership for many years, and now we are demanding leadership to be developed not only within the organisation but outside it as well. EE is a laboratory for this kind of leadership.

**Further questions, critical issues and challenges**

- Is there only one type of leadership that makes EE work? If so, there would be failure.

- There are three types of leadership: traditional (the leader person steps forward and gathers the whole group, leading them in the right direction), the opposite (everyone is a leader), and the network leader (several agents are recruited to form a selected group). There is also distributed leadership (across different places). Where does EE’s leadership stand in this categorisation?
Where does leadership reside? With individuals? In the processes? The different form of leadership that have been developed in the implementation of collaborative governance of EE have to be identified. Does EE leadership derive just from EE leaders? In other words, does leadership have to come from the person designated as the leader? Hypothesis: leadership comes from the person who has the ideas to pull people in one direction.

What will happen when the structural leading person goes? Will EE keep going?

Can CG change leaders, and if so, how? The leader can change governance, but the opposite can also happen: a strong culture of collaboration will change the leader.

4. How has EE approached communication? What can be learned from it about the role communication plays in collaborative governance?

Initial response and reactions

Understanding of communication in EE rests on the assumption that collaborative governance is not communicated but it is rather communication in itself. Communication is hence an intrinsic factor of the EE model, and is located at the core of the relational spaces that are developed; thus, communication is not a function to ‘sell’ what the government does. The communication activities developed in three areas (institutional communication, media relations, and digital communication) have been oriented to establish relationships with stakeholders of the different spaces and projects. Implementing this conceptualisation has faced opposition and given rise to internal and external tensions, and still problems emerge. Current formats do not yet enable people to contribute and participate as much as the Etorkizuna Eraikiz communication model requires.

Thematic debates

The following comments and suggestions emerge from the discussion:

Segmenting publics and looking for feedback is key when building collaborative governance. Feedback is looked for via quality assessments, meetings, surveys, interviews, and the interactions with stakeholders in the projects. There is not yet a clear approach to process all this information in order to make sense of the data and interpret stakeholders’ reactions.
What is the role of communication? Communicating collaborative governance leads to placing emphasis on actions, facts and actual performance over the narratives. The core of the conceptualisation of EE’s communication is about performance, achievements and acting, and hence communicating EE is more about interacting with stakeholders than about advertising it. The role of communication at EE is thus understood as inviting people to act together, to undertake joint action. By acting together you are communicating.

Collaborative governance puts into practice a relational approach to communication.

Gaps emerge between facts and messages, between the theory of collaboration and its practice. Collaborative governance undertakes the risk of a rebounding effect: credibility is lost when behaviours do not correspond to the promise of collaboration.

Further questions, critical issues and challenges

The extent to which awareness of a government initiative on collaborative governance should be taken as an indicator of good communication performance is debatable. It might be the case that while awareness of the whole project is low, audiences are aware of the impact of the public policies that collaborative governance develops.

How is communication to be controlled in a collaborative governance initiative? Should it be? Coordinating communication and messages is particularly challenging since collaboration entails including different entities from different levels and sectors. Each side may pursue its own interests. What does power sharing imply for communication coordination? This challenge becomes particularly evident when municipalities from different political parties are involved.

In election years, the risk of instrumentalising communication is larger. Politicians tend to pursue media visibility, and this may raise citizens’ suspicions about the authenticity of collaborative policies.

Communicating for building collaborative governance faces challenges related to media coverage. The media require tangible realities, and the innovation that is associated with collaborative governance is based on intangibles rather than tangibles. Collaborative governance appears not to get media attention until there are newsworthy outcomes.

Communicating for collaborative governance becomes more challenging in social networks, where young people are used to short, quick and gimmicky communication.