Comments from scholars

Comment 5
Collaborative governance, accountability and leadership in Etorkizuna Eraikiz

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1. Introduction

Accountability and leadership are core drivers of performance and legitimacy in effective public collaborative arrangements, particularly if they are anchored in robust internal systems of governance and a purpose articulated collectively. In this essay I use my understanding of Etorkizuna Eraikiz to reflect on the role of accountability and leadership in collaborative governance.

I draw on received knowledge and conversations with selected Gipuzkoa leaders, some site visits and selected documents. My view is incomplete absent conversations with civil society participants. Focused on the public administration side of the story, my impressions are filtered through my conviction of the promise of participation for democracy, and my expertise in three domains: organisation and management studies, social innovation and leadership studies.

The essay has four parts. Against the backdrop of received knowledge from these literatures, I start by exploring Etorkizuna Eraikiz’s architecture, then reflect on its accountability and leadership dynamics, and finally characterise it as a social innovation in government.

2. What is seen from the outside: a parallel networked architecture

Created by the Gipuzkoa Provincial Council to transform “politics and the public agenda” (O&E, 2022, p. 5), Etorkizuna Eraikiz (EE) implements a model of collaborative governance that has transformed the region’s political culture, public administration and approach to public policy.
Organisational structures are institutionalised paths coordinating collective action toward a goal. EE adds a parallel networked structure to the provincial public administration (PA), affording flexibility and boundary-spanning capacity to face complex contemporary challenges. It is a network of networks, operating within governmental authority, and thus bounded by the rule of law and democratic principles.

EE’s basic unit of action is the project – more precisely, collaborative projects on the ground. Three social spaces form EE’s architecture: *Gipuzkoa Taldean* fosters deliberation, dialogue and reflection; *Gipuzkoa Lab* fosters experimentation and demonstration projects; and the *reference centres* foster specialised policy design via partnership with independent non-governmental organisations that advance strategic areas for the territory. Local collaborative projects are ‘seeded’ in these spaces, where participants deliberate, negotiate and implement solutions.

Anchored in this architecture, multiple stakeholders in hundreds of local projects foster and create innovation on the ground. Projects in *Gipuzkoa Taldean* illustrate this. A Think Tank invites action-oriented deliberation across diverse participants who propose projects around four strategic areas (green recovery; new political culture; possible futures of the welfare state; future employment). Other citizen projects emerge from community responses to government RFPs around local challenges, like youth participation, intergenerational cooperation or community development. Other citizens engage in dialogue around funding priorities in the Open Budget initiative, where community proposals selected by participants’ votes receive grants (e.g. to support first job searches for young people, or to increase civic awareness of climate change). And representatives from Gipuzkoa municipalities discuss implementing their own collaborative projects.

These projects are embedded in a polycentric system with simultaneous authority centres, each working in a domain with their own stakeholders and place-based challenges. For example, *Gipuzkoa Lab* experiments with local solutions that show future promise outside policy priorities. Public administrators, civil society, the university and international experts collaborate and, if successful, solutions are incorporated into policy. These experimental projects probe, among others, arts and cultural activities for adolescents, women experiencing domestic violence, and person-centred care models for the elderly.

Projects (and their organisational hosts) differ in content, design and implementation. For example, the *reference centres* are independent entities partnering with provincial ministries to pursue strategic policy goals (e.g. aging, sustainable mobility, industrial cybersecurity, climate change,
language revitalisation, gastronomy, inclusive employment reinsertion). Other partnerships and local projects emerge within each strategic area.

Independent initiatives and projects connect via their structural location in the integrated system and EE’s overall collective purpose. A formal Office of Projects – a Council (Comisión) staffed by government and external members – oversees (and somewhat regulates) EE projects, while ensuring they respond to local realities.

In sum, as the basic unit of action in EE, collaborative projects are configurations of actors (or organisations) using network arrangements. Featuring varied internal governing systems, they drive accountabilities to ensure commitment to the collaborative process and its goals, led by Etorkizuna Eraikiz’s purpose. Absent a single chain of command, horizontal accountability mechanisms guide participants’ reciprocal expectations, given their contributions to achieving the collaboration’s goals.

3. A hybrid accountability structure

Public accountability assumptions have changed historically from the early 20th-century bureaucratic paradigm to the new public management paradigm of the late 20th century, and again with the emergent new governance paradigm of the 21st century (Lee & Ospina, 2022). Accountability dynamics are complex in hierarchical organisations, and even more in collaborative governance arrangements: who accounts, for what, to whom and how happens within “a tangled web of accountability relations” (Lee, 2022).

Accountability refers in public administration to a relationship between an actor with the obligation to explain behaviours/actions (giving accounts) and an inquiring body (forum) passing judgement with consequences for the actor. Account-giving and account-holding rest on explicit standards and implicit norms. Accountability mechanisms clarify work relationships and the standards that regulate them, generating information flows about expectations and actions, how these are discussed and judged and the consequent rewards or sanctions (Lee, 2022).

The primary accountability relations in networks are horizontal and informal. Network collaboration is not bounded by legal authority but by the common purpose participants cannot achieve alone. Commitment to work together around the unifying mission depends on reciprocal and trustworthy interactions developed over time. But vertical accountability is also present. Organisational representatives in networks are also bounded by antecedent accountability relations with their superiors and peers. Furthermore, the publicness of collaborative governance also bounds its members to formal
bureaucratic and political authority. Collaborative governance efforts do not replace hierarchies with networks, they add networks to hierarchical arrangements. EE reflects this tangled, hybrid accountability structure.

At EE, a cascading system of accountability mechanisms progressively involves more actors, as follows:

1) at the top, political leaders (e.g. the Deputy General and the Director of EE) and civil servants from assigned offices (e.g. the Projects Office and pertinent ministries) are responsible for this experiment in Gipuzkoa’s public administration. They are accountable to democratic institutions and to the public;

2) in the middle are the three social spaces crystallising EE’s architecture (Gipuzkoa Taldean, Gipuzkoa Lab and the reference centres); here various network configurations with diverse degrees of formalisation (foundations, coalitions, cross-sector partnerships, service delivery networks and programmes) are accountable to EE leadership, to the public administration and to political leaders. They are also accountable to their external formal partners;

3) on the ground are multiple projects embedded in each EE social space (e.g. Think Tank projects, citizen projects, Open Budget projects in Gipuzkoa Taldean; experimentation projects in Gipuzkoa Lab; and spin-off projects in the reference centres). Projects are accountable to EE (via the Projects Office or ministries) but are equally and reciprocally accountable to partners and participating citizens. Horizontal accountabilities seem to be primarily managed via localised dialogue and deliberation around project issues.

Considered the basic unit of action, EE’s collaborative projects resemble mini partnerships: multi-sector “projects formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis” (Selsky & Parker, 2010, p. 849). At a minimum, the literature on partnerships suggests that their internal governance systems must create accountability and leadership mechanisms to drive collaboration toward success. Whether this is happening in EE requires more research. Based on limited information, the table below briefly sketches impressions for the whole EE system (similar exercises may apply to the other levels described).
Table 1. Accountability preconditions for partnership success applied to EE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requisites</th>
<th>Evidence based on <em>Etorkizuna Eraikiz’s</em> governance structure</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieving strategic goals based on agreed measures</td>
<td>EE communicates to stakeholders the strategic goals and their</td>
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<td></td>
<td>implications for the lower project levels, where discretion</td>
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<td>is afforded, while ensuring measures and targets. The Office</td>
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<td>of Projects acts as a control mechanism to oversee the</td>
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<td>management of units where projects are embedded; some</td>
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<td></td>
<td>projects (e.g. funded citizen projects) are embedded in regular</td>
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<td></td>
<td>public administration units, with their own budgetary rules</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and monitoring; conceived as public–private partnerships, the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>reference centres develop jointly goals and measures.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Monitoring and evaluation at the system level is not clearly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>defined; important conversations are happening around specific</td>
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<td></td>
<td>measures for the overall EE; there is now urgency to crystallise</td>
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<td></td>
<td>these more formally, which seems late in the lifecycle of the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>effort.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enabling the partnership to resolve disputes and</td>
<td>Intentional degree of autonomy and discretion allows this to</td>
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<td>concerns within the system</td>
<td>happen at the organisational level and its embedded projects,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>with ample opportunity for dialogue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solving resourcing challenges</td>
<td>Since most projects are partially or totally funded by the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>public administration, traditional accountability measures may</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>exist for each, but not for the whole effort.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensuring continuous learning, improvement and system</td>
<td>Constant feedback loops exist at EE, the organisational units</td>
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<tr>
<td>innovation</td>
<td>and projects, within a strong culture guided by action learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and action research practice; dialogue and deliberations are</td>
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<td></td>
<td>embedded in the projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embedding systems of downward accountability and</td>
<td>The polycentric structure generates cascading mechanisms of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voice</td>
<td>downward accountability and citizen participation affords voice.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some vulnerable populations are hard to reach.</td>
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Summing up, Gipuzkoa’s political leaders and public administrators have made explicit commitments to support networks of outside participants in the projects that give life to the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* system. As a network of networks, EE relies on cascading mechanisms of accountability that, following traditional public administration rules, regulate and monitor collective action at the various levels of the system. Its network structure simultaneously ensures the discretion needed on the ground to foster strong horizontal relationships of accountability with partners and citizens, generating a unique
version of local social innovation, as will be further described below (Parés, Ospina & Subirats, 2017). As a civil servant asserted, EE leadership has managed to promote social innovation at the lower levels of the system while ensuring that this innovation remains within the confines of the rule of law and best practices demanded in public administration.

4. Collective leadership in action

Profound changes in post-industrial, globalised, digital societies require reframing leadership. In the workplace, new organisational forms reduce traditional managerial authority, and turbulent environments augment complexity, volatility and diversity, while working groups and permeable boundaries demand a relational understanding of leadership: collaborative, contextual and fully embedded in a system of relationships that must be viewed as a collective.

Networks for knowledge, information sharing, service delivery and policy reform, multi-stakeholder coalitions and cross-sector partnerships reflect this reality in the public sector. Understanding public leadership today means considering more actors, processes, arenas and levels of analysis, and an expanded awareness of interdependency, complexity and shared authority (Ospina, 2017).

Shared/distributed and relational/network leadership models reflect collective approaches, grounded on new assumptions and leadership practices. The source of leadership expands beyond leaders and roles to include other system properties such as decision-making rules, accountability mechanisms or participation spaces. The object of leadership moves beyond influencing followers or groups to develop conditions to ensure collective responsibility for the results. The outcome of leadership work now includes generating human capacity to co-produce a valued purpose, as much as achieving it (Ospina, 2017).

Shared/distributed models emphasise the horizontal relationships of accountability and shared responsibility over joint work and its outcomes, given the diminished relevance of command and control. Collaborative governance scholars advocate the contingent distribution of facilitative leadership roles outside formal positions, in different locations and at different times. Relational/network models further push the relational lens, moving the epicentre of leadership to the practices that make leadership happen. Leadership is emergent, interactive ‘work’ around local members’ capacity and adaptability to navigate complexity at the collective level.
Leadership in nested collaborative contexts enacts these assumptions and practices to foster collaboration. Yet research also shows that bureaucratic and network logics operate simultaneously in collaborative governance, and that formal leaders make use of directive leadership to foster more relational approaches. To engage interdependent, yet diverse stakeholders around a collective purpose, formal leaders build conditions where capacity, safety and readiness afford participants down the line opportunities to make meaningful contributions through collaboration. Following the cascading lines of accountability, formal leaders intentionally expand leadership in the system by cultivating emergent leadership at different levels. This in turn authorises participants to lead upward and sideward, that is, to become collaborative leaders themselves within their sphere of influence. This is collaborative leadership at its best. The experience of EE suggests that developing this type of leadership at all levels of the collaborative governance system requires, indeed, visible, strong formal leaders with political and moral authority.

In addition to strong collaborative leaders at the top, work in *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* reflects features that collective leadership studies have documented showing how, absent recurrent interventions of an appointed leader, other mechanisms help diverse members engage in leadership work (e.g. project-related collective tasks, participatory problem-solving, and meaningful stories and narratives around EE’s compelling purpose). All these help participants at the project level to do the leadership work of connecting and making meaning to articulate a direction, align their contributions and make collaborative commitments toward their shared purpose (Drath *et al.*, 2008).

My research colleagues and I identified recurrent practices of leadership work in community-based organisations trying to transform systems. We found that successful groups practised recurrent leadership work resulting in reframing discourse, bridging difference and unleashing human energies to leverage power and produce change. We argue that this leadership work is applicable to public-sector contexts and has great potential if used more intentionally (Ospina & Foldy, 2015).

*Etorkizuna Eraikiz* offers evidence of successful leadership work, and more research could draw important lessons for collaborative governance. To illustrate, the table below defines these leadership practices and offers a glimpse of their emergence in EE.
Table 2. Signs of (collective) leadership work in *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective leadership practices</th>
<th>Evidence in EE</th>
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| **Reframing discourse** happens when established social frames that reinforce problems are challenged and new frames, narratives and vocabulary (more congruent with the group’s vision of the future) are articulated and enacted | Naming traditional political culture as part of the problem/articulating an alternative way of being and doing policy and public administration  
Revalorising the role of Basque cultural values (self-government and territorial sovereignty; language, community and cooperation; strong social tissue) to interrupt growing individualism and to motivate citizen participation  
Reframing institutional leadership as collaborative, and collaboration as a public-sector strength  
Valuing co-produced knowledge’s multiple ways of knowing beyond expertise  
Pushing authority and leadership downward and out into society (via projects)  
Other reframed core ideas: representation (engaging with electors, political leaders as active participants); power (as a shareable resource); political imagination (to reinvent action); diversity (a strength and a political value) |

| **Bridging difference** happens when diverse actors understand each other’s perspectives and recognise their potential contributions to the common purpose, despite their differences | Intentionally connecting government with each: academics; private sector; civil society; citizens; parties in the opposition  
Connecting public administration actors: political leaders, public administrators/civil servants and front-line employees; municipalities within Gipuzkoa; and the latter with other Basque Country provinces  
Aligning EU and Gipuzkoa strategic goals  
Cultivating networks of actors within service or policy ecosystems  
Organising dialogue among diverse actors |

| **Unleashing human energies** happens when the group members’ potential for transformational learning is tapped, yielding self-efficacy and liberating passion and motivation to gain capabilities that contribute to the common purpose | Inviting stakeholder participation  
Offering spaces for varying degrees of engagement/participation (meetings, workshops, agoras, citizen assemblies, formal partnerships, youth neighbourhood engagement)  
Experimenting deeply (failure is culturally acceptable)  
Celebrating the messiness of co-creation and collaborative leadership  
Inviting intentional dialogue, problem-solving and meaning-making about collaborative governance and the new political culture  
Using action research and action learning to build spaces that foster innovation, create feedback learning loops, co-produce knowledge and conduct collective problem-solving  
Using action learning/action research to build collective leadership capabilities and align diverse perspectives |

Source: author’s own elaboration.
In sum, collaborative governance arrangements demand a different way of doing public leadership. Attention shifts from position, authority or charisma to the processes by which the group co-creates results that are valued by its members; and there is a cultural shift around participant mobilisation, from relying on control to cultivating purpose. Leadership is the group’s work – performed by formal and emergent leaders – to find the direction, alignment and commitment they need to achieve this purpose. This understanding of public leadership seems appropriate to interpret leadership in EE, but more research is needed to understand how it happens.

5. A systemic social innovation

Contemporary scholars have championed a socio-political and systemic approach to social innovation conceptualised as “a complex process of introducing alternative solutions that produce systemic changes” (Parés, Ospina & Subirats, 2017, p. 5). Three basic features characterise it: 1) satisfying alienated human needs; 2) transforming social relations; and 3) empowering citizens. The first feature conceptualises social innovation as public value creation; the second and third introduce ethical and political dimensions: power relations are transformed by placing instrumental goals (like technology or economic development) within a broader human purpose; and by acknowledging the role of a community’s cultural assets in reconfiguring social relations, governance arrangements and social learning.

Rather than a mere public tool that incorporates outside capacity to respond efficiently to social problems, the ontology of this approach posits innovation as a social change process. In other words, innovation fosters agency and collective capacity to challenge existing social frames that hinder human development and equity, and thus change “the basic routines, resources, beliefs and power relationships of the social system in which it occurs” (Parés et al., 2017, p. 10, citing Moulart et al., 2005).

This resonates with EE’s strategy and ethos. EE uses the most innovative approach to contemporary public administration to create public value – collaborative governance. In doing so, it is changing Gipuzkoa’s political culture, and creating new ways of doing public administration and policy implementation. Experimentation and citizen participation generate change from the ground up, reasserting and reframing for a contemporary context the Basque Country’s deepest cultural values.

EE does not just foster innovation; it is a governmental social innovation. Political leaders intentionally designed EE as a top-down strategy that engages the public administration of Gipuzkoa. They did so to foster bottom-up
citizen participation, which in turn requires affording relative autonomy to place-based projects. This successful strategy contributes insights that link debates in three literatures.

In the policy implementation literature, references to bottom-up and top-down are about control and discretion over implementation: should policy-makers or street-level bureaucrats lead? In the collaborative governance literature, the question shifts: should public administrators or external actors lead? For social innovation scholars, the question is about where social innovation emerges, from within government (top-down) or from within civil society (bottom-up). Research finds that bottom-up initiatives are more effective and scalable when they are linked to public institutions through collaboration in a “bottom-linked” approach (Pares et al., 2017, citing Eizaguirre et al., 2012). Bottom-linked scholars study efforts initiated by those experiencing the problem and recognise the role of institutions in strengthening these initiatives by supporting agency and guaranteeing citizen rights (Parés et al., 2017). They highlight the benefits of multi-scalar strategies for solving complex social problems, like those featured in EE.

Enacting this ‘both-and’ alternative, the experience of EE as a social innovation challenges the ‘either-or’ conundrum featured in the implementation and collaborative governance literatures. The case of Etorkizuna Eraikiz suggests that bottom-linked approaches can happen in reverse: a top-down responsible strategy aiming to support social innovation at the bottom. This unique approach has emerged through iterations of reflective experimentation, aiming to advance policy through a collaborative governance strategy and collaborative leadership. While fostering bottom-up social innovation, EE’s formal leaders maintain some control over an innovation that aspires to create a more democratic and participatory way of governing. In fact, EE draws legitimacy from the top via the political authority of representative democracy, and from the bottom via the social authority granted by articulating purpose around community felt needs.

6. Concluding remarks

Gipuzkoa’s Etorkizuna Eraikiz is an extraordinary experiment of public value creation that weaves together an integrated participatory system mobilising multiple and diverse stakeholders, and changing Gipuzkoa’s political culture. It is also shaping how political leaders, public administrators and citizens imagine and craft together a different future.

As its leaders acknowledge, six years of implementation have afforded shortcomings, gaps, contradictions and exclusions. Yet the achievements in its
short existence show promise for the future. As an example of bottom-linked innovation, EE’s architecture, accountability systems and collaborative leadership practices have evolved into a dynamic network of networks. In this architecture, strong, top-down formal authority is used to foster bottom-up frontline discretion and citizen participation; oversight is ensured via formal cascading accountability mechanisms that prioritise vertical relations at the system and organisational levels, and horizontal relations at the project level; and directive leadership is used to promote collaborative leadership. In this system, recurrent reflective/dialogic spaces are cultivated intentionally, where all actors – political leaders, public servants, frontline employees, partners and project participants (including citizens) – can explore the contradictions and tensions of collaborative governance, and, as a participant said, “make meaning of the mess”. Etorkizuna Eraikiz is a vital asset of the public administration of Gipuzkoa, the Basque Country and Spain. It represents a source of deep wisdom as well, for those interested in the theory and practice of collaborative governance in democratic contexts.
Comment 6
*Etorkizuna Eraikiz: A case of interactive political leadership*

EVA SØRENSEN, Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University, Denmark

1. Introduction

As extensively documented in research, collaborative forms of governance hold considerable potential for promoting effective and legitimate governance by engaging relevant and affected public and private actors in a shared effort to create something of value for society and the citizenry (Agger *et al*., 2015). In most cases, however, collaborative governance processes do not involve politicians, and the implications of the arm’s-length distance between politicians and collaborative processes can ultimately exacerbate the current democratic crisis rather than solving it (Rosanvallon & Goldhammer, 2008). *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* represents a noteworthy exception to this general tendency, as the politicians are the main initiators of the collaborative governance processes and participate actively in them. In so doing, they find opportunity to establish stronger ties to local stakeholders and citizens than the standard political institutions in representative democracies are typically able to do, voice their ideas and perspectives to members of the community, and harvest input from stakeholders that enhance their capacity to make well-informed and innovative strategic decisions about how to make society better. The project stands out as an intriguing case of interactive political leadership and opens a much needed alternative pathway for politicians who are looking for alternatives to meeting public discontent and rising levels of distrust in government and politics with authoritative forms of populist political leadership (Sørensen, 2020).

2. The missing link in collaborative governance

Public officials in liberal democracies are increasingly turning to collaborative forms of governance in their efforts to solve complex governance problems and to develop society in a desired direction (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Morse, 2011; Bianchi *et al*., 2021; Peters *et al*., 2022). What renders collaborative governance so attractive is that it not only mobilises the many ideas, visions and knowhow that actors within the public sector possess, but also the invaluable insights, skills and experiences of private businesses, civil society organisations and citizens. In unison, these resources can all enhance the problem-solving...
capacity of a society and its ability to meet its goals and aspirations, as well as to build social capital. When policy strategies and practical projects are developed and implemented in collaboration between all of the relevant and affected actors in society, they tend to become more successful, partly because they are better informed and more innovative, and partly because more people are committed to carrying them out (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015a; Doberstein, 2016; Torfing, 2016).

As a general trend in the research and practice of collaborative governance, the public actors involved are mainly public administrators, whereas politicians are positioned at arm’s length from the collaborations (Sørensen et al. 2020). If politicians play a role, it is usually to commission public administrators to participate, to allocate resources or to endorse governance outputs. Consequently, democratically elected representatives often end up with two options. First, they can accept decisions made in collaborative governance arenas, thereby ending up as ‘policy-takers’ who rubberstamp decisions made by non-elected actors. Or, second, they can insist on their sovereign position as authoritative policy-makers and disregard what the collaborative governance actors have decided. Both options are problematic for politicians and representative democracy alike, as they tend to trigger distrust in politicians and the political institutions. When politicians pick the first option and become policy-takers, questions are raised regarding the relevance of elections and the willingness and ability of political elites to take action when needed to solve problems and move society forward. But when the politicians choose the second option and disregard or even reject the work done in collaborative governance arenas, the actors who invested time and energy in participating are left discontent. Both cases risk nourishing authoritative populism (Mudde, 2016; Rooduijn, 2018).

3. The promise of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*

New strands of democratic theory and research propose a third strategy: that politicians engage in close and continuous formal as well as informal dialogue with relevant and affected publics (see e.g. Hendriks, 2016). This is exactly what happens in the huge collaborative endeavour to ‘shape the future together’ in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa, where politicians play an active role in all phases in the collaboration processes. Politicians initiated the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* project, and they have focused on securing broad support among public administrators and public employees. Moreover, the politicians have supported the hiring and training of staff with competencies to design and facilitate the collaboration processes. Finally, they are taking...
active part in developing and governing the different sub-projects. The role that politicians play as both leaders and participants in the collaborative governance processes allows them to make decisions in ongoing dialogue with the local community members rather than being either policy-takers or sovereign policy-makers. Collaborative policy-making between politicians and citizens is important for several reasons. Firstly, it can strengthen the ability of politicians to provide well-informed, innovative political leadership. Hence, input from societal actors is likely to enhance the effectiveness and innovativeness of government responses to complex and turbulent governance problems, such as global warming, pandemics and migration, as well as strategies for promoting economic growth and prosperity (Torfing, 2016). Moreover, continuous dialogue between politicians and members of the local political community enhances the mutual understanding and trust between them, and can potentially reduce the polarisation between different groups in society (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019a). Those benefits do not depend on whether the collaborative process produces consensus between the involved actors. Negotiations that result in a balanced decision that take all the different voices into account are a cornerstone in democratic decision-making, and collaborative governance is a productive tool for making this happen. In a nutshell, successful collaborative governance promotes and thrives on a certain kind of collective political intelligence, defined as “a realistic and deep understanding of what the disagreements are, what it would require to make decisions that satisfy several views, and what the costs would be of making decisions that produce losers” (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). The collaborative governance processes in *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* hold the potential to nourish the collective political intelligence in the province.
Comment 7
The need to systematise relationships with stakeholders to make collaborative governance work

Jacob Torfing, Roskilde University, Denmark and Nord University, Norway

1. Introduction

Democratic governments are facing two pressing challenges: they are confronting a growing number of complex societal problems that call for new and innovative governance solutions, and their populations have become more competent, critical and assertive and want to participate more directly and actively in the making of the decisions affecting their daily lives than the institutions of representative democracy allow. Failing to deal with these challenges might be fatal, as the accumulation of unsolved societal problems and the persistent ignorance of the new demands for enhanced democratic participation may deepen the distrust in elected governments and nurture the rise of authoritarian populism that will undermine liberal democracy.

By introducing collaborative governance into the heart of government, the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* project (‘Building the Future’ in English) aims to kill two birds with one stone. The involvement of elected politicians, civil servants, policy entrepreneurs, researchers, organised stakeholders and citizens in collaborative governance tends to facilitate creative problem-solving while creating new opportunities for effective participation in public governance. When a diverse set of actors interact, they will tend to disturb each other’s views and ideas, and this disturbance will tend to stimulate mutual learning and the creation of innovative solutions that outperform the existing ones. The manifold actors participating in the collaborative innovation process will most likely develop shared ownership over the new solutions, and they will feel empowered by their ability to influence key decisions. In short, bridging the widening gulf between government and citizens by expanding collaborative governance may enhance both input legitimacy through more inclusive participation and output legitimacy through the construction of better-quality governance solutions that hit the target.

What is remarkable about *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is that collaborative governance is not merely introduced as an *ad hoc* tool that is used sporadically when other hierarchical or market-based forms of governance have been tried and found wanting. Rather, the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa is in the process of transforming itself into a platform organisation that, instead of aiming to solve all public tasks and problems by itself, creates participatory and
collaborative governance arenas to mobilise a broad range of societal ideas and resources in order to boost policy innovation and deepen democracy. In essence, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is a platform supporting the formation and adaptation of different arenas, including arenas for reflection on problems and needs and thematic agenda setting (e.g. think tanks, citizen projects, open budgeting), arenas for future-oriented design, experimentation and learning (*Gipuzkoa Lab* and experimental projects), and arenas for strategic development and knowledge production (reference centres and strategies organised as consortiums, foundations or partnerships). The collaborative governance platforms and multiple arenas are meta-governed by the Project Office and the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa.

The scale and sincerity of the organisational investment in collaborative governance is considerable, and continuous attempts are made at advancing the collaborative governance model to local municipalities and other provinces, governments and countries. The consistent, long-term political commitment to the expansion and deepening of the collaborative governance model is strong, as is the willingness to learn and adapt. Hence, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* has a real potential for developing a new type of interactive political leadership (Sørensen, 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019b) whereby elected politicians receive valuable inputs from relevant and affected actors to better understand the problems at hand, design innovative solutions that work in practice, and to test and implement new and bold solutions through a combination of top-down and bottom-up experiments.

Whether the potentials of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* are realised depends on the systematic efforts to ensure the inclusion and alignment of a diverse groups of public and private actors and to lead the co-creation of new and better governance solutions. To that end, this text reflects on the need to systematise relationships with stakeholders. The discussion draws on state-of-the-art literature on collaborative governance and public innovation (Peters *et al*., 2022; Torfing, 2016) as well as experiences from a three-day workshop with people from *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*.

### 2. Inclusion and empowerment of the participants in collaborative governance

The basic idea of collaborative governance is to involve a group of interdependent actors in collaborative processes based on open deliberation that lead to better outcomes due to the possibility to exchange and pool experiences, ideas and resources (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Research points to the importance of involving actors with a strong interest in getting the problem at hand solved.
and actors with the power, authority and expertise to solve the problem (Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). Here, stakeholder analysis is important to identify the relevant as well as the affected actors and motivate them to participate (see Bryson, Cunningham & Lokkesmoe, 2002). *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* uses stakeholder analysis to map relevant and affected actors and to aim to represent different sectors in the collaborative arenas to be able to draw on their different inputs. Sometimes existing networks in the public, private and civic sectors are asked to select representatives. However, an unresolved problem is that some citizens are not represented by existing networks and organisations and must therefore be reached in other ways.

Stakeholder type tends to vary with the goal and ambition of the collaborative arena. The broad inclusion of different communities and citizens is important for enhancing democratic legitimacy, the involvement of competent and knowledgeable actors is crucial for enhancing governance effectiveness, and diversity is important for producing innovative solutions (Sørensen and Torfing 2017). Hence, depending on the purpose, conveners must ask openly who can help them to solve a particular problem or task in accordance with the stipulated goals and ambitions. Posing and answering this question helps conveners to identify relevant and affected actors and build a dream team around the problems and task that needs to be defined, solved and/or explored.

The inclusion of societal stakeholders in collaborative governance arenas is important because they have crucial experience with problems and possible solutions. More than 200 organisations, associations and groups have participated, but some continue to go it alone without benefitting from cross-boundary collaboration. The participation of elected politicians is also important because they require input to understand problems and design-wise solutions and because they have the authority to secure the implementation of new and bold solutions. Here, the picture is mixed; some are actively participating in collaborative governance while others are not, either because they have a traditional view of political leadership or because they see themselves as a kind of civil servant. Lastly but importantly, civil servants and administrative personnel must be included in collaborative governance because they possess valuable professional knowledge and expertise that is strictly necessary for collaborative governance to produce legal, effective and feasible solutions. Many civil servants initially thought that the collaborative governance initiative was a political communication stunt and that it limited their support and involvement in the project. However, middle managers are frequently involved in the collaborative governance arenas, either as participants or facilitators, and the administrative personnel is gradually won over, although there is still some way to go before the administration adopts collaborative governance as a core governance principle.
Collaborative governance thrives on inclusion, but including all relevant and affected actors is often impossible as there are simply too many of them. Hence, some actors must be excluded. *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* sometimes decides to exclude actors such as trade unions that will tend to act as veto-actors, preventing or blocking joint decisions. Some actors exclude themselves because they do not want to participate or have limited resources and capacities. The external exclusion of potential participants is supplemented by an internal exclusion (Young, 2000), which happens when actors join a collaborative arena but never voice their opinion. Broad-based inclusion is a key goal for *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* and sought to be obtained by operating with different degrees of inclusion in collaborative management, joint workshops, hearings or newsletters. Hence, actors are not either ‘in’ or ‘out’, but may participate in different ways.

While relevant actors are often quite powerful, affected actors may not have the knowledge and resources required to ensure effective participation. This calls for the empowerment of weaker actors, and perhaps also disempowerment of the stronger actors, who need to understand that steamrolling the weaker actors may undermine the collaborative endeavour. Like all other similar initiatives, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* struggles to involve young people and does not reach citizens on the fringes of society. However, there is a continuous effort to use new tools for stimulating participation, including digital tools, action groups, citizen assemblies and bridge-building within local ecosystems. The experience is that participation itself has an empowerment effect, but there are also special efforts to empower participants. External consultants are sometimes brought in to empower young people.

3. **Alignment and conflict mediation in collaborative arenas engaged in learning and experimentation**

The Provincial Council has considerable convening power, as societal actors are keen to participate when invited. The prospect of having a real impact on public governance by participating in collaboration on a relatively neutral platform is also conducive for generating participation. A final factor is the recognition of the mutual dependence between the invited actors in the sense that they are able to achieve things together that none of them would otherwise be able to do on their own (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Now, when relevant and affected actors are brought together in collaborative governance arenas, the alignment of their expectations, ideas and interests is crucial to be able to construct a common ground for joint problem-solving. Mapping the motivation and discourse of the participating actors may help
to construct a storyline that aligns the actors (Bryson, Cunningham & Lokkesmoe, 2002), perhaps through multivocality, whereby different actors agree on a certain formulation of common goals but interpret the key terms in different ways (Padgett & Ansell, 1993). In *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, stakeholders sometimes come to the table to get money, but proactive efforts to frame the collaborative process often help to change expectations and facilitate alignment. It has also proven helpful to spend time explaining goals, ideas and arguments, as well as exploring overlaps between the participants.

Since some actors come to the table with different interests, ideas and proposals, collaboration is rarely easy and conflict may eventually arise. Here, it is important to understand that conflict and collaboration are not necessarily antithetical. Much depends on how we define collaboration. Some define collaboration as an effort to obtain unanimous consent, but collaboration may also be defined as a constructive management of differences (Gray, 1989). The latter definition facilitates collaboration between a diversity of actors who may sometimes disagree on key issues, but facilitation and conflict mediation is required to prevent small and productive conflicts from growing and becoming destructive. In *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, conflicts sometimes prevent the actors from moving forward and making effective governance decisions. Facilitators aim to prevent or mediate emerging conflicts by making the conflicting views and ideas explicit in order to explore whether the conflict is founded on misinformation, misunderstanding, prejudice or a lack of trust. Other helpful tools for conflict mediation include the use of boundary objects, joint fact-finding missions, attempts to depersonalise conflicts and taking the money out of the equation and focusing on goals.

Collaborative governance between a diverse set of aligned actors may enhance effective and democratic governance, but it may also stimulate innovation. When actors come together in collaborative governance, they tend to disturb each other’s way of thinking about problems and solutions, and out of this disturbance comes learning and ultimately innovation. Stimulating learning and innovation, for example through brainstorming, scenario building, design thinking and role games with exchange of perspectives, is of utmost importance. *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* aims to stimulate learning and catalyse innovation by allocating resources to co-creation processes, linking collaborative arenas to external sources of inspiration and by creating an open and safe space for thinking aloud and testing new ideas in joint discussions.

The experimental approach of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* project also stimulates learning and innovation. Developing and testing prototypes through joint action facilitates rapid learning, and the iterative rounds of design, testing and revision of new solutions facilitate the scaling of what works in practice.
and helps to break down the boundary between design and implementation. Experimentation may be assisted by some more or less well-defined procedures and templates that can be tailored to specific projects. In *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, there are several competing templates for conducting real-life experiments with new governance solutions. The evaluation and integration of the different templates is needed to further support the experimental strategy.

4. **Leading collaborative governance processes for innovation and democracy**

People who believe that collaborative governance processes are spontaneous, self-organised and bound to succeed are wrong. Like all other governance processes, collaborative governance requires the exercise of leadership. Strategic leadership can help to design organisations amenable for collaborative governance. Political leadership can set the overall policy goals and collaborative leadership can convene actors, build trust, facilitate collaboration and catalyse innovation (Torfing, 2016).

Collaborative governance presents challenges to leadership, as we lack a clear understanding of what it entails. In recent decades, we have trained leaders to focus on achieving a particular set of goals and pre-determined performance targets by mobilising their own organisation, budget and employees and securing compliance with administrative rules. Now, public leaders and managers face the formidable challenge of learning how to lead cross-boundary collaboration and foster new and innovative solutions (Hofstad *et al.*, 2021). Instead of leading inward and downward, they must learn to lead outward and focus on relations, which is an entirely different ballgame. *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* focuses on collective and distributed leadership. Collective leadership bids farewell to heroic leadership exercised by a single individual in charge of mobilising other actors, instead perceiving leadership as an effort to create spaces where participants can enact their joint leadership for the common good (Ospina, 2017). Similarly, distributed leadership decentres leadership by involving participants in collaborative governance in performing different leadership tasks (Bolden, 2011). At a more concrete level, this means that leaders in the collaborative governance arenas in the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* project are looking for answers together with the participants rather than presenting answers to them.

The horizontal and decentred character of leadership in collaborative settings raises the question of who leads and what leadership model is chosen. While leadership might be shared among a large group of participating actors, some actors will play a bigger leadership role than others. This begs the
question of who is exercising leadership and how the exercise of leadership in collaborative arenas is organised. Research shows that an empirical distinction can be drawn between three models of collaborative leadership: 1) leadership might be shared by all actors and exercised in and through joint decisions made in plenary meetings; 2) leadership is exercised by a small group of key actors from different organisations who form an inter-organisational steering group; and 3) leadership is exercised by a lead organisation where one or two leaders are supported by a small secretariat or a secretary (Milward & Provan, 2006). The three models are sometimes combined into a hybrid leadership model. The formation of an inter-organisational steering group otherwise tends to be the preferred solution, as it combines inclusion with speed and competence. That said, in reality, the lead actor model is found fairly often in collaborative settings, which also applies in Etorkizuna Eraikiz, where lead actors tend to be accepted as collaborative leaders because they can offer strong ideas, good facilitation skills and much needed professional expertise.

A key challenge for Etorkizuna Eraikiz, which has been spearheaded by politicians, is that elected politicians often have little time to participate in and to lead collaborative governance processes. They may delegate the day-to-day collaborative leadership to their administrative aides, who over time become adept meta-governors (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). However, there is a limit to this delegation. Not only are meta-governing administrators gaining a lot of power vis-à-vis the elected politicians through their role as gatekeepers vis-à-vis the collaborative governance arenas, there are also many political issues about inclusion and exclusion, goal setting, budget frames and the endorsement of final decisions that call for political rather than administrative meta-governance (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016). A solution to the problem of the politicians’ time pressure may be the formation of leadership teams with the participation of both politicians and administrators who combine administrative and political meta-governance.

5. Learning from Etorkizuna Eraikiz

There is much to learn from studying the Etorkizuna Eraikiz project. Strong and persistent political commitment is important to launch such a visionary and large-scale collaborative governance initiative, and a supportive context in the shape of a well-organised civil society and a tradition of collaboration must be in place. However, this text has shown that political vision and the commitment to solve complex problems and to deepen democracy through collaboration with citizens and organised societal stakeholders is not enough. What is also needed to get off the ground and produce concrete and tangible
results is an effort to systematise the relationships to the many different stakeholders through attention to inclusion, alignment and leadership, without which *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* will be nothing but good intentions and will have nothing to show. Hence, the lesson to learn for other governments that want to improve the quality of public governance and representative democracy by replicating the ideas and practices of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is that the day-to-day effort to meta-govern the collaborative governance arenas while supporting the entire endeavour through strategic leadership is paramount to success.

On a larger scale, the efforts in Gipuzkoa to reform democratic governance by promoting the collaboration between politicians, public administrators and local community members, including businesses, civil society organisations and citizens, is noteworthy because it envisages a remedy against the mushrooming examples of authoritarian populist political leadership in Europe and other representative democracies. This remedy is a turn to interactive political leadership. Populist political leaders such as former US President Donald Trump claim to represent the people against a corrupt political elite consisting of some kind of united political establishment of elected politicians (Mudde, 2016). Moreover, they treat those who disagree with their standpoints as enemies of the people, whether they be opposition politicians or citizens with diverging views and opinions. The antagonist approach to political opponents and the disrespect for political pluralism among populist political leaders foster political distrust and question key democratic values and the very institutions of representative democracy.

In contrast, interactive forms of political leadership employ collaborative forms of governance as a platform for politicians and citizens with different views and ideas to come together in an effort to find a way forward for society that takes all the different views and perspectives among politicians and stakeholders into account. Moreover, interactive political leaders seek collaboration with other societies rather than turning their backs on the outside world (Sørensen, 2020). Interactive political leaders assume responsibility for guiding and participating in the negotiations that lead to decisions and activities that effectively address challenging problems and exploit emerging opportunities because they are well informed and enjoy broad support. A key objective for interactive political leaders is to convene the right actors, that is, actors who can not only contribute to making well-informed and innovative strategies and projects but who also secure the commitment needed to implement the decisions made. Although these are still early days, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* stands out as a highly interesting experiment that deserves keen attention from researchers and decision-makers interested in finding a pathway forward for democracy.
Comment 8  
Public-sector communication to engage citizens in collaborative governance

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The challenge facing Etorkizuna Eraikiz and almost all public-sector organisations globally is the challenge of involving and engaging those who are served, and it has been established as vital for a blooming society (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004). The operation environment within which public-sector entities function has changed, and citizens in their own self-selected communication bubbles (Sloterdijk, 2011) tailor their communication according to their needs, recommendations, interests, preferences and life choices.

Scholars suggest that an urgent shift has occurred from a ‘culture of controls’ towards citizen-centred engagement (Bourgon, 2011), and there much relies on communication (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). For public-sector organisations this poses the challenge of moving from organisation-optimised communication to citizen-optimised communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019): how to answer citizen questions while keeping the organisational agenda of public good in mind?

Digitalisation of communication has altered the way in which citizens seek to interact and engage with public administrations (Lovari & Parisi, 2015). Citizens are expecting a more dynamic, interactive and co-creative experience when collaborating with authorities and public-sector organisations (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Arranging for citizens to provide feedback is not enough to meet this need; as stated by Muñoa (a workshop participant from the Gipuzkoa Provincial Council), and in the words of the public servants (2022): “Collaborative governance is not communicated; collaborative governance is in itself communication”.

During the COVID-19 crisis, authority communication became very central for most societies in their survival (Chen et al., 2020). Descriptive of this new environment are the “heightened citizen expectations regarding dialogue, influence, and the heavy reliance on real-time and social media” (Luoma-aho et al., 2021, p. 20). Despite these visible new needs, ‘networked publics’ (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 154) are not all created equal and do not react the same, but range from highly engaged (cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally) producers of content to individuals who are unengaged, unable
to engage or remain in a state of engaged passivity (van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009), making the task of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* more central than ever. Public managers need to update their understanding of what now counts as citizen engagement and re-architect the citizen experience of engagement to also consider the more negative relationships that may form while citizens engage.

So, what should future citizen engagement contain? If engagement is central for democracy (Bourgon, 2011; Delli Carpini *et al.*, 2004), then ensuring it also in the future becomes important. As summarised well by Muñoa, engagement as a construct actually brings the relationship between citizens and organisations to a more equal level. Subsequently, this will affect the development and maintenance of organisational legitimacy and other intangible assets such as trust or positive reputation, which again strengthen the relationship further.

If public-sector communication is defined as “strategically planned communication between organisations and their stakeholders, enabling public sector functions, within their specific cultural/political settings, with the purpose of building and maintaining the public good” (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 33), to help *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* move forward to the future of citizen engagement, and keep all the valuable lessons learned, the following seven Future Citizen Engagement propositions are suggested (see Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2021):

1) *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* must ensure that the willingness and empowerment to engage in the future is apparent on both sides: citizens and authorities. These can take the form of ensuring sufficient time and resources are dedicated it, as well as providing a safe emotional climate to operate and develop it.

2) There is always the potential for either positive or negative manifestations of engagement, hence preparation is needed to address and receive both. While negative engagement may burden both authorities as well as citizens experiencing problems, ways to work through these in dialogue are needed, and sometimes also support structures such as therapy and work counselling for authorities on the front lines.

3) The expectations for outcomes of citizen engagement should be maintained at a realistic level. This is not so often due to individual aims but rather to the project nature of development: many applications, projects and plans simply aim too high in relation to the resources available. Keeping in mind the available resources and potential will ensure future citizen engagement stays sustainable for all involved.
4) Citizen engagement is a process; there is no clear start or end. This may be a challenge for those authorities hoping to report back on successful cases and developments, as there are no clear outcomes of this. In fact, citizen engagement that fails may be easier to distinguish than a good, continuous dialogue.

5) The ultimate aim of improving society should always be kept in mid by those involved. Despite this, both citizens and public-sector organisations have their own personal targets to meet and reach. Sometimes society is improved by enabling dialogue and disagreement, and these should be valued as highly as agreements and decisions.

6) All engagement is increasingly global, so collaboration across borders and cultural division lines are necessary. This was a surprise lesson learned by many governments during the COVID-19 pandemic, as foreign governments were able to reach and target their citizens unexpectedly, and citizen networks shared information in real time across cultural and country borders. Understanding how citizens are connected globally will help make more lasting results.

7) Citizen engagement is a team sport, enforced by others in society, not just related to individual citizens and their experiences. Understanding which stakeholders to collaborate with and who they can connect with and engage in dialogue, even unexpectedly, are future skills for all public authorities.