Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty

Published by Leuven University Press

Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty: Pracademic Lessons from the Basque Gipuzkoa Province.

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Comments from scholars

Comment 9
Notes on the evaluation of Etorkizuna Eraikiz

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Etorkizuna Eraikiz is a collaborative governance initiative of Gipuzkoa Province, which is in Spain’s Basque County and home to a little over 700,000 people. Reflecting the province’s long history of self-governance and cooperative production, the initiative aims to involve citizens in a variety of projects aimed at pressing issues, such as balancing work and family life, protecting the environment, developing high-technology industry, and preserving the Basque language and culture. Citizens and civil society organisations work with public officials and project staff to identify issues and design solutions. Thus, it is a policy initiative with not only multiple activities, involving a variety of stakeholders, but one with a wide range of substantive goals and outcomes.

How can such an initiative be evaluated? Some tentative answers to this question are presented in this essay, which is based on ideas discussed in, or inspired by, a workshop with Gipuzkoa government leaders and affiliated experts who gathered to consider how to measure and evaluate Etorkizuna Eraikiz. Hopefully, the ideas and suggestion that follow will be helpful to the leaders and staff of Etorkizuna Eraikiz as well as to those involved in similar collaborative governance initiatives around the world.

One key suggestion from the workshop was that concentrating on trust of government might help focus the evaluation. Indeed, in an important sense, Etorkizuna Eraikiz was launched to demonstrate that the provincial government was making an effort to listen to the public and to address some of their most pressing concerns. The effect of Etorkizuna Eraikiz on trust is likely not only direct, shaping the views of those who directly participate in its activities, but also indirect to the extent the broader public becomes aware of Etorkizuna Eraikiz and views its themes and activities positively. In fact, Etorkizuna Eraikiz promotes itself through branding and social marketing across the province. And, importantly, the provincial government measures awareness of Etorkizuna Eraikiz and trust of government through regular
annual telephone surveys of the population. Survey results shared at the workshop suggest that awareness of Etorkizuna Eraikiz is increasing and that those who have heard of the initiative report higher levels of trust of the provincial government. This certainly represents a promising start to the task of evaluating the effects of Etorkizuna Eraikiz on trust.

A few comments and suggestions, however, can be offered to build on what has been done. To begin with, although awareness of Etorkizuna Eraikiz is associated with trust, we remain unsure of which way the causal arrow goes: it could well be that more trusting citizens simply have more interest in (and thus awareness of) a government initiative like EE. To better get at causation, the province could run some survey experiments in which a treatment group is randomly assigned to receive information about Etorkizuna Eraikiz (such as a brief description), the trust questions are asked after this treatment, and results compared with a control group that receives no information about EE. This could be done in the context of a future annual telephone survey or, less expensively, with an online market research panel. Although online panels are not as statically representative, randomised experiments still provide solid causal evidence with non-probability samples. (Think about randomised clinical trials in medicine, for example, which are done mostly with volunteers and not a random sample of the population.) Having experimental evidence that awareness of Etorkizuna Eraikiz actually causes higher trust of government would add support to the suggestive patterns observed in the annual telephone surveys (mentioned above). For more on experimental approaches to public management research, including survey experiments, see James, Jilke & Van Ryzin (2017).

Another strategy, if survey data exist for nearby provinces such as Bizkaia, is to do what is termed a difference-in-differences analysis of trust before and after the implementation of Etorkizuna Eraikiz in Gipuzkoa. The method is simple and straightforward: if trust is increasing in Gipuzkoa after the implementation of Etorkizuna Eraikiz but stagnant or declining in Bizkaia, over the same years, then we have more reason to believe Etorkizuna Eraikiz may be causing the increased trust observed in Gipuzkoa. In other words, we have better evidence to rule out the possibility that the trust trends in Gipuzkoa merely reflect broader trends across Basque society in how people view government. Of course, this method depends on having survey measures of trust (or related attitudes toward government) asked in the same years in both provinces. For general introductions to the difference-in-differences strategy, see Remler & Van Ryzin (2022) and Angrist & Pischke (2014).

Although trust is a foundational motivation as well as general aim of EE, some in the workshop worried that survey measures of trust would be
considered too subjective and intangible to justify government spending on *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* to sceptical stakeholders. Thus, some additional approaches could be considered to generate metrics that capture more concrete outcomes. Because *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* contains multiple reference centres focused on diverse policy areas, each could be required to come up with a detailed list of tangible goals (or targets) in consultation with citizens, centre staff, civic organisations and public officials. Undoubtedly, this would take some effort and would be complicated by the usual difficulties of defining outcomes, setting goals and developing indicators. But it would help to encourage reference centres to make their targets fairly simple, concrete and measurable. Once agreed upon, the targets could be the objects of regular (perhaps quarterly) reporting by each reference centre. The results could be compiled and a report on the *percentage of targets achieved* – for each reference centre as well as for *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* as a whole – could be presented to the provincial government and related stakeholders.

A final suggestion, somewhat outside the box, is to set up an independent panel of judges to assess the success of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. With such a varied package of activities and aims, a comprehensive evaluation may simply be beyond the scope of social science measurement and analysis. Moreover, many complex objects in society are evaluated by judges and not by measurement methods: gymnastic events, boxing matches, legal cases, book prizes and dog shows, to name a few. But, curiously, using judges is not an approach used to evaluate public policies or programmes – although it could be. The judges would have to be selected carefully to reflect a relevant range of perspectives and expertise. They would need to be independent and shielded from the influence of public officials, programme staff or other actors with a vested interest in a given outcome (which is what happens with trial jurors or financial auditors). They would need to be able to request information, conduct site visits, observe meetings and gather other facts about the programme as needed. They could then deliberate and render a judgement, much as an appellate court issues a ruling. But in this case, they would be rendering an evaluation of the programme: What are its strengths, and weaknesses? Is it effective? Is it efficient? Does it appear to be accomplishing its goals? Admittedly, this would remain a subjective judgement – but one that is independent, careful and considered. In the end, such a judgement may come closer to what government and the public really need from a policy evaluation than does a report on the inevitably limited and ambiguous quantitative indicators that make up the usual social science approach.

Evaluation of a complex, multifaceted collaborative governance initiative like *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* is challenging – but necessary. A focus on trust provides
a broad focus, and various strategies to estimate the initiative’s impacts on trust are possible (as discussed above). But more concrete evidence may be needed, and it might be necessary to think outside the box about alternatives to traditional social measurement and analysis – such as the use of independent, expert judges – that could help render a useful and credible evaluation of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. 
Comment 10
Looking at the impact of collaborative policies on intangibles and outcomes through dynamic performance governance

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1. Managing sustainable growth in collaborative networks through learning-oriented performance governance

The *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* (EE) case study provides thought-provoking insights on the role of intangibles as driving forces for a collaborative network governance primarily lead by the civil society. Among such factors are: 1) social cohesion around core values rooted in cultural traditions (e.g. language and gastronomy); 2) natural and historical assets; 3) human and social capital; and 4) policy innovation. All of them are at the same time framed in an ideal continuity with history, and consistently transposed into the future (Bianchi et al., 2019, p. 104).

The fast and intensive growth in both the collaborative network and the achieved outcomes experienced since the inception of the EE ‘model’ suggests how intangibles (e.g. leadership, active citizenship and stakeholders’ aptitude to leverage natural and historical assets) can make a difference for generating community value. In the EE case, the intangibles profiling the civil society have been the main trigger for successfully deploying the endowment of available shared strategic resources (most of which are intangible too) to generate community outcomes.

The involvement of local government and other stakeholders in the collaborative network, and the adoption of formal institutional structures and coordinating mechanisms (e.g. the reference centres) have certainly contributed to foster consistency among the different network initiatives inside a holistic – though multifaceted – political entity and organisational ecosystem. However, the efforts at which the local grassroots organisations and volunteers have pursued new ventures in various collaborative domains may look even more intensive and pervasive than the pace at which the network governance has perhaps been able to cope with such growth. This condition is a potential factor of unsustainable network performance in the long run, which requires proper methods to plan the future growth of EE, with a focus on capacity building and network legitimacy, to attract, involve and retain stakeholders. Though the final outcomes for EE are undoubtedly associated with community value creation, relevant intermediate outcomes
are related to the network leaders’ capability to pursue growth in the network governance capacity and legitimacy that may sustain the growth in the volume and scope of the projects carried out.

Network capacity not only refers to the number of people working in the projects and to their skills, but also to the number and mix of stakeholders involved and the consistency of their profile with the initiatives carried out. Governance legitimacy is another strategic resource to consider for assessing collaborative network growth sustainability. It is related to the level of trust and mutual accountability among network members and from the external stakeholders towards the network itself. This asset provides a fundamental performance driver affecting the acquisition and retention of stakeholders, which in turn may allow further network growth to be sustained.

Both network capacity and legitimacy sustain policy-makers’ ability to consistently leverage and deploy social cohesion around core values, natural and historical assets, and human/social capital. An expression of such ability is policy innovation, to position EE in an ideal continuity with history towards a future that may gradually incorporate new values, consistently with those transmitted by past generations.

Obviously, such strategic resources cannot be procured in the market (Bianchi, 2016, p. 73). Their acquisition and retention are outcomes of value generation processes for which policy-makers should be able to detect and affect the driving factors. Hence, enabling EE leaders through proper planning methods to enhance their learning processes in the implementation of policy innovation for leveraging local intangible assets may prevent growth crises and foster enduring performance outcomes.

There is a relative paucity in the public policy literature on collaborative network lifecycle and growth crises. Among the few studies in the field, Ulibarri et al. (2020) and Imperial (2022) identify four main lifecycle stages describing what they define as the “useful life of collaborative network governance”, i.e.: 1) activation; 2) collectivity; 3) institutionalisation and stability; and 4) decline or reorientation. Each stage underlies specific challenges and opportunities for collaborative network growth and sustainability. In this regard, two insightful issues of debate have been raised by Ulibarri et al. (2020, p. 634), i.e.: “How do collaborative leaders or participants identify the need for reorientations or recreations, and how can they successfully manage these changes? Is decline inevitable, or could adjustments in leadership, accountability, and process dynamics stave off premature endings?” Two more debating issues can be added, i.e.: What kinds of crises can be encountered through collaborative network lifecycles? How could learning-oriented performance governance help in preventing or counteracting them?
Greiner (1972) distinguished four main organisational growth crises. In the early stages of growth, a **leadership crisis** can be generated by the unaddressed need of a formal professional management (organisational structures, budgets, incentives, etc.) to deal with an increasing number of employees. In the next growth stage, an **autonomy crisis** can be generated by the unaddressed need to delegate power. In a further stage, a **control crisis** can happen due to lack of coordination between autonomous field managers. In a later stage, a **red tape crisis** can be caused by a lack of collaboration to counteract an excess of departmentalisation. To prevent these crises, for each phase Greiner suggested adopting tailored organisational responses through the management focus, the organisation structure, the top management style, and the control and management reward systems. The implicit idea behind this conceptualisation is that organisational growth generates more complexity, requiring an increasing resort to formal and informal structures and processes with a different nature and focus, as business maturity advances.

Conversely, framing and addressing the risks of unsustainable growth in public governance networks is perhaps a more complex and less predictable issue than for single organisations. This is primarily due to the intrinsic wickedness of network governance and community value generation processes in today’s public service ecosystems (Osborne, 2021), and to the complexity of pursuing coordination and collaboration at an inter-organisational level, consistently with the level of the individual networked organisations (Bianchi, 2021; 2022).

In collaborative network governance, different potential kinds of crisis may converge together to affect the growth and survival of the projects undertaken. For instance, a **red tape crisis** may jeopardise the take-off of the collaboration, because of prevailing cultural systems on the basis of which an excessive emphasis is given to the formal structure and features forging governance agreements. At the same time, a **leadership crisis** can be a potential challenge for collaborative networks in their start-up and early growth stages, because of poor or ineffective efforts towards enhancing individual leadership in a blurred setting where roles, decisions and accountabilities are carried out outside of formal institutional boundaries.

Fostering leadership cannot only refer to an individual dimension, which initiates change, provides vision, instils values, and fosters trust and commitment. Enhancing **collective leadership** (Mintzberg, 2009, pp. 152–154) by leveraging individual leadership is also needed in the medium term. This is to keep direction, to adapt to internal or environmental change, to gather support and to manage relationships not only within a single field or project (e.g. a reference centre), but also with other stakeholders, both in and outside a network.
At societal level, collective leadership entails a pervasive tension by people towards the common good, inspired to a deep feel of belonging to a community. In this regard, Crosby & Bryson (2010, p. 211) refer to **integrative public leadership** as “bringing diverse groups and organizations together in semi-permanent ways, and typically across sector boundaries, to remedy complex public problems and achieve the common good”. As noted by Cooper et al. (2006, p. 84), “high ethical citizenship conceives of citizenship as a responsibility [...] Low ethical citizenship, on the other hand, conceives of authority as hierarchically distributed”.

Therefore, particularly in the described governance context, the concepts of leadership, trust and active citizenship are nested in one another. Detecting the performance drivers triggering each of such intangibles and those through which collaborative policies deploying them may foster local area attractiveness and community wellbeing is vital for effective performance governance (Bouckaert & Halligan, 2007). Sustainable performance at local area level shows, in the medium to long run, a stabilised aptitude of collaborative policy outcomes to build up and retain a balanced set of shared strategic resources, such as common goods. Common goods are natural, social or historical assets which are rooted in a region so as to profile its intimate identity. Examples are ecosystem attributes (e.g. quality, preservation and enjoyability), availability of green spaces, respect for the environment, usability of cultural heritage usability and social awareness of it, safety, financial stability, and active citizenship (Bianchi, 2021, p. 340). Common goods provide a suitable basis for improving (or ensuring stability of) the quality of life that can be achieved and the attractiveness of the local area.

A learning-oriented approach to planning may enhance individual leaders’ aptitudes to frame and share with other stakeholders their values and visions, as well as the necessary actions for attaining community outcomes. It can also enhance building leadership, legitimacy, trust, and conflict management (Bryson et al., 2006). There is a need for innovative governance methods based on facilitated modelling for performance dialogue among the stakeholders involved to enable them to explore the cause-and-effect relationships between the policies adopted, intangible assets and community outcomes. Embodying such a learning-oriented approach in performance governance may substantially help stakeholders enrich the planning process. Through this view, facilitated modelling can support stakeholders in outlining sustainable policies and identifying a set of performance drivers affecting the accumulation and retention of the intangible shared strategic resources in which the EE ‘model’ is rooted, and their impact on community value generation.

Just such an innovative framework can be provided by ‘dynamic performance governance’ (DPG). The next section will illustrate the logics and
potential benefits of DPG for managing sustainable growth and detecting/counteracting early signs of crisis in implementing the EE model.

2. **Dynamic performance governance as a learning-oriented approach to policy analysis for pursuing sustainable outcomes in collaborative networks**

DPG aims at fostering performance dialogue in boundary-crossing settings by bridging three scientific domains, i.e. System Dynamics, Performance Management, and Collaborative Governance. It adopts a selective approach to foster stakeholder learning by modelling policy sustainability across three interconnected stages, i.e.: 1) outlining the targeted end-results; 2) exploring performance drivers affecting them; and 3) setting policies to build up and deploy strategic resources for affecting performance drivers (Bianchi, 2021, 2022; Bianchi et al., 2019).

Strategic resources are stocks of available – tangible and intangible – assets (e.g. natural resources, cultural heritage, image, skills, leadership, trust, population, quality of life) shared in a context by different stakeholders.

The level of such assets changes over time through flows, as the end-result of network governance policies, through which stakeholders affect community outcomes by leveraging shared strategic resources consistently with organisational resources. Different levels of intermediate outcomes are identified through DPG as the end-results which impact final outcomes. For instance, an increase in local area attractiveness can be affected by a plurality of intermediate outcomes, which gauge a change in more specific strategic resources on which such attractiveness depends (e.g. human capital, infrastructures, green areas, services to households and businesses).

Performance drivers refer to the critical success factors for attaining community outcomes. To allow policy-makers to promptly perceive and counteract the effects of discontinuity on performance, they should be continuously monitored for ‘weak signals’ of change.

Performance drivers are gauged as ratios comparing a strategic resource endowment to a benchmark. A performance driver numerator may refer to different categories, such as: 1) allocated capacity (time; skills; scope, pervasiveness and inclusiveness of collaboration; authority; incentives); 2) shared organisational/individual capacity (e.g. information, contacts); 3) community capacity (e.g. common goods, refurbishment sites); 4) legitimacy (e.g. trust, mutual accountability); 5) service delivery (e.g. percentage of population reached by community services, percentage of enforced policy interventions); or 6) financial (e.g. lien-to-market-value, tax arrears, public
funding). All these categories underlie possible effects on agents’ behaviour, which impact on the change in other shared strategic resources. For instance, allocated time, shared information and contacts may affect change in trust. Modelling such relationships requires a selective approach.

While most performance management and governance is focused on financial and tangible measures through a static perspective, DPG adopts a feedback view through which policy-makers are engaged in framing the causes behind the observed patterns of behaviour showing system performance over time. Given the dynamic complexity of framing causation in outcome-based performance governance, the adopted approach is descriptive – rather than prescriptive. To avoid the risk of modelling turning into an illusion of control, DPG helps stakeholders in framing the system’s structure and behaviour, and learning from a continuous comparison between the real world and the model (Lane 1994). This requires that stakeholders actively participate in model building: their explicit and tacit knowledge, together with coded data from formal information systems, are prerequisites for learning (Forrester, 1994).

DPG may help stakeholders to detect lack of performance sustainability and policy resistance, which occurs when “policy actions trigger feedback from the environment that undermines the policy and at times even exacerbates the original problem” (Ghaffarzadegan et al., 2011, p. 24). For instance, promoting the image of a place to attract tourists, in order to counteract a financial crisis, without also making investments in infrastructure, may generate an improvement in a bounded set of shared strategic resources (e.g. tourist visits, image, business investments, available jobs) in the short run. However, in the long run, it would deplete other shared strategic resources (e.g. cultural heritage usability, quality of air, sanitation, public space saturation and safety), which would cause the place’s image, attractiveness and quality of life to deteriorate, leading tourist visits to drop.

Through learning forums (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Douglas & Ansell, 2021), DPG enables performance dialogue (Rajala et al., 2018). It provides ‘boundary objects’ for implementing collaborative platforms (Bianchi, 2022), which supports change processes in decision-makers’ attitudes and mental models (Moynihan, 2008, p. 111).

3. Conclusions

This paper has illustrated the potential problems that static planning or emotional collaborative networking may generate in the medium to long run, in pursuing community outcomes. We suggested DPG as a learning-oriented framework for performance governance to deal with sustainable network
growth and to foster stakeholders’ ability to frame the cause-and-effect relationships behind the outcomes from implemented collaborative policies.

The described approach can strengthen the quality of policy analysis by addressing a number of unsolved issues in outcome-based performance governance, such as: enhancing performance dialogue and policy alignment, managing conflict, fostering trust and legitimacy, building up and deploying shared strategic resources, framing policy trade-offs, dealing with intangibles and non-monetary performance measures, and turning collaborative governance from a discrete event to a continuous process (Bianchi et al., 2021).

In the EE case, DPG could be useful to outline how sustainable collaborative policies may affect intangibles like trust, leadership, active citizenship and culture, in which key policy ideas are rooted. It can also be helpful in supporting stakeholders in outlining policies that, by leveraging such intangibles, may affect performance drivers leading to sustainable community value creation.
Comment 11
Looking about achievements and results: Further steps to evaluate *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*

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Collaborative governance, once an ideal, is becoming a reality. A wide range of ways of organising public decision-making fall under the umbrella of collaborative governance. Broadly speaking, it is any process of public decision-making in which a wide set of stakeholders, including the members of the general public, participate directly in decisions guiding the planning, design, enactment and implementation of a public activity, project or policy.

This notion of broad engagement in governance decisions grows out of many different traditions of economic, political and social thought. The projects examined in this volume most clearly flow out of two lines of thought. The first, originating with Joseph Schumpeter and Karl Polanyi, asks how can democracy and capitalism coexist? The need to regulate the economy and the constant effort by economic stakeholders to influence democracy pushes for an external authority to solve problems of governing. That external authority is, by its nature, undemocratic. The second line of thinking, of which Elinor Ostrom is the central figure, grapples with vexing problems involving the management of common pool resources, such as fisheries, water and land. Ostrom shows that a practical approach to decision-making that is incremental and sequential and involves all affected parties in direct discussion and negation can solve common pool problems. In this ‘bottom-up’ approach to problem-solving communications is the key. These two important streams of thinking have fuelled efforts at collaborative governance, deliberative democracy and polyarchic governance throughout the world.

The Schumpeter–Polanyi perspective and the Ostrom perspective each point to different approaches for evaluating the performance of collaborative governance. The former perspective is concerned with the health of democratic processes, and the latter is concerned more with outcomes, especially the ability of people to overcome the limits on collective action and the provision of public goods.

At this point in the evolution of these new modes of governing what is most needed are systematic, empirically grounded evaluations. Much of the academic literature on these new modes offers theorising and advocacy, but practical, hard-nosed empirics are lacking. What is happening in these many experiments in Europe and around the world? Are people arriving at
better decisions? Is the legitimacy of government improving? This volume offers just such a rich examination of the experiments in collaborative governance undertaken by the government of Gipuzkoa Province in the Basque Autonomous Community of Spain. *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* – ‘Building the Future’ in English – launched 125 experiments in deliberative democracy, participatory budgeting and other forms of collaborative governance. The very important task now is to assess what we can learn from these experiments about building the future.

First, I encourage the readers of this volume and of any other work on the proper design of policy and government to think like a structural engineer: focus on the failures. If we want to make a structure, such as a bridge, stronger we must stress the model to the point of breaking and understand where and why it failed. In her classic study *Governing the Commons*, Elinor Ostrom emphasised the instances of failures of deliberation, negotiation and problem-solving in order understand what forms of governance can and cannot solve. Ostrom emphasised the incremental and sequential nature of problem-solving about collective goods. Solving difficult problems, such as public goods provision, is especially hard. People must understand and accept each other; they must adjust rules of decision-making to the particular problem; and they must communicate with each other. It takes time to build trust, to make appropriate rules and to communicate.

The failures are important for both internal and external learning. Evaluation, after all, is ultimately important because any project, or, in this case, many projects, offers us an opportunity to learn. Internal learning is the gathering and use of information by those involved in a project to improve the project as it evolves. During the fourth workshop, the participants in the seminar undertook an exercise of writing ten simple questions that could aid in the evaluation of a project. These included “Would you come back?”, “Was your problem solved?” and “Were all of the people who should be here, here?” The answers to these and other questions can help those involved in a project improve what they are doing. They are not the end point of evaluation, but the opening of a dialogue with participants in a project (such as those who use the programme’s services) to find out what happened and how the project can be improved.

External learning is the gathering of information about a project by those outside the project in order to ascertain whether the project should continue to receive support and what aspects of the project might be useful elsewhere. External learning is essential for ensuring the accountability of the project management. It is also the vector through which the lessons of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* will carry to other places in Euskadi, in Europe and around the globe.
How far can experiments in collaborative governance go before trust breaks down or before a project cannot be managed practically?

Second, follow (and document) the flow of communication. Elinor Ostrom emphasised that the advantage of polyarchic governance (or collaborative governance) grows out of improvement in communication. Better and faster communication helps solve three essential problems: (i) collective action, (ii) monitoring, and (iii) commitment (trust). It is critical to solve problems of collective action in order to arrive at optimal outcomes – outcomes that benefit all of us collectively, but that can only be accomplished if the group works together. Monitoring is of obvious importance in order to ensure that all parties comply with an agreement. And commitment, which is rooted in mutual trust, ensures that deals do not break down, and that the participants will continue to work on the problem in the future.

The 150 distinct projects under the *Etorkizua Eraikiz* umbrella have compiled extensive amounts of text associated with their activities, including minutes of meetings among stakeholders. This is a rare opportunity to analyse the communications within collaborative governance projects, as a wide range of different sorts of projects have been conducted simultaneously. Some surely have fared better than others in building communication flows and trust among stakeholders. An intensive evaluation of that text offers an extremely valuable resource for those outside of these projects to examine how collaborative governance actually happens. In addition, this body of text is also an interesting opportunity for the further development of text analysis and natural language processing tools that have been developed over the past two decades.

Third, understand the alternatives to what is put forth. Often, the alternative to collaborative governance is 1) a hierarchy or top-down decision-making, 2) a market, or 3) an external authority. Participatory budgeting, for example, is proposed as a novel way to set budgets in ways that reflect the preferences and information of the public broadly. Budget requests reflect the needs and observations of citizens. The alternative is that administrative agencies make budget requests that are approved or amended by an elected council. A different form of expertise and knowledge is involved in each of these two sorts of budgeting. There may be advantages to each, and trade-offs from relying on one of these approaches versus the other.

In evaluating collaborative governance, it is essential to understand the alternatives. It is widely argued by advocates that collaborative governance is ‘better’, but better than what, and in what ways?

1) What is the counter-factual form of government against which collaborative governance is to be compared? What form of decision-making
would occur in the absence of the collaborative governance programme? We could compare the experiment to what government organisations did before the implementation of a collaborative approach, or to the decisions, activities and performance of other government agencies in other municipalities or provinces with similar responsibilities.

2) What is the standard for improvement (not success, but improvement)? Was the outcome different than results that occur with an alternative form of decision-making? Was the implementation more expedient with collaborative governance? Was there wider uptake and acceptance?

Fourth, understand the process. Collaborative governance changes the basic process of citizen involvement, from one of a principal (a voter) holding an agent (elected official) accountable to one in which the citizen has agency. It will be helpful in evaluating the Etorkizuna Eraikiz projects to map the different points in the process and ways in which people are involved.

In my thinking about collaborative governance and related innovations, what is distinctive is the point in the decision-making process at which people are engaged. In polyarchic forms of government, stakeholders and even the broader public are engaged throughout the process, especially early on. In other forms of government decision-making, the people are engaged in the end. For example, in siting an electric powerline, collaborative governance would engage people in planning and design decisions. In common practice, public hearings are held late in the process, and then only to allow people to vent their frustration. As a result, all that the public can do is acquiesce or complain. The public is made out to be the bad guy because people end up opposing many projects. Collaborative governance reverses this process. The public and stakeholders are engaged early in deliberations, and throughout the decision-making process. How does this shift in the process improve either relational outcomes, such as trust, or objective factors, such as time to completion, project costs or distribution of benefits from the project?

One important challenge of collaborative governance is the tendency for participation to be low and highly skewed toward higher-educated and higher-income citizens when a participatory project makes high demands on people’s time and attention. Participatory budgeting in Scotland, for instance, generated relatively low numbers of proposals, and almost all of them came from people with college degrees. In this regard, collaborative governance may only magnify inequities that arise in traditional forms of representative and bureaucratic governance. At least since the 1950s, studies of urban politics have found that there are low levels of participation in city elections and meetings, and participation skews heavily toward the highly
educated. A key challenge for all collaborative governance projects is to find new ways to design public engagement to broaden the set of people involved and ideas communicated. For example, deliberative polling used in the State of Texas to advise the selection of energy projects in the 1990s helped people overcome practical obstacles of participation, such as providing parents of young children with babysitters. Engaging with the same set of participants that show up in city council elections or to protest a local government action will only replicate the inequities evident in more traditional forms of representative or bureaucratic governance.

Gipuzkoa and other communities in Europe and around the world are in the early stages of the experimentation with collaborative governance. As we embark on this journey, it is useful to keep Elinor Ostrom’s sage insight in mind: solving problems through collaborative, deliberative and polyarchic decision-making is incremental and sequential. A community first may try one idea, and, if that does not yield the desired results, it will experiment with another idea, adjusting to what it learned from its own experiences. With that in mind, the evaluation of the experiences in Gipuzkoa can inform both those in the region seeking to solve problems and those elsewhere in the world interested in the potential of collaborative governance.
Comment 12
Some reflections about the future of Etorkizuna Eraikiz

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Etorkizuna Eraikiz revolves around the most precious – and fragile – object in democratic politics: the future, what is yet to come, as a matter of free, collective deliberation.

In times of uncertainty and seemingly constant crises, it is difficult to make the future the centrepiece of political debate. One tends to find comfort in the certainties of the past, a shared sense of history, the memories that ground our individual and collective sense of belonging. The future, in contrast, appears indeterminate, treacherous, likely calamitous. War, pandemics, economic downturns, the escalating climate crisis… it is hard to organise our politics around a hopeful engagement with the future, particularly when increasing precarity threatens the livelihood of the younger generations.

This predicament is compounded by the short-circuiting of our traditional mechanisms of collective debate and democratic participation. Growing inequality and political fragmentation foster disenchantment with representative institutions.

Gipuzkoa is exposed to these trends, as it grapples with the localised impact of systemic, planetary changes. Etorkizuna Eraikiz intervenes in this complex set of issues by experimenting with alternative arrangements for the design of public policies. The term ‘collaborative governance’ is a useful catchphrase for this sort of initiative, but it does not fully capture the diversity of initiatives that have come together under the umbrella of Etorkizuna Eraikiz over the last decade.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this experience is its very origin: an institution like the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, with full authority to design and implement public policies, willingly sharing its executive power with civil society. In so doing, the institution makes itself accountable to the stakeholders – and citizens – who agree to take part in the myriad acts of debate and decision-making that follow, for all those actors are now in a position to judge whether the commitment to ‘collaborative governance’ leads to truly participatory processes and better public policies, or is simply a rhetorical strategy for partisan gain.

The scale of Gipuzkoa and its high level of social capital make this accountability much more genuine. This is a community of little more than 700,000 residents, evenly distributed in a small territory, and traversed by
multiple forms of civic associationism and political activism. This means that the claims of any institution to inclusiveness can be easily put to the test. A process like Etorkizuna Eraikiz would quickly come to naught unless those claims were supported by effective participation – people would simply ‘exit’ these forums if their involvement did not render any concrete benefits to them. The fact that civic involvement in these initiatives has grown over time, and that none of the actors that engaged in these processes of collective reflection has walked away, should count as the primary success.

In addition to the experience of the different reference centres, labs and think tank, perhaps the most significant impact of Etorkizuna Eraikiz may be in its ability to change the administrative culture of the Council itself, in the extent to which collaborative governance is built into the habits of civil servants. This will determine whether the spirit (if not the actual programmes) of Etorkizuna Eraikiz will continue when the leadership of the Provincial Council changes.

The distinct social and political conditions of Gipuzkoa – a small and prosperous region with a high level of political autonomy, control over key tax revenues, entrepreneurial state institutions and relatively low levels of income inequality – make the experience of Etorkizuna Eraikiz not easily replicable in other contexts or jurisdictions. International observers can nevertheless draw practical lessons from the successes and failures in making specific issues – ageing and dependency, electric mobility, social use of the Basque language, employability and social exclusion, advanced manufacturing, etc. – tractable to public participation through reference centres and living labs. They will also be able to learn about how processes of ‘invited participation’ can generate genuine change in the thinking and workings of the institution that sets these processes in motion – or, alternatively, what are the factors that limit the potential of these processes and reduce them to mere acts of consultation or ‘placation’ (to use Arnstein’s famous ‘ladder of participation’ scheme, Arnstein, 1969).

Going forward, there are several features of this experience that require further reflection. The first one is the role of formal institutions of public deliberation. Gipuzkoa has a Parliament that should in principle serve as the primary forum for discussing public policies. Yet Etorkizuna Eraikiz has operated largely outside this institutional channel of public debate, reaching out directly to civil society actors to formulate priorities and experiment with new ways of designing policy. The challenge here is common to most parliamentary institutions in liberal democracies, which are seen as representing the rigid agendas of political parties rather than serving as a conduit for civil society concerns. Etorkizuna Eraikiz convened a forum with all
political parties represented in the Provincial Parliament, but Parliament itself was not a decisive forum to articulate the aspirations expressed through *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. How to reinvigorate formal institutions of public debate and make political parties more permeable to civil society agendas remains a key challenge in the effort to imbue institutions with the principles of participatory policy-making.

A second point of reflection is the definition of priorities for experimental, collaborative policy-making. *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* was conceived, organised and funded by the Provincial Council, and the choice of areas of work tracks closely the concerns of the Provincial Council itself. Public opinion surveys suggest that these concerns are broadly shared by the Gipuzkoan citizenry, but they are key socioeconomic issues – housing, precarity and working conditions, employer–employee relations – that do not lend themselves so easily to experimental formats of collaborative governance.

As *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* closes this cycle of activities, a clear trade-off becomes apparent. The institution at the heart of the initiative has shared some of its authority to define public policies. In return, it has gained greater access to the insights, aspirations and competencies of civil society actors. When the process is successful, this leads to a virtuous cycle in the relationship between institution and society: it reinforces civil society actors, generating greater pluralism in the identification of problems and solutions, and at the same time strengthens the role of the institution as an authoritative venue for collective, future-oriented deliberation.