The contribution of Action Research to policy learning: The case of Gipuzkoa Sarean

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This article is about a six year policy learning process named Gipuzkoa Sarean in the Basque province of Gipuzkoa. In the article we reflect on how action research contributed to policy learning. The process consists of three stages:

2009-2011: Initiation of the project and development of a work method;

2011-2013: Government learning and organisational change;

2013-2014: Social learning and the shift to a new approach to territorial development.

For each stage we describe the background and main goal of the research project, the participants in policy learning, the work method and agenda, the status and roles of policy makers and researchers and the results.

Our reflections on-action are used to discuss the conditions for social learning. Our argument is that the distinction between *practice* and *praxis* is crucial for understanding the conditions for social learning. Our use of the concept praxis is inspired by Paulo Freire and we interpret it as the connection of reflection and action in the same phase of the process. If they are separated into theory and practice they do not create the conditions for social learning in a policy process. They might create outcomes, such as recipes for policy or political discourses, but not social learning.

Key words: policy learning, territorial development, territory, policy maker, theory, practice, praxis

Introduction: Policy learning

In this article we reflect on a six year policy learning process named Gipuzkoa Sarean (GS) that we have participated in as action researchers. The aim is to share our perspective on *how action research can contribute to policy learning in a concrete policy process.*

A press release on the 21st of May, 2014 said "the General Deputy of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa declared that Gipuzkoa Sarean is about knowing how to share, about having an approach to territorial development based on counties… he congratulated the government for having achieved this *model* built *among all* where Orkestra has been essential in building a scaffolding on which a system of *shared governance* has been constructed" (El Diario Vasco, 2014).

These words synthesise the main argument in the article, which is about policy learning as a central process for changing the approach to territorial development and action research as a critical element in policy learning. The reference to Orkestra[1], which was the research organisation that contributed the action research perspective, shows how policy makers interpreted the role of action research (scaffolding for their policy process). We use the term *policy makers*, for persons responsible for making policy, especially in governments, referring to both elected politicians and civil servants (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014, p. 16).

In the literature, policy learning is an ambiguous term (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Borrás, 2011). There is ambiguity about what policy learning is, as well as how to study policy learning processes (Borrás, 2011). However, there seems to be an agreement within the policy learning literature that policy learning does not actually occur unless there is some kind of policy change. This conclusion is also valid for other approaches to learning, where learning is defined as a change in behaviour (see for example Crossan et al., 1999; Daft & Weick, 1984). Policy learning has a closer similarity to organisational learning than individual learning (Kemp & Weehuizen, 2005). It involves groups of people in organisations as well as people in different

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[1]   Orkestra, the Basque Institute of Competitiveness is a research organisation linked to the University of Deusto

organisations. Policy learning therefore challenges collective discourses and behaviour within organisations as well as between different organisations.

As mentioned above there are different approaches to what policy learning is. There is diversity when it comes to *who* is learning, *what* they are learning, and the *result* of the learning process (Bennett & Howlett, 1992, p. 278). We agree with Bennett & Howlett (1992) that this is a complex issue, that policy learning is a complex, multi-tiered phenomenon which can affect decision-making organisations or processes; specific programmes and instruments used to implement policy; and/or the ends to which policy is developed.

In the description of the case we will use Bennett & Howlett's (1992) distinction between three different types of policy learning: *Government Learning*, *Lessons drawing* and *Social Learning* (Bennett & Howlett, 1992, p. 289). Government learning is the learning process of state officials and is mostly oriented towards organisational change. It refers to the administrative capacity of the government to develop, direct and control resources to support the discharge of public policy and programme responsibilities (Donahue et al., 2000, p. 384) as well as the rules, procedures and resources governing administrative action designed to improve the performance of public administration (Hou et al., 2003, p. 300).

Lessons drawing focuses on the lessons that come from interaction in policy networks which improve or change existing policy tools, such as programmes, often through evaluations.

Social learning is the widest form of policy learning, and involves different actors in society, such as firms, universities, training centres or civil society, as well as governments and government related agencies. Social learning is mainly about the exchange and change of ideas. The wide approach makes change, if it happens, into a paradigmatic shift.

We interpret learning not as an exclusively cognitive process but as a process at the intersection of reflection and action which creates a change in behaviour. That is why we use the term *praxis*, which we interpret as change pushed by the connection of reflection and action in a dialogue process. This is inspired by Freire (1996):

…as we attempt to analyse dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself, the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such a radical interaction that if one is sacrificed, even in part, the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world (Freire, 1996, p. 68).

GS is designed as an action research project based on three cornerstones: participation, action and reflection (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014). Participation has led to the interpretation of GS as a dialogical process. Action is interpreted in terms of change which is produced in terms of both tangible (change in policy instruments) and intangible (mutual influence of the participants in the attitudes and behaviours of others) results. Reflection has been interpreted in terms of a continuous tension between the discussion of concepts and frameworks and decision making processes.

This article is a result of reflection in-and on-action (Schön, 1983) of the policy learning process in Gipuzkoa Sarean. We have participated in the process since its beginning in 2009. One of us as an insider, and after 2010 as an academic director of the project, and the other as an outsider. Throughout this time we have been part of the Orkestra team. When we refer to *researchers* without specifying anything else, we refer to the Orkestra team in GS, which currently consists of eight people (two full time, one half time and five with a smaller part time participation).

Since we have participated in the project we have lived its development. Our experiences from the long term dialogue process are part of the project data. This data comes from hundreds of discussions and debates, formal and informal, with actors and researchers in the project. After formal meetings we have systematically held debriefing sessions among researchers, going over what happened, how everybody felt and what to improve for next time. Another part of the data is literal minutes from formal dialogues in meetings and workshops.

In the next section of this article we share a thick description (Denzin, 1989; Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 1949) of the process, to show how action research can contribute to policy learning and to give enough data to enable the reader

to construct a meaning and interpretation of it. A thick description is not a neutral description with objective facts. How we describe, what we describe as results, and what we choose not to describe, are a result of our interpretation of the process.

After the description, we reflect on-action; on what we have learnt in six years in GS about the contribution of action research to policy learning.

Policy learning in Gipuzkoa Sarean

Gipuzkoa is one of the three provinces of the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain. The Basque Autonomous Community has around 2,200,000 inhabitants, about 700,000 of whom live in Gipuzkoa. The Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa is one of the three provincial governments in the autonomous community, each of which collects taxes. The provincial government is formed by different deputies (the equivalent of ministers, the General Deputy being the equivalent of the Prime Minister). Each deputy works with a series of directors. The case focuses mainly on the Cabinet of the General Deputy.

Gipuzkoa is divided into counties, which are supra municipal and infra provincial levels. There is no county government, but since the late 1980s municipalities have jointly maintained county development agencies that operate at county level. This means that the governments that operate at county level are municipalities in an inter municipal cooperation framework. There are eleven counties in Gipuzkoa.

The description of the case has been divided into three stages that show different approaches to policy learning. These stages are:

a) 2009-2011 Initiation of the project and definition of a work method;

b) 2011-2013 Government learning and organisational change;

c) 2013-2014 Social learning and the shift to a new approach to territorial development.

2009-2011: Initiation of the project and development of a work method

This stage lasts from 8th September, 2009, when the launch meeting for GS took place, to May 2011 when elections led to a change in government.

Background and main goal of the research project

The rationale for the project was the diagnosis of the Head of the Cabinet of the General Deputy that, due to a trend towards individualism, the territory of Gipuzkoa had diminishing social capital, which was a competitive disadvantage. This can be seen in the words used by this politician at this stage:

> 'Initial hypothesis: individualism has increased and social capital has decreased; this has an effect on competitiveness' (Minutes from Steering Committee meeting, 9th October, 2009).

> 'We had the idea that communitarian values had been an important factor for the development of Gipuzkoa. And with this project we try to intervene in values and in the community factor, in a way that has a positive effect on competitiveness' (Minutes from Steering Committee meeting, 30th June, 2010).

The Head of the Cabinet was a sociologist. A former university lecturer whose PhD thesis was about social capital, he had developed several research projects in this field. He was part of the government as a representative of EAJ-PNV, considered a Christian Democrat party. He played a critical role at this stage.

When interviewed about the influences he had when proposing this project, he answered that he had been influenced by the social doctrine of the church, nationalism (communitarian-republican) and a sociological approach based on phenomenology and focused on culture, values and social behaviour (Costamagna, 2014).

The goal of GS was defined as reinforcing social capital in Gipuzkoa in order to improve competitiveness.

Participants in policy learning

The policy learning process took place in the steering committee for the project, which was the space where policy makers and researchers met to discuss and make decisions on the project. This steering committee was formed by four policy makers, five researchers representing the universities of Mondragon, Oxford and Deusto (Orkestra) and three people subcontracted to develop the communication strategy for the project.

In the strategy document for the launch meeting, which was written by researchers, there was a paragraph about the role of this committee:

> The way the steering committee is articulated will be critical, as the first and strongest intervention area of the programme is this committee itself. It should be a privileged context to experiment the generation of social capital and the articulation of real participation in decision making. It is necessary to discuss and concretise in an open atmosphere the roles and the responsibility of the steering committee and the roles of the different participants in the committee (Strategy: GS, internal document, 25th September, 2009).

The idea that in order to generate change in social capital in the territory, the steering committee itself had to learn and change was proposed in the documents, but was not yet part of the shared vision of the participants.

Work method and agenda

The initial stage of the project consisted of three diagnoses oriented to give a perspective on social capital which could later be used to enter into a dialogue with leaders in different territorial organisations in Gipuzkoa:

a) A diagnosis of how issues related to social capital were shown in mass media;

b) A survey to measure the social capital ascribed by public opinion to institutions and organisations in Gipuzkoa;

c) Interviews with 62 regional leaders in four fields (firms; knowledge organisations; cultural organisations and organised civil society; political parties) about how relevant social capital had been in their life and professional careers. The results were discussed with them in seven workshops.

Our interpretation of the process is that at this stage policy learning was mainly happening in the dialogue process in the steering committee, as although the leaders who were interviewed participated in a couple of workshops each, they barely changed their behaviour as a result. In total the steering committee met 22 times to work on the process. The discussions in the committee were mostly to do with the operational elements of the project:

who to call to workshops, what to discuss, how to open the process to participation, the legitimacy of each of the participants to influence the process etc.

Status and roles of policy makers and researchers

When the project was initiated the direction of the steering committee was in the hands of two policy makers, one of them with research experience. In the main they were the ones making decisions about the process and researchers were seen more as executors of what was decided than partners for reflection and decision making.

On the 15th May, 2010 it was decided that a new formal role would be created, that of research director of the project. This role was taken by a researcher. At this moment a more balanced relationship emerged between researchers and policy makers.

Results

In tangible terms, the results at the end of the period were seven intervention proposals (seven documents) linked to the discussions held with territorial leaders on the challenges for Gipuzkoa in terms of social capital.

But it is not this tangible result that we are interested in. In this section we try to describe the results in terms of policy learning, understood as change in behaviour.

Policy makers and researchers learnt to work together in a dialogical approach. This was a change from the initial stages of the project, when policy makers mainly asked for data and reports and researchers delivered them. This might sound like a simple thing, but it was a complex compound of: shared vision on the future of the project; trust between some politicians and some researchers; honest dialogue; readiness to mutually influence and be influenced.

The following extracts from Steering Committee minutes support this argument.

> The Head of the Cabinet finalises saying that this Project is being a good experiment for everyone who is part of it, because it is allowing us to meet each other and learn to work together (Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa,

> San Sebastián City Council, Orkestra – Basque Institute of Competitiveness, University of Mondragon, Bizkaia Xede and University of Oxford), which also constitutes a way of social capital generation (Minutes from Steering Committee meeting, 30th June, 2010).

> We have materialised the relationship network among us and the learning path up to now has been positive for everybody (Minutes from Steering Committee meeting, 20th December, 2010).

Another result was that awareness grew that action research contributed to policy learning. This was made explicit by the Head of the Cabinet when interviewed in 2013.

> I value what we learnt at this stage. I did not have the opportunity to take it into practice then because of the change in government, but I am using the method in other environments in my political career (Personal communication, 31st January, 2013).

For us this is a sign of change in behaviour and consequently, policy learning. There was thus a clear feeling that what was developed together was more than concrete decisions. It was an approach to learning together.

2011-2013: Government learning and organisational change

This stage starts in May 2011 with the formation, after elections, of a government led by a different political party and finishes in May 2013 when the Directorate for Territorial Development was created in the General Deputy's cabinet.

Background and main goal of the research project

The party that won control of the government of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa was a coalition catalogued as radical left wing. They had won the elections with participation as a central element of their programme. During their campaign they had criticised the previous government's project, Gipuzkoa Aurrera, which proposed a framework for public private partnership in Gipuzkoa. The criticism was that it only reflected the views of the small number of project participants. Another feature of this new government was that many of the politicians had previous experience as mayors.

After the elections there were several informal meetings between researchers and the new government. The goal was to decide whether the project would continue or not. In an interview held with the new Head of Cabinet in 2013, he underlined that:

> … one of the reasons why we decided to continue was the flexibility we found in the research team to redefine the process (Costamagna, 2014).

Analysing these first steps in retrospect in 2014, the same politician said:

> We were coming from a political situation of confrontation… there were broken bridges that we had to reconstruct… also in the economic sphere… but we had to do it in a different way… we could construct a new type of networks, not only govern the already established…, change the established in a non-revolutionary way… we continued with Gipuzkoa Sarean in order to build a bridge… if we don't understand this, we cannot understand why Orkestra is here… we decided to play this game with all its contradictions… (Minutes from meeting of the big group, 13th March, 2014).

The government did not have a closed agenda for the research process. The first approach to defining it emerged in a workshop in November 2011, when researchers and policy makers analysed what the project had been until then and together started to reformulate it. The two main concepts in the previous stage: social capital and competitiveness, were questioned. The government preferred not to use the concept of capital as a central concept in the project. The generation of trust was nevertheless considered relevant for the project and the term bridging became representative of the construction of trust relationships. Territorial development replaced the previous competitiveness concept. The goal of the project was thus reformulated into "bridging for territorial development". At this initial stage, there was no shared understanding of exactly what this goal meant. However, we suggest that the process led to the definition and the development of a new approach to territorial development based on the participation of territorial actors, mostly county agencies in the first stage.

Participants in policy learning

We now describe the different groups that the government decided needed to participate in GS.

The core of the reflection process was a group, informally known as the small group, composed of the head of the Cabinet of the General Deputy, a councillor and a civil servant from the Cabinet and two local members of the research team from Orkestra.

Some issues were also analysed and discussed in the so called big group, composed of all the deputies (ministers) and their directors. When working with the big group the team of researchers from Orkestra also consisted of non-local researchers coming from other parts of Spain, Norway and Argentina.

Though different universities had participated in the previous stage, the Orkestra team was the only one that remained active throughout this period.

Work method and agenda

The work method, inspired by action research, consisted of meetings of the small group where policy makers shared their challenges and researchers brought concepts and frameworks that helped reflect on them. After the reflection, policy makers made their decisions, which they shared with researchers in order to continue the reflection process. When there was an issue that was considered critical for the government the debate was taken to the big group, which had a more formal approach using three hour workshops. Based on what the big group had said, the small group continued working on the next steps. During this period there were 22 meetings of the small group and eight of the big group.

In order to give a better insight into the procedures followed in these groups we now discuss one part of the process in more detail. The government had set some basic conditions for the approach to territorial development they wanted for GS:

- The approach would have a departure point in reflection, but would be an actionable approach that would in time be implemented.

- It would be based on the participation of territorial actors.

- It would be an approach that would be based on counties (supra municipal but infra provincial territorial units).

(Extract from the document *Propuesta de una nueva aproximación al desarrollo territorial, 2013*).

In the big group meeting held on the 25th May, 2012 the group worked with an international expert on territorial development, Francisco Alburquerque from Orkestra. After a short introduction, different approaches to territorial development were discussed and the opinions of the government members gathered. In a later meeting of the small group (on 16th June, 2012) it was agreed that the government would adopt the following definitions of territory and territorial development for GS:

- *Territory:* actors that live in a place with their social, economic and political organisation, their culture and institutions as well as the physical environment they are part of.

- *Territorial development*: the process of mobilisation and participation of different actors (public and private) in which they discuss and agree on the strategies that can guide individual as well as collective behaviour.

These definitions were the result of combining Alburquerque's concepts with the basic conditions from the government and the discussions in the small and big groups.

In the subsequent meetings the small group worked to concretise this definition. Based on what the government members had said in the previous workshops, a list was made of the critical territorial actors (organisations) for the Provincial Council. The result was a list of 14 actors that were targeted in the process. There had been a discussion in the big group about whether the county development agencies should or should not be considered to represent the counties in GS. Some thought that they represented the old approach to territorial development, and could not lead the process to develop the new

model. In the small group meeting of 4th July, 2012 policy makers told re-searchers that they would work with county development agencies.

These reflection and decision/action cycles were repeated throughout the whole period, with a significant change of rhythm in July 2012 when the Head of the Cabinet changed. The new politician asked for more meetings of the small group. In January 2013 this formalised into weekly meetings of the small group while the frequency of the big group discussions reduced.

Status and roles of policy makers and researchers

At the end of the period with the previous government there had been a change in the balance of the status of policy makers and researchers in the project, and this empowered researchers. The relationship researchers pro-posed to the new government was based on a perspective of dialogue be-tween equals, and not on a hierarchical dependency of researchers on policy makers.

One of the red lines that policy makers and researchers agreed was that there was a clear division between reflection and learning processes (which policy makers shared with researchers) and political decision processes (that were only for policy makers). Decisions on the research process were made together.

However, the minutes of the big group meeting on 27th June, 2012 show that: "one of the participants said that sometimes the line between the space for reflection and the space for decision is very thin, because reflection can condition the decisions made". Our interpretation of the process is that this kind of critical interpretation of each other's roles created the tension be-tween policy makers and researchers that kept the process going in a bal-anced way, without either of them dominating the debate.

The tension just described was considered a positive tension by us, re-searchers. Besides, we had proposed action research as a research method for GS since 2009, and we were aware that the participatory approach the new government was looking for favoured action research over other approaches. One of the things that we valued most at this stage was that we were invited into a reflection process to co-generate a new approach to territorial devel-

opment, and not invited into the process once the government had decided what they needed.

Results

By the end of this period, the result of policy learning was an invitation from the government to some of the territorial actors targeted to participate in the construction of a new approach to territorial development for Gipuzkoa (mostly county development agencies). Together with researchers the government had worked on a ten page document that synthesised the proposal and was constructed from the debates and decisions worked out in the small and big groups. In summary, the result of the policy learning process was the government's decision to develop a new approach that would:

– Build on the definitions of territory and territorial development previously defined (Alburquerque, 2012).

– Take into consideration that they were confronted with a situation of regional complexity (Karlsen, 2010).

– Have a strategy not based only in the planning approach but also the learning, power and cultural approaches (Mintzberg et al., 1998).

– Foster social innovation in terms of innovating in the way territorial actors related to each other (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005).

– Approach change in terms of the four stages proposed by Gustavsen (1992).

– Continue co-generating the new approach to territorial development following the co-generative action research model by Greenwood & Levin (2007).

(Adapted from the document Gipuzkoa Sarean, Propuesta de una nueva aproximación al desarrollo territorial, 2013.)

This government proposal was not the only relevant result. The learning process gave a solid base for the Head of the Cabinet and his team to propose the creation of a new Directorate for Territorial Development, which they

considered was necessary to take the proposal for a new approach to territorial development into practice. Following Bennett & Howlett (1992), we interpret this decision as the government learning process evolving towards social learning.

2013-2014: Social learning and the shift to a new approach to territorial development

This stage lasts from May 2013, when the Directorate for Territorial Development was created, until June 2014, when we are writing this.

Background and main goal of the research project

The new team leading the Directorate for Territorial Development brought a new language into the process. They said that the goal of GS was to construct a new pattern of relationships between the Provincial Council and the county agencies in Gipuzkoa. This meant empowering agencies were to play a more active role in the territorial development of Gipuzkoa. Agencies were not understood to be a goal in themselves, rather an intermediary actor that could help connect the provincial council with other territorial actors such as firms, unions, universities, technology centres and as a final goal, with citizens.

Participants in policy learning

In order to work with the county actors, the government created two different spaces. The first was named the Inter County Table (ICT). This was the place where policy makers from the provincial council met county development agency presidents and managers. The other space was designed for county development agency staff, and its goal was to train them as facilitators who would later assist in the development of the new pattern of relationships in their counties. We will call them county facilitators.

The participants in the process of government learning also changed. The new Director of Territorial Development led the small group in this stage. To keep the Head of the Cabinet of the General Deputy involved a third group, called the intermediate group, was created.

The researchers from Orkestra who had participated in the previous stage continued working in the government learning process, and also accompanied policy makers in the two new groups, but with a different intensity. They were very active in the county facilitator training process, and played a secondary role in the ICT, where the government hired a consultancy firm to help them. In one of the meetings to co-ordinate the process, the difference in the roles of researchers and consultants was discussed. Consultants said that their role was to facilitate the workshops of the ICT to reach the goals the government had set, but they did not provide content (concepts and frameworks) about territorial development or the development of new patterns of relationships. It was researchers who worked with policy makers in the development of this content. Consequently, the policy community we will focus on is composed of: four representatives of each of the 11 agencies (the president, who is always the mayor of one of the municipalities, the manager and two members of staff); six members of government (five elected politicians and one civil servant); three members of the Orkestra team working regularly on the project plus another three researchers collaborating sporadically and two consultants.

Work method and agenda

As in previous sections, we will not only describe the work method but give a more detailed example of how it has recently been used.

The small group has held weekly meetings of two to three hours throughout this period, while the ICT has had morning workshops once a month, and the county facilitators one morning workshop every three weeks.

In order to show how action research principles have been used differently in two processes with county actors, we divide this section into two. First we describe the process in the ICT group and then the process with county facilitators.

a) Work method and agenda in the Inter County Table group

When starting the ICT group with county level decision makers (both mayors and agency managers) the Territorial Development Directorate prioritised

showing that they were ready to distribute power. They wanted to demonstrate that the project was not just a talking shop, but would quickly create visible change. Among other activities, two specific work groups were created: one about employment policy and another about energy (focused on energy efficiency and generation of new activity in the energy sector). These were work groups where government technical staff worked with the county representatives to adapt their plans and programmes to what county representatives saw as relevant. They also invited representatives of the Basque Government and other regional organisations related to employment and energy issues. In these groups there was no explicit reflection on the new approach to territorial development, but they were taking it into practice.

After a few months new programmes, shaped in these work groups, were approved by the government. For example, at the time of writing this article, a new programme is being launched by the Provincial Council for county development agencies to get funds to analyse the energy value chain in every county. The goal is to use the eleven diagnoses to have a good picture of the value chains in Gipuzkoa and foster cooperation processes where small firms will be integrated into new projects for the energy sector. This shared construction of concrete programmes is something new in the relationship between the provincial government and the county agencies.

18 meetings of the ICT and the work groups on employment and energy were held from June 2013 to June 2014, in which there was only one explicit discussion with researchers on the new territorial development model and the construction of a new pattern of relationships. When the balance between reflection and action was discussed in the small group, the Director of TD synthesised the approach to learning in this group when he said:

> … in this group we have had little explicit reflection on the model, but by constructing it, we are learning about the model too (Minutes from small group meeting, 4th June, 2014).

b) Work method and agenda in the training process for county facilitators

The training process for county facilitators followed a completely different pattern. This activity had been viewed as a *training process,* and not as a

structure for decision making. Consequently, much more time was devoted to reflection.

The process, from October 2013 to January 2014, consisted of six morning workshops in which the government's proposal for a new approach to territorial development and a new pattern of relationships was analysed by the agency staff. While analysing this proposal, they reflected on what needed to change to advance the development of the new model. The five areas to work on were:

– To work on the engagement of politicians to develop the new model for territorial development;

– To gain recognition of counties as a relevant territorial level in the new territorial development model;

– To redefine the role of county development agencies in the new territorial model;

– To develop instruments for the new territorial development model;

– To change patterns of communication to help the new territorial development model.

(Minutes from the workshop with county facilitators, 31st October, 2013).

County facilitators shared these contributions with government members (5th December, 2013). The second part of the training process focused on concrete techniques for facilitating participatory processes, and took place from January 2014 to April 2014.

After the meeting in December, the researchers in the small group had a clear perception that it was not possible to continue learning unless reflections were taken into some form of action by county facilitators.

On the 8th January, 2014 this idea was discussed in the small group. In April 2014 the provincial council called on all county agencies to present projects to develop the new model in their counties. The call presented the five work areas defined by facilitators as a guide to the activities that would be funded. All counties presented projects, which were accepted and granted funds. As an example we present the goals of three of them:

– Debabarrena county: Redefinition of participation structures in the county to deepen in the political commitment and identity of the county.

– Oarsoaldea county: Strengthen the county participation forum to align sector forums with it and develop a political forum.

– Buruntzaldea county: Develop a strategic plan for county development.

The goals defined in these projects vary from the type of goal set by the employment or energy groups in the ICT. These goals are set in terms of the development of a new pattern of relationships to construct a new approach to territorial development, while the goals for the ICT were much more concrete. The different approaches to action research in the two groups show that different combinations of reflection and action: that is, different approaches to praxis, lead to different results. After the projects were approved, the first workshop was used for the county facilitators to discuss how having concrete projects would change their learning process. These were some of their answers:

> …we will evolve from talking in general to discussing very concrete problems… there will be more legitimacy of the process and the results… we will change from training to being actors… (Minutes from workshop, 29th May, 2014).

Results

In this stage there were no significant changes in the status and roles of policy makers and researchers. That is why we close this description with a final reflection on results.

Concrete programmes and projects have been discussed in the previous sections. We now offer a more general reflection. To do so, we bring back the definition of territorial development: "territorial development is the process of mobilisation and participation of different actors (public and private) in which they discuss and agree on the strategies that can guide individual as well as collective behaviour". The main practical result to which action research has contributed in the past six years is that there is now an incipient

new territorial development model in Gipuzkoa that responds to this defini-
tion.

Finale: Reflections-on-action

What we have done in the previous section is to present a thick description of
how action research contributed to policy learning in Gipuzkoa Sarean. In
this section we will share our main conclusions on the project based on our
experience as participants in the process.

The difference between theory and practice and praxis

Theory and practice, reflection and action, the abstract and the concrete are
concepts that are often used by academics and practitioners. The distinction
between them is assumed to be clear. Our experience is that the distinction
between these concepts is less sharp and more slippery than assumed. To
demonstrate this we present a conversation with the new Director of Territo-
rial Development. When presenting the new direction to territorial actors, he
said:

> … up to now the government has been developing a theoretical reflection,
> and now we are taking it into practice (Notes from a workshop with mem-
> bers of parliament, 16th May, 2013).

This interpretation differed from the perspective of the politicians that had
preceded him in the government, who had made the decision to create the
new direction. One of them described the process as a continuous movement
from reflection to action, and back to reflection again, when he said:

> … but this was not a circle, it was a wheel, as every new reflection-action
> cycle was taking us one step ahead (Costamagna, 2014).

We analysed these different perspectives in a small group meeting with the
new Director of Territorial Development. By the end of the meeting he
shared the interpretation that there had been action in the previous stage. But
we (researchers) also shared his perspective that, for the newcomer who was
told about the process, this action became theory.

What we have learnt in this respect is that decisions in the abstract have often been underestimated in the project. Abstract discussions were categorised as "just talk" by some participants. But in GS it was as important to decide on the definition of territorial development (decision in the abstract) as on the creation of the new Directorate for TD (decision in the concrete). Decisions in the abstract might seem "useless" before they are concretised, but it is not possible to evolve in a process unless they are made.

Our reflections from GS, as well as from other policy learning processes we have participated in, is that instead of making explicit decisions on the abstract concepts, we often take the underlying frameworks for granted. Processes often move too quickly into the practical formulation of solutions, without an explicit agreement on the nature of the problem. *We too often go from theory to practice, without generating the conditions for praxis.* Theory and practice are interpreted as separate stages and often it is assumed that "the right" theorisation is already there; i.e. the theoretical solution is known in advance. Theory and practice must be simultaneously constructed in a process. We used the examples in this section to present this as an intersubjective process where there is no clear cut line that separates theory from practice. Our contribution in a later section is to come back to this in a way intended to prompt researchers to reflect on how this is affecting their research methods.

The political/ideological dimension of policy learning

Our reflection is that it is important to have an explicit discussion on political/ideological positions in action research processes for policy learning. We interpret *ideology* as the set of beliefs by which a group or society orders reality so as to render it intelligible. There is no policy design or intervention that does not respond to a given ideology, either implicitly or explicitly.

This is often limited by participants' fear of influencing and not being neutral. The argument for neutrality affects not only researchers, but also politicians who have sometimes expressed the fear that any ideological discussion will be interpreted as them attempting to indoctrinate territorial actors. When discussing this we have been inspired by Freire's approach to

neutrality when he argues that '… a moment comes when it is not possible to exist without being subject to the radical and deep tension between good and bad, between dignity and indignity, between decency and shamelessness, between the beauty and ugliness of the world. This means that it is not possible to exist without educators assuming their right or duty to choose, to decide, to fight, to do politics (Freire, 2008, p. 51).'

The challenge is to create a deep and shared reflection process, without anybody pushing their position through. This is where we see that action research, with concepts and approaches such as the co-generative model (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 1992), or the process of awareness (Freire, 1996), can play a role in creating a constructive approach to ideological debate. The challenge is to generate processes in which new concepts and frameworks can be co-generated, overcoming traditionally dichotomised positions in terms of class or political parties that make actors reluctant to participate. This is not easy, given that there are conflicting positions that must not be avoided. One of the politicians, discussing Freire's (1996) approach, described his own position as:

> … we can introduce elements for hybridisation in issues related to competitiveness, internationalisation etc. This will not be a revolution, though we don't give up our political approach… we have to build bridges, the goal is to change patterns of relationship… there are more chances for a shift in paradigm if we relate to each other… the local level is important for this… if we make a programme based on all we believe, it will fail, because as a society we are not ready for it… so we have to choose between implementing what we believe or going for hybridisation, introducing elements that will make the system evolve in a new direction (Minutes from the medium group meeting, 11th December, 2013).

Some participants in GS have shown concern that having an ideological or political position might mean being a partisan and prioritising the interests of a certain group over a scientifically correct solution. But even when we avoid political discussion, we have a political position because it is impossible not to influence a social process in which we participate (Bjørndal, 2004; Hammersley, 1995; Karlsen & Larrea, 2014). We cannot avoid influencing and by influencing we might initiate change. Neither influence nor change is neutral; it will always have consequences that might affect others. We have

proposed action research for policy learning because in it we do not find the claim for neutrality that we have found in other approaches to research.

Synthetising reflections into a framework

We now take our consideration of what happened in GS a step further by synthesising our reflections in a four field table, see Table 1.

We simplify the first discussion in this section, by saying that we have identified two approaches to interpreting policy learning. One is linear, and we describe it as *linear approach from theory to practice.* It is based in the much internalised perception that there is first a stage of designing and planning policy (this is usually the moment when theory is presented and sometimes discussed) and a second stage of implementing it. This is not the approach to learning in action research, but we have found it is taken for granted even in projects labeled as action research. The alternative is based on a *nonlinear approach to theory and practice,* where these stages do not happen one after the other, *and* we continuously and simultaneously plan and implement policy.

The second part of the discussion is simplified by arguing that there are two possible attitudes towards ideological and political debate. One is to keep the ideological/political dimension of the process implicit, and the other is to have an explicit approach to its discussion.

We have combined these two analyses to create four different situations in Table 1, creating a tool to reflect on how researchers and policy makers approach policy learning processes. It is a tool to prompt participants in policy learning to reflect on their own attitudes and approaches.

Table 1:   Contribution of research in policy learning

	Implicit political/ ideological positions	Explicit political/ ideological positions
Linear approach from theory to practice	**I.** Recipe book for policy	**III.** Political discourse
Nonlinear approach to theory and practice	**II.** Improvement of programme efficiency	**V.** Social learning

Situation I and *Situation II* are situations where there is not an explicit discussion of the different political/ideological positions. If social learning and a paradigm shift are sought in these situations, it is highly improbable that there will be a shared vision of the change that needs to be achieved, and consequently the process will generate only surface-level change.

When solutions are transferred from theory to practice, as in *Situation* I, we get what we call a recipe book for policy, with normative interpretations of theory and listed best practices that are often very difficult to take into practice. We have worked this way in many of the documents that we, as researchers, have prepared with recommendations for policy makers, which have remained unused.

When there is a nonlinear and continuous connection between theory and practice, that breaks the linearity between planning and implementation, but without an explicit discussion of the political/ideological dimension, improvements mainly happen in terms of the efficiency of a system that is taken for granted, which we called *Situation II*. This is the case with many projects where concepts such as competitiveness, innovation or innovation system remain unchallenged, and even the indicators to measure them such as growth in GDP, patents or R&D expenditure are unquestioned, and the project focuses on improving some part of the system that might be perceived as dysfunctional to reach these goals.

When we move into *Situations III* and *IV,* there is an explicit discussion of political/ideological positions. In Situation III, with the linear approach, learning is based on the application of a given theory to practice. This means that the territorial actors are "informed" about the theory that inspires action and about the ideological positions behind them, but participants in the process are not involved in a collective process to construct a shared interpretation and reinterpretation of this theory from practice. In these cases, researchers participating in the process might be helping the government construct their political discourse, which is meant to be implemented, but are not contributing to social learning. It is only when researchers help governments and other actors not only to make their ideological positions and theoretical assumptions explicit, but to continuously construct and reconstruct

such theory from practice that they are contributing to social learning (*Situation IV*).

In this article we have shared how action research has contributed to policy learning in a concrete policy process and, using Table 1, we have proposed the relationship between theory and practice and the explicit dialogue on ideological/political positions as relevant features of this contribution. We have shown that concepts such as theory and practice, abstract and concrete, reflection and action, are used by policy makers as well as researchers in a variety of ways. Social learning, as presented in this article, is not a sudden and big process, but a slow incremental pedagogical process in which the individual perspective is relevant for the collective perspective. It is the context and the persons that are part of a context at a given point in time, and in a specific project, that determine the concrete use and usefulness of a concept. The concrete interplay between context and actors can define whether something is useless or has a meaning and is actionable. This interplay between concepts, context and actors is not new in action research (eg. Fricke, 2011; Pålshaugen 2014) but needs to be discussed more at the intersection between the action research and policy learning literature in the future.

Acknowledgements

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Latest publication
Karlsen, J., & Larrea, M. (2014). *Territorial development and Action Research: Innovation through dialgoue.* Farnham Gower