

The Role of Action Research in Democratizing Governance: The Case of Bilbao Next Lab

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to analyze how Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) promotes democratization in governance spaces. Considering the declared democratic intention of action research (AR) (Gustavsen, 2017; Palshaugen, 2014), ARTD is not an exception (Larrea, 2019). However, this specific relation with democratization has not been yet analyzed, nor measured in ARTD. In a context in which the number of countries categorized as *free* is at its lowest level in the 21st century (The Freedom House, 2021), the main contribution of this paper is the construction of a new analytical framework in order to assess the degree of democratization in ARTD processes. This analytical framework can be useful for other approaches to AR as well. More specifically, the most important contribution is the analysis of how ARTD may be facilitating such processes. This investigation studies governance at the Bilbao Next Lab, an AR laboratory focused on urban policy making in the Basque Country, Spain. This process is being facilitated through ARTD by the Basque Institute of Competitiveness – Orkestra in alliance with the local government, the Bilbao City Council and its economic development agency, Bilbao Ekintza. The case shows, together with new democratization dimensions analyzed, a deep and diverse bonding system between ARTD and democratization, in which the democratization factors hold to all ARTD elements. The paper discusses how the core ARTD elements are promoting the development of what are considered in theory as democratization factors.

Key words: Action research, territorial development, democratization, governance, urban policies.

El papel de la Investigación Acción en la democratización de la Gobernanza: el caso de Bilbao Next Lab

Resumen: El objetivo de este estudio es analizar cómo la Investigación Acción para el Desarrollo Territorial (IADT) promueve la democratización en espacios de gobernanza. Considerando la declarada vocación democrática de la investigación acción (IA) (Gustavsen, 2017; Palshaugen, 2014), la IADT no es una excepción (Larrea, 2019). Sin embargo, esta relación específica aún no ha sido analizada para el caso de la IADT. En un contexto en donde el número de países denominados como *libres* está en su nivel más bajo del s. XXI (The Freedom House, 2021), la principal contribución de esta investigación es la construcción de un nuevo marco analítico para evaluar el grado de democratización para procesos de IADT. Este nuevo marco analítico puede ser útil a su vez para otros enfoques de IA. Específicamente, el principal aporte es el análisis de cómo la IADT puede estar facilitando la democratización en estos espacios. Este artículo se enfoca en el espacio de gobernanza del Bilbao NextLab, un laboratorio de IA responsable del diseño y gestión de diversas políticas públicas en el País Vasco, España. Este proceso está siendo facilitado por medio de la IADT por el Instituto Vasco

de Competitividad – Orkestra en conjunto con el gobierno local, *Ayuntamiento de Bilbao*, y su agencia de desarrollo económico, *Bilbao Ekintza*. El caso muestra, junto con las nuevas variables de democratización analizadas, un profundo y diverso sistema de relaciones entre la IADT y la democratización, en el que los factores de democratización sostienen a todos los elementos de la IADT. El artículo discute cómo los elementos de la IADT están promoviendo el desarrollo de lo que la teoría define como factores de democratización.

Palabras clave: Investigación acción, desarrollo territorial, democratización, gobernanza, políticas urbanas.

1. Introduction

Democracy is considered as a fundamental aspect for an inclusive human development (PNUD, 2008). However, due to a number of ecological, technological and health changes in recent years, many countries have questioned the idea of whether democracy is the best available model for facing upcoming world challenges, “turning towards a kind of post-democratic hybrid” (Gustavsen, 2017: 102). The Freedom House Institute, an organization which defines and registers the state of civic and political rights in the world, estimates that during 2020, 75 % of the world’s population experienced a deterioration of their democracies. This fact reinforces the downward trend in the number of countries categorized as *free*, and an upward trend in countries considered as *not free*, both at their lowest and highest levels since 2005, respectively.

Table 1.1: Evolution of the state of democracies in the world

Category / Year	2005	2010	2015	2020
“Free”	89	87	86	82
“Partially free”	58	60	59	59
“Not free”	45	47	50	54

Source: Own elaboration. Adapted from (*The Freedom House*, 2021).

In this context, the need arises to reflect on democracies and how researchers can contribute to their sustainability. Due to the declared democratic intention of action research (Gustavsen, 2017; Palshaugen, 2014), this document focuses on AR as an academic tool for deepening democracy. Specifically, this study analyzes the ARTD approach, which also has “the AR intention of democratizing processes where are applied” (Larrea, 2019: 22).

The case study in this paper is the Bilbao Next Lab project as a case of governance in the Basque Country, Spain. This space is responsible for designing and making decisions affecting diverse public policies, such as the Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy making, the Municipal Policy for Employment and Talent and others, and is facilitated through ARTD by the Basque Institute of Competitiveness – Orkestra in alliance with the

local government, the Bilbao City Council and its economic development agency, Bilbao Ekintza.

Thus, this case study is based on an ARTD process in order to analyze whether this process has had any impact on the democratization of policy processes through the transformation of its governance. This is a new contribution to the literature, as no specific tools, frameworks or dimensions to assess democratization in ARTD have been identified.

Considering this situation, this study proposes a conceptual framework and a case study to respond to a twofold research question: *what dimensions of democratization can be recognized in an AR process*, a question that is addressed based on existing literature, and *how did ARTD promote the democratization of governance in Bilbao Next Lab*, which is answered in connection with the case study.

The main contribution of this paper is a new analytical framework presented in an effort to provide more comprehensive methods of analyzing democratization and to bring this concept closer to AR experiences. In this case, the framework has been used ex-post to examine the impact of an action research process on the democratization of the governance of specific policies. However, it could also be integrated as a future tool for facilitators of AR.

During the research process for this paper, I considered my positionality through the multiple positionality perspective (Herr & Anderson, 2005: 43). On the one hand, this research was made possible thanks to a master's program internship in the Basque Institute of Competitiveness – Orkestra, which allowed me to access the action research team that facilitated the previously mentioned project after project completion. At the same time, this research has been my master's thesis on Participation and Community Development. This master's program was done at the University of the Basque Country, Spain, with no connection to the project. It may likewise be relevant to emphasize that the ideas of democracy, state, public participation and institutions presented in this study are understood through the lens of my experience of being born and growing up in Chile, which can be particularly influenced by the social uprising of 2019. I consider this point as a sign of my outsider role in the research.

2. Definition of the problem in practice

The Bilbao City Council, its economic development agency Bilbao Ekintza and Orkestra have been working together through the Bilbao Next Lab AR laboratory since 2013. The aim of this space has been to drive urban competitiveness towards sustainable and inclusive wellbeing in the city of Bilbao.

The role of Orkestra has been to facilitate this process through the ARTD approach. In 2018 these dialogues identified a complex scenario of potentially negative consequences of the digitization, automation and integration of new technologies in production processes affecting current and future employment. In order to overcome this challenge, Knowledge Intensive Businesses Services (KIBS) firms were detected as territorial actors that could help solve the problem. However, there was also a need to enhance capabilities and develop talent in this field. Thus, this problem was designated as talent mismatch in KIBS.

One of the first steps in the ARTD process was to define the identity of the core stakeholders in order to address this problem through policymaking, which was the approach that the city council and its agency wanted to address. In the dialogue between policymakers and action researchers, Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS) (Albizu & Estensoro, 2020) were detected as territorial actors that could help solve the problem of employment loss. However, there was a need to enhance capabilities and develop talent in this field in order to play that role. This problem was designated as *talent mismatch in KIBS*. To overcome this problem, another type of territorial actor was considered: vocational education and training (VET) centers. Consequently, participants in the ARTD process were the following: representatives of VET centers, KIBS firms, local and regional policymakers that could promote programs related to this problem and action researchers.

Whereas some of the Bilbao Ekintza (development agency) policymakers and Orkestra action researchers facilitated the workshops, the other participants were involved in the action research process.

This collaborative process started in December 2018 and was still ongoing at the time of writing this paper. Fifteen workshops have been held since the beginning of the process, around five workshops per year on average, with more than 30 people participating in different spaces. The aim of the first stage was to analyze the potential of VET profiles in the KIBS talent mismatch. Due to their relevant contribution, primarily VET centers and KIBS firms were invited to participate. In the following stages, several new policies were co-designed to address the mismatch and prioritizing the technologies to focus the skills development.

The main impact of this process can be explained on two levels. The first level of impact relates to the new policy programs co-designed that emerged from these dialogues. For example, in order to guarantee equal gender accessibility, the Shadowing Project was created, inviting female students to discover the benefits being professionals in KIBS and through other female references at KIBS firms. These programs were being implemented in the last stages considered in this research, which introduced changes in VET policymaking and in the Municipal Policy for Employment and Talent. An eventual effective reduction in the talent mismatch will be assessed in further cohorts. The second level of impact is the multi-stakeholder collaborative network created with a common challenge, defined as *VET-KIBS Bilbao Next Lab governance*, and referred to in this paper simply as *Bilbao Next Lab governance*. This paper focuses on how ARTD, through the development of this governance, democratizes the policymaking process.

This last process-result, the governance space, is at the core of the contribution of the facilitation team, as ARTD considers it to be the vehicle and core space for the transformation process (Larrea, 2019). I connect this space with democratization because following this process through ARTD has made it possible for policymakers to experience the value, and/or to confirm the feasibility of sharing power with a more diverse group of people from the territory. Considering the democratic intention of ARTD mentioned in section 1, as well as the lack of tools in ARTD to reflect on democratization, the facilitation team accepted the proposal of the author of this paper to investigate whether the process had promoted the democratization of policymaking beyond the specific solutions given to the problem.

3. Democratization in AR literature

The previous section presented the context of the specific AR process where the need for a framework to address democratization emerged. This section examines AR literature on democratization, which is the literature this paper aims to contribute to with a specific framework. Considering that the case was developed through ARTD, the section focuses on literature regarding quality of working life (QWL), industrial democracy and co-generative AR, which influence ARTD and provide a consistent framework for analyzing this practice.

The intention of using AR as a tool for strengthening democracy began in its origins and has remained as a significant purpose at present. In this challenge, different action research communities have had to answer to diverse questions throughout history.

With the aim of developing more participative and democratic research methods, Lewin (1943) proposed in broad terms the advantages of considering the implied stakeholders in the research process in order to generate more meaningful and robust results. The vehicle for this engagement was through dialogue. This framework was one of the foundational seeds for several subsequent movements which argued that AR represents a tool for healthier and more robust democracies. Specifically, this section examines the challenges of the QWL and the industrial democracy movements in their declared intention not only of workplace democracy, but of democracy in general since the 1950 s, first in the UK and Norway, and later in the rest of Scandinavia.

One relevant experience analyzed is the QWL movement, which originated from the idea of promoting the notion of autonomy at work, when faced with the question of what AR should do beyond promoting democracy in a context of global democratic precariousness (Gustavsen, 2017). “A core characteristic of the QWL movement was that it offered alternative experiences: people formerly existing in non-democratic contexts could experience democratic life and, through this, develop a deeper commitment to democracy” (Gustavsen, 2017: 109).

Another experience is the subsequent industrial democracy movement and its Scandinavian approach defined as “Action Research for Democracy” (Palshaugen, 2014). Understanding the potential contributions of AR for deepening democracy, the movement was essential to improving AR’s legitimacy both in society and in the academic community. The main argument was related to the implication of AR programs within public institutions as part of the democratic system, and considered knowledge arising from such research as public goods.

From these ideas emerged new scientific ways of “providing models of democratic procedures for forming the organization by the members of the organization themselves” (Palshaugen, 2014: 104), promoting democratization as a question of expanding the possibilities for people at work to participate in the processes of development and as question of enforcing more democratic ways of dealing with controversial issues with crossed interests. This action research strategy was later first defined as *democratic dialogue* in Gustavsen (1992).

From these concepts, Greenwood & Levin (2007) built the cogenerative model, which was later adapted in Karlsen & Larrea (2015) which considered contexts with an active participation of policymakers in the dialogue processes with other territorial stakeholders,

defined as ARTD. Perhaps due to these origins, ARTD also has “the AR intention of democratizing processes where are applied” (Larrea, 2019: 22).

Thus, it could be said that both the QWL and the Action Research for Democracy movements and their evolution have had several aspects in common. First, the idea of focusing on democratization not only as a result, but as part of the process of collaborative redesigning itself. This aspect is aligned with the process-oriented democracy approach defined in Tilly (2007). Second, the shift to the importance of experiential learning over traditional knowledge. And third, the consideration that these democratic experiences at work may be related to more democratic preferences in the civic and political sphere, as well as their contribution to wider networks of democratic practices.

4. Proposing an analytical framework

This section addresses the challenge of finding a proper democratization framework which considers the three aspects just mentioned at the end of section 3, using the relational democracy approach (Ibarra, 2011) for inspiration.

From this perspective, democratization is understood as the process in which practices “establish and develop a group of relationships between the governing and the governed appropriately led in order to achieve the coincidence between decision-making policies and decisions made by society” (Ibarra, 2011: 37).

As a result of the process-oriented view of democracy, the recognition of the relevance of other stakeholders’ participation during the processes, the focus on their practices and their relationship with public institutions, relational democracy seems to sustain the basic principles of AR in general, as well as the more specific ARTD principles.

Furthermore, whereas relational democracy defines governances as spaces open for democratization (Ibarra, 2011), ARTD considers them as the core of the transformation process (Larrea, 2019).

4.1 A tentative analytical framework

This section describes the dimensions of democratization that this paper proposes for ARTD processes. Due to the diversity of aspects involved, a wide variety of analytical democratization frameworks are found in the literature, also with very different focuses. On the one hand, some frameworks center their attention on context characteristics. Others, on the other hand, focus on the call for participation method, or on the quality of the process and results. In this context, I have chosen Ibarra’s (2011) proposal as the main reference because, although it was constructed as a forward-looking framework (Ibarra, 2011), it does the best job of synthesizing these different concerns and makes an effort to develop integral ways of analyzing democratization.

In broad terms, Ibarra’s (2011) proposal is based firstly on the quality of social and legal democratic conditions in society. It then suggests analyzing democratization by considering (i) the plurality of participants; (ii) organization and decision-making during the process; and

(iii) the impacts and consequences. However, it is not clear if the author was considering AR processes.

Thus, based primarily on Ibarra's contribution, I propose an analytical framework to analyze the degree of democratization in ARTD processes that create new governance spaces for policy. The framework has the following four democratization dimensions: feasibility, inclusiveness, transparency, and effectiveness.

4.1.1 Feasibility

The first factor in evaluating democratization in a governance space is feasibility. Its relevance is based on the existence of the legal, constitutional and political conditions for the development of the process (Ibarra, 2011). The definition and subcategories are defined in Table 4.2.1.

Table 4.2.1: The Feasibility factor

Factor	Definition	Subcategory
Feasibility	Existence of the legal, constitutional and political conditions for the development of the process (Ibarra, 2011; Pogrebinski, 2013).	Primary Conditions: Set of minimum institutional conditions present in society (Ibarra, 2011).
		Formality: A clear and confident process for legal back-up (Pogrebinski, 2013).
		Role of civil society: Degree of state support to promote and strengthen the associated fabric (Ibarra, 2011; Pogrebinski, 2013).

4.1.2 Inclusiveness

The second assessing principle, inclusiveness, refers to the idea that "all potentially rule affected people should be included and have access to the processes of participation" (Kamlage & Nanz, 2018: 9). The definition and subcategories are defined in Table 4.2.2:

Table 4.2.2: The Inclusiveness factor

Factor	Definition	Subcategory
Inclusiveness	The intention of the organizers to call for ample and plural participation for the process (Pogrebinski, 2013: 14; Ureta, 2022: 34).	Participation: Absolute and relative numbers of participants, according to social class, gender, educational level and other social and cultural indicators (Pogrebinski, 2013: 15).
		Deliberation: Organizational rules and procedures, opportunities for expressing and changing preferences, quality

Factor	Definition	Subcategory
		of deliberation (Pogrebinschi, 2013: 15).
		Bindingness: Binding or consultative results, rules ensuring the communication and consideration of the results (Pogrebinschi, 2013: 15).

4.1.3 Transparency

The third factor, transparency, focuses on the possibilities that both participants and the general public have to be informed before, during and after the process. The definition and subcategories are defined in Table 4.2.3:

Table 4.2.3: The Transparency factor

Factor	Definition	Subcategory
Transparency	The possibilities that participants have to understand the conditions under which the process is implemented (Smith, 2009: 29) and that rule-affected people have the equal opportunity to be fully informed about the processes (Kamlage & Nanz, 2018: 10).	Publicity: Studies to what extent the process, objectives and results have been communicated to the general public and relevant target groups (Kamlage & Nanz, 2018).
		Internal Transparency: Participants in public participation procedures have access to relevant and professionally prepared information in the process of participation (Kamlage & Nanz, 2018).

4.1.4 Effectiveness

The fourth and final assessment principle, effectiveness, analyzes how resources and discussions are translated into productive, manageable and achievable goals. The definition and subcategories are defined in Table 4.2.4:

Table 4.2.4: The Effectiveness factor

Factor	Definition	Subcategory
Effectiveness	Degree to which a process is able to solve problems, achieve goals (Kamlage & Nanz, 2018: 11) and address citizen concerns through public policies (Ureta, 2022; Ibarra, 2011).	Thematic Congruence: intention of defining and promoting laws and policies in consonance with the debates of the participative process (Ureta, 2022; Pogrebinschi, 2013).
		Redistribution: Allocation of state resources or reallocation of budgetary

Factor	Definition	Subcategory
		provisions to historically marginalized groups (Pogrebinschi, 2013).
		Efficiency: A reasonable relation between the limited resources and the means to achieve the objectives (Kamlage & Nanz, 2018).

5. Methodology of the case study

This paper is not an AR process, but rather a case study based on an ARTD process (the process conducted in Bilbao Next Lab and previously presented) in order to analyze, ex-post, whether AR has had any impact on democratizing governance. To integrate a holistic perspective, I interviewed one representative of each of the stakeholders present in the AR process: a KIBS firm (A1), a provincial government policymaker (A2), a VET center (A3), a regional government policymaker (A4), a City Council policy maker (A5), and the facilitation team (FT1 & FT2).

Considering that the facilitation team is comprised of two different institutions, with a view to achieving transparent dialogues, this group was separated into an individual interview for the Bilbao Ekitza representative (FT1) and a focus group with the two Orkestra facilitators (FT2). The research components are specified in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Technical index of empirical analysis

Research aim	Analyze how ARTD promotes the democratization of governance.
Research method	Case study analysis through a qualitative research design.
Subjects of analysis	The VET – KIBS governance of Bilbao Next Lab.
Statistical population	VET – KIBS governance participants (30 stakeholders).
The stakeholders	Representatives of institutions that have participated actively throughout the entire action research process (6 entities; 8 individuals).
Geographic area	City of Bilbao, Bizkaia province, Basque region, Spain.
Data sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth semi-structured online interviews. • Documentary review. • Focus group (facilitation team).
Time period	May 4 – 19, 2022.

The case study used ARTD as its methodology. The ARTD researcher-facilitators supported the processes based on eight elements that are extensively described in Larrea (2019), all of which can be considered as interdependent, complementary and at the same time essential:

Table 5.2: The ARTD Elements

ARTD element	Definition
Social capital as the starting point	"The advantage a community has due to the quality of its members' relations" (Larrea, 2019: 27).
Praxis	Refers to the balance between action and reflection in a process.
Cogeneration as a vehicle	Recognizes the relevance of collective knowledge in order to take action on common challenges.
Facilitation	Points out the relevance of the role which drives and accompanies the conversations using a clear and flexible design.
Conflict management	Understands conflicts as natural components in the process.
Emergent strategy	Suggests complementing the linear planning strategy by considering the learning opportunities which may be found during the process.
Soft resistance	Focuses on the tensions that researcher-facilitators have in their relation with the rest of the stakeholders, acting both as a researcher and as a participant in the process.
Territorial role of researchers	Considers university as a territorial stakeholder, "as an active agent of change" (Larrea, 2019: 62).

The aim of this research is to subsequently evaluate whether this process has led to the democratization of governance (described in section 6), but more importantly, to analyze how it has been promoted by ARTD (studied in section 7).

6. Results of the case study

The analytical framework proposed in this paper inspired the interviews, the revision of project documents and the focus group. Based on the data gathered through these processes, this section presents the perception of participants of whether the ARTD process helped democratize governance for policymaking.

The results of the new analytical framework proposed in this paper are summarized in Table 6.1¹. The terms *satisfied* and *partially satisfied* (no factor was considered *not satisfied*) synthesize the most frequent perception about whether a factor was satisfactorily addressed through the process. The main considerations for each factor are shared in the Evaluation column of Table 6.1.

¹ The main results with the voice of the participants, originally in Spanish, have been translated as literally as possible, and are presented in the Appendix section specified for each subcategory.

Table 6.1: Democratization results

Factor	Subcategory	Evaluation
Feasibility <i>Satisfied. The process is in a territory in which the minimum legal and political conditions are covered. Main sources in Appendix 1.</i>	Primary Con- ditions	The case study is performed in a context that guarantees at least minimum political and civil rights and liberties.
	Formality	The initiative is supported by a binding contract signed by the main stakeholders.
	Role of civil society	Strong state and regional government support for the social fabric.
Inclusiveness <i>Partially satisfied. The call for participation and meetings have been structured in order to promote debates, which have been transformed into concrete actions respected at the moment. However, most participants have similar social and cultural backgrounds.</i>	Participation	Although the group is gender-balanced, most individuals have similar educational, cultural and social backgrounds. Future research can consider the appropriateness of this subcategory for governance spaces, which tend to be composed of representatives of organizations and institutions. <i>Results in Appendix 2.</i>
	Deliberation	The facilitation team has built structures and techniques to promote debates. The policy makers' implication has encouraged the expressions of points of view. <i>Results in Appendix 3.</i>
	Bindingness	Notwithstanding the engagement of stakeholders and the systematic monitoring of the team facilitator, an effective bindingness will naturally be assessed in the future. <i>Results in Appendix 4.</i>
Transparency <i>Partially satisfied. There is a fluid internal communication among stakeholders. However, no strategy exists to communicate results to the general public.</i>	Publicity	There are no communication outputs identified for informing the general public. It is considered as an important area for improvement by the stakeholders. <i>Results in Appendix 5.</i>
	Internal Transparency	There are several active channels and products of communication persistently sustained by the facilitation team. <i>Results in Appendix 6.</i>
Effectiveness <i>Satisfied. There is a positive feeling that goals have been fulfilled and dis-</i>	Thematic Congruence	The debates and discussions have been translated into effective changes

Factor	Subcategory	Evaluation
<i>cussions have been translated into concrete actions.</i>		in programs and policies. <i>Results in Appendix 7.</i>
	Redistribution	Together with the inclusiveness approach of the specific participants' agendas, procedures and policy decisions focused on recognizing and advocating for the rights of historically excluded groups, and more specifically, young women. <i>Results in Appendix 8.</i>
	Efficiency	Both participants and the facilitation team recognize effective flexibility and have a positive impression of goal fulfillment. <i>Results in Appendix 9.</i>

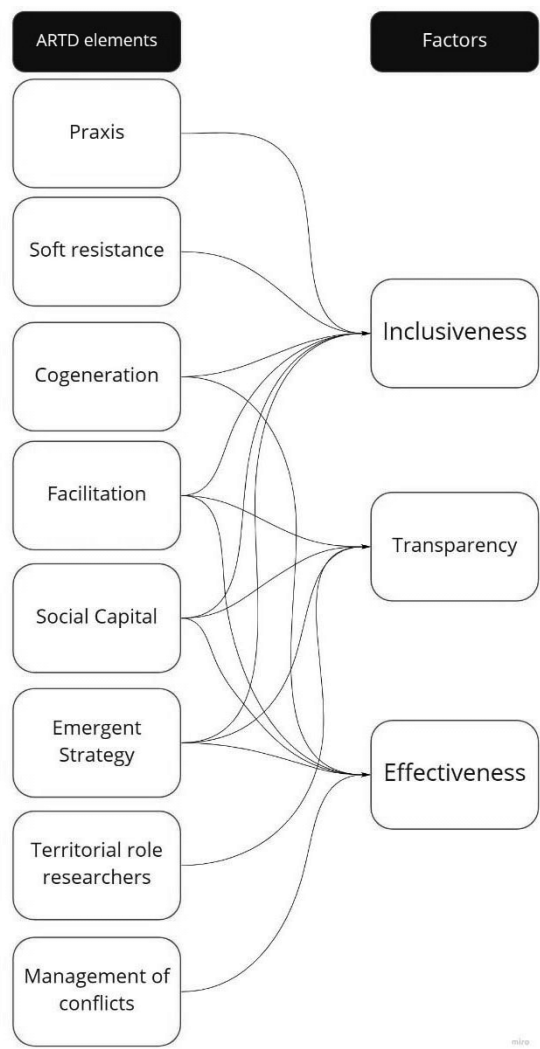
7. Analyzing the role of ARTD in the results

Now that the democratization process has been identified through the four dimensions discussed above, we shall move on to discuss how ARTD may be promoting this process. To that end, ARTD is understood in practice as the working methodology of the facilitation team. This section analyzes to what extent participants, including action researchers, consider that ARTD made a contribution towards enhancing three democratic factors: inclusiveness, transparency and effectiveness. The feasibility factor is not included in this reflection because these are contextual conditions that are not dependent on the facilitation of the process.

Figure 7.1 shows the connections between the eight features of ARTD presented previously and the democratization factors proposed in the framework. Although “the eight ARTD elements can simply been understood through a systemic perspective as elements that conform a whole, and which at the same time are influenced by this whole” (Larrea, 2019: 25), some findings are highlighted.

A deep and diverse bonding system can be conceptually recognized, in which the democratization factors hold to all ARTD elements. In some way, all the ARTD elements are promoting the development of the democratization factor.

Figure 7.1: ARTD and democratization bonding system results



The upcoming sections analyze the perception of participants of how ARTD supported each democratization factor.

7.1 ARTD as a promoter of the Inclusiveness Factor

Through interviews and the focus group, participants recognized that the ARTD has supported a more extensive and plural call and stakeholder participation. Table 7.1 expresses the way in which these participants expressed their perspective on how some ARTD elements are involved:

Table 7.1: ARTD inclusiveness results

ARTD Element	Representative Quotes	Factor
Cogeneration	“Some elements were designed and executed in a more rewarding and enriching way than others, but all of them were within the limits. When you design something you run the risk that an initiative will evolve, but I think the group assumes this will happen and accepts it” (A4).	Inclusiveness
Social Capital	“The most difficult thing is to connect individuals who can make it happen, and in this case it was essential to make this connection in order to get things started. Connecting individuals and stakeholders was made possible by the facilitation team” (A1).	
Emergent Strategy	“We developed our strategy as we went along, with a clear objective: no political jargon – just creation. It was a very natural path, fresh and intuitive, with policymaking taking a back seat” (A5).	
Facilitation	“Orchestra’s facilitation is essential because they are aware of the limits of each actor and they never overstep. This creates a stronger feeling of trust in the group, which facilitates actions. When you see positive results, everyone starts to become more involved” (A4).	
Soft Resistance	“Earlier during the first stage we put forward the idea of additional business representation, but we were told that this was better left for later” (A3).	
Praxis	“Participants are well informed. They are trainers who have been doing this for a long time (...), so their shared knowledge is very valuable, and this has helped me quite a bit” (A2).	

Source: Joaquin Oliva.

7.2 ARTD as a promoter of the Transparency Factor

The facilitation team followed ARTD principles to generate diverse communication channels and products before, during and after every work meeting, which are positively assessed by the participants. The following ARTD elements described in Table 7.2 seem to be operating in favor of this factor:

Table 7.2: ARTD transparency results

ARTD Element	Representative Quotes	Factor
Emergent Strategy	"There is plenty of room for improvement in how we share the value of these stakeholders with society to show how it affects my quality of life" (FT2).	Transparency
Territorial role of researchers	"Our strategy is based on research. Each step is based on the evidence that was discovered in the previous step" (FT2).	
Social capital	"Always having information was key. The facilitation team called me multiple times to see if everything was going okay, and I felt comfortable and integrated" (A3).	
Facilitation	"I would say that there was really good communication and facilitation. This has a great impact, because it is not simply that you have a lot of information, which can actually become an obstacle, but that you have all of the necessary information for proper monitoring of the process so it can be successful and deliver good results" (A4).	

Source: Joaquín Oliva.

7.3 ARTD as a promoter of the effectiveness factor

The ARTD facilitation team's top priority of building trust relationships in the group may have led to greater flexibility and a positive assessment of the fulfillment of short-term goals, culminating in concrete policy changes. Representative quotes on identified ARTD elements are shown in Table 7.3:

Table 7.3: ARTD effectiveness results

ARTD Element	Representative Quotes	Factor
Emergent Strategy	"A lot of doors opened during the process. I agree that the Shadowing project emerged unexpectedly. The conclusion here is that the facilitator is an essential element" (FT2).	Effectiveness
Facilitation	"I don't know if these were the original goals, but they were pursued, and (the facilitators) took them on board and took action" (A1).	
Social capital	"We involved actors who have the ability to influence policy and who are willing to share and create spaces to co-define policies when it is in their remit. (...) They are willing to share in order to define policy. And there is a lot of work behind this. In the end, we as participating researchers have the obligation of making them aware of the potential they have for transforming specific ideas into policy" (FT2).	

ARTD Element	Representative Quotes	Factor
Cogeneration	"I feel that everything was done quickly and effectively, and (the facilitators) have helped with the initiatives from start to finish" (A1).	
Conflict management	"We were able to openly address and resolve all misunderstandings, and this is extremely helpful. Sometimes we find that we work at a different pace or have different strategic visions, but the way this works means we are always focused on a goal" (FT1).	

Source: Joaquín Oliva.

8. Conclusions

Since the origins of action research, AR processes have had a declared intention of democratizing the spaces where are applied, with a clear connection to wider democratic network practices. As an approach that emerged from this legacy, ARTD can also be considered as part of this challenge.

Going deeper into this relationship, the relational democracy approach (Ibarra, 2011) is offered as a framework for hosting AR processes. In this context, in order to provide more comprehensive methods of analyzing democratization, and with the intention of bringing this concept closer to AR experiences, a tentative analytical framework has been suggested in section 4 to define the democratic dimensions for AR processes.

These democratization dimensions have been first applied in this paper to the Bilbao Next Lab governance space, in the Basque Country, Spain.

Table 6.1 of this paper describes the democratization results of the case study. These findings may act in the future as a working tool for recognizing and reflecting on which aspects have been fulfilled, and which aspects are yet to be addressed by action research teams in their specific processes with democratic intentions.

For instance, Bilbao Next Lab's governance indicates the challenges of including more socially and culturally diverse individuals in the debate space, of ensuring that collective decisions are correctly implemented, and of creating a communication strategy which responds to society in general.

Perhaps the most important conclusion, however, is that this research analyzes how ARTD may be affecting these democratization results. Section 7 identifies the significant contribution of ARTD to the three democratic factors, with representative quotes from participants.

Further studies could use this new framework for other governance spaces or any collaborative spaces, as well as for processes facilitated through new or different AR approaches.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Feasibility factor analysis – main sources

Subcategory	Documentary Analysis
Primary Conditions	The Freedom House (2022). <i>Freedom in the World Report</i> .
Formality	Framework Partnership Agreement Legal Document (non-public).
Role of civil society	Social Action NGO Platform (2020). <i>Third Sector Social Action in Spain 2019: New Horizons for a New Sociopolitical Context</i> . Basque Third Sector Social Observatory Team (2021). White Book of the Third Sector in Euskadi 2020.

Appendix 2: Participation subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
Participants were open to the possibility of incorporating new stakeholders in upcoming stages.	<p>“In a future process for sure, and possibly even in this one, we could include a new stakeholder” (A5).</p> <p>“We need parents who are switched on and who can tell their children that there is a promising future here. I don’t know if through community organizations, but somehow we have to transmit more to society” (A4).</p> <p>“Community representatives, which is where the process is going to have an impact. Perhaps we should have included them sooner – parents’ associations, youth organizations, business associations...anything” (FT1).</p>
Satisfaction was high due to the participation of all of the stakeholders directly involved in the challenge.	<p>“In my view, all stakeholders are perfectly represented in this project” (A2).</p> <p>“Thanks to the fact that the stakeholders were properly identified, everything is working smoothly” (A4).</p>
There is a potential concern about overly complicating the process by including more stakeholders.	<p>“Sometimes new groups come and address other issues, distorting the path the project is taking. I’m doubtful as to whether this is a good idea” (A4).</p> <p>“Considering the challenges and the goals we have set, this doesn’t seem like a good idea</p>

Results	Representative Quotes
	because it is too technical and you need to be familiar with the legislation" (A3).
The facilitation team considers the stakeholders' capacity of engagement, decision-making and effectiveness in relation to the shared challenge.	"Finding people who are committed to the challenge and are willing to devote time and resources is one of the keys to the success of this type of process" (FT2).
The facilitation team guides and encourages participants to invite the involvement of other stakeholders affected by the challenge.	<p>"We all decided together who would participate. The initial decision was for Bilbao Ekintza and Orkestra, and the decision for a new group was the result of a workshop decision" (FT1).</p> <p>"The original ARTD determined that in order to address a challenge, all stakeholders must be involved. You have to create the conditions of that mapping and engage the stakeholders in the process somehow. This is based on the concept of complexity" (FT2).</p>

Appendix 3: Deliberation subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
The discussion is considered highly participative, making it possible to build rewarding proposals based on the experience and perspectives of all of the stakeholders involved.	<p>"I think it was a really participative way of working. At the end of the discussion you have all of the feedback and all of the conclusions that were reached, including what each person said. Sharing knowledge really adds a lot, and it was really helpful for me" (A2).</p> <p>"I certainly felt comfortable expressing what I felt and believe, and we reached our conclusions by working together" (A4).</p>
The engagement and capacity of the political representatives encouraged the exchange of opinions in order to change policy.	"I had the opportunity to go to a larger group meeting and you really see that those who are on top, the politicians, are fully involved and amenable to changing policy, or at least as far as is possible" (A2).
The facilitation team structures each workshop using different methods to encourage dialogue as a means for reaching an understanding.	"The key to reaching a consensus lies in the workshops, which is where everything comes together. We put the decisions up to debate, and from there, we construct a common project – an agreement" (FT2).

Results	Representative Quotes
	<p>“Each workshop uses AR – first a reflection phase, and then an action phase, and to do that, there is a moment of collective decision-making” (FT2).</p>
<p>The facilitation team establishes dynamics so that all aspects are determined by the group—from defining the challenge, to the rules of working together, the roles of participants and the steps to follow.</p>	<p>“I think the key is not so much in the dynamics, but in the fact that you have something to contribute in each workshop. You are building something or offering solutions, and there should always be that feeling that you are creating added value” (FT2).</p> <p>“The key lies in submitting the decisions that have been taken to the group so that the process can move forward” (FT2).</p>
<p>The facilitation team considers casual communication with stakeholders to be a relevant aspect of collective decision-making.</p>	<p>“There is an essential human component in this process of facilitation. All of these informal conversations are extremely valuable and very difficult to measure” (FT2).</p>
<p>The facilitation team is identified as being responsible for the connection and integration of participants and process.</p>	<p>“The facilitation team made this all possible. The most difficult aspect is connecting the people who can make it happen, and for me this was the key to being able to connect and making this a reality” (A1).</p> <p>“I think that (the facilitators) do a great job of facilitating, and at every meeting they clearly explain where we are coming from and where we are going, so it is easy to follow the route” (A4).</p>

Appendix 4: Bindingness subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
The decisions and proposals made by the group have been implemented in accordance with the agreed upon methods and timelines.	<p>“Until now they have been (implemented), and I think this is a really good method” (A5).</p> <p>“I think that everything is being respected in a very reasonable manner” (A3).</p>
The challenge of assessing proper implementation of the group’s decisions during the next political term was identified.	<p>“The challenge lies in maintaining these decisions over time, beyond those of us who are currently present” (A5).</p>
The facilitation team identifies the engagement of political stakeholders as an essential element for effectively promoting agreements.	<p>“It is remarkable that there are such highly engaged groups. This is possible due to the continuous and visible strategic and political leadership driving participation throughout the project. Interest and visibility are maintained throughout the process, which is essential” (FT1).</p>
The facilitation team constantly monitors the commitments made by participants.	<p>“The facilitation team must be persistent, because participants commit to actions during the workshops that are later forgotten. They have to be gently reminded” (FT2).</p> <p>“I think that the organizers are highly disciplined regarding timelines, and in reminding stakeholders of their commitments” (A2).</p>
The facilitation team structures the relevant information in order to create an account of what was covered and what remains to be done during the year in response to the established goals.	<p>“We want to be present on the agendas of the different stakeholders. Structuring the information has the role of recording the decisions and commitments that have been made” (FT2).</p> <p>“One of the facilitator’s roles is to begin workshops by reminding participants of what decisions have been made and why, for full transparency” (FT2).</p>

Appendix 5: Publicity subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
No initiatives were put forward to communicate the process and the results to the general public.	<p>“To date we have not made any statements for the general public” (A5).</p> <p>“There is no indication that this has been done, and for something so general, I find it surprising” (A3).</p> <p>“As this was a pilot project, we are still in the experimentation phase and have not communicated the results of the project to the wider community” (FT2).</p>
Participants consider it both challenging and necessary to inform the target audience of the challenge and the efforts that are being made to improve wellbeing in this area.	<p>“For me it is essential to begin sowing the seeds with our target audience—young people and their families” (A2).</p> <p>“When communicating our message, I would primarily share the results. If we only talk about the context, people lose interest. Communication is always a good idea, but I’m not sure what kind of an impact it will have” (A4).</p>
The facilitation team has identified room for improvement in communicating project results to the wider community.	<p>“Stakeholders can be mouthpieces for communicating the results to the wider community. This is an area we still need to work on” (FT2).</p> <p>“What the group is lacking is a plan for selling this project, how to get it out there. We don’t even have a name for the project” (FT1).</p>

Appendix 6: Internal transparency subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
In-person and online meetings are a valuable way to gain insight into the key aspects of the project.	<p>"I get the information first-hand at the workshops, and afterwards I receive the minutes with all of the details. Before each workshop I receive information on the date, the attending participants, a detailed account of the content of the workshop, and if a presentation is going to be made, the name of the institution and the organizer" (A2).</p> <p>"I learned about the evolution and the launch of the project through the periodical and inclusive meetings, where pains were taken to make sure everyone was well informed" (A1).</p>
Informal communication channels such as casual conversation and phone calls are considered relevant ways of keeping participants up to date on the key aspects of the process.	<p>"Orchestra gets in touch with me to let me know the date and the objective of the next session, and they ask if I would change or suggest anything. It's like a mini-interview or brainstorming session" (A4).</p> <p>"Casual communication, phone calls and WhatsApp messages make the project more holistic" (A5).</p> <p>"The impact (of the calls) is that you keep the flame burning. The engagement of the stakeholders shows that there is a lot of planning going on to maintain commitment to the project" (FT1)</p>
Participants have received quality information products that enhance the process.	<p>"We receive an account of the meeting, which includes the next steps in the process and the following workshop. It is very detailed information that includes the contributions of each participant, even in the break-out groups" (A2).</p> <p>"The information is comprehensive and practical, including the topics of each workshop and the minutes to ensure that everyone is on the same page" (A1).</p>
The facilitation team considers that a key to success lies in providing material and structuring the process before, during and after the workshops.	<p>"The workshops are the core area where AR and the transformation process can occur. Presentations and structure help to create a better reading of the process, making it easier to define decisions and follow up to ensure that they are successfully implemented" (FT2).</p>

Appendix 7: Thematic coherence subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
Participants feel that the conditions required for implementing changes in public policy were created and specified.	<p>“It’s not just about creating good policy, but also about building on existing policy, and these spaces help to align needs with legislative potential” (A3).</p> <p>“We have already launched KIBS specialisation programs in VET centres. We have invested in classrooms and areas equipped with state-of-the-art technology so people can become more familiar with the digital transformation” (A4).</p>
Participants perceive political intention and flexibility of the legislative framework in favour of policymaking and policy modification.	<p>“One positive aspect of the Basque Country that I haven’t seen in other parts of Spain is that policy is adapted to the needs of everyone, and not the other way around” (A1).</p> <p>“I perceived quick and flexible changes from the Basque government” (A2).</p>
The discussion and debate process has transformed the implementation of actions and changes in policy.	<p>“The results of the debates held during the process are now visible in VET policy, as well as in vocational training for the unemployed, although to a lesser extent. Municipal policy is benefitting greatly from these debates, and they have allowed us to define highly focused niche projects” (A5).</p> <p>“VET has benefitted greatly from everything that has been discussed and debated, and we are now working with companies” (A4).</p>
The facilitation team considers that the legitimate work methods of stakeholders has contributed to the process.	<p>“We had been working with Nora, the former director of Bilbao Ekintza, since 2016, and we had built up legitimacy and methodology” (FT2).</p> <p>“They delegate in us 100%. We find solutions because we have a methodology” (FT2).</p>

Appendix 8: Redistribution subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
There is an explicit intention of participants and specific actions for promoting equal opportunities for women.	<p>“Equal opportunities for women is something I put on the table from the very beginning. It is a problem stemming from society, and this analysis has led to specific policies” (A1).</p> <p>“The underlying reasons are clear to me: firstly, there are not enough people, and secondly, we have to create more opportunities for women, so they have the same opportunities as men. It will benefit everyone, and women above all” (A2).</p>
The inclusion of marginalized groups is a shared goal of all stakeholders.	<p>“We include people with no formal training and immigrants from very complex backgrounds. We are talking about VET programs that are not only inclusive but that also display solidarity” (A3).</p> <p>“I am sure that this will be included in everything that is done. The more diverse we make it, the greater impact it will have in society” (A1).</p>
The facilitation team considers public policymakers whose political agendas include promoting solutions for marginalized groups as participants in the process.	<p>“Disadvantaged groups were part of this process because it was on the policymakers’ agendas” (FT2).</p> <p>“As an institution, we have signed a letter of commitment (for inclusion). This should strongly influence all initiatives” (FT1).</p>
The facilitation team designs dynamics so that issues discussed in the workshops can appear on future agendas.	<p>“Our work method allows these issues to appear on the agenda of our project. This came up in the workshops, and the companies agreed. So in the end, we also decide what issues to push” (FT2).</p> <p>“The agendas are established, but the facilitation of the process allows them to be put into practice” (FT2).</p>

Appendix 9: Efficiency subcategory results

Results	Representative Quotes
It is too soon to assess the main objectives of the project due to their long-term nature.	<p>“I feel that the project is based on cultural aspects that need attention in the long term” (A2).</p> <p>“We don’t expect immediate results with high school students. What I see is an action that can be maintained and extended over time, and in that case what we are doing can contribute to this changing trend” (A3).</p>
Participants identified the need for more resources to design actions for implementing long-term goals.	<p>“Particularly as regards the dissemination of the benefits of this project, we want the message to reach families, VET centres, young people...and to do that we need more resources and a long-term vision” (A2).</p>
Participants consider that resource management is appropriate for fulfilling short-term goals.	<p>“Actions have been quick and effective, and initiatives have been followed through from start to finish” (A1).</p> <p>“Now we are focusing on the short term, on pressing actions. I understand that with the available time more could not be done” (A3).</p>
The facilitation team moves the process forward based on a set of pre-defined conditions.	<p>“We always try to remain within the pre-existing possibilities, based on a set of previously defined conditions, which makes our work viable” (EF2).</p>
The facilitation team uses trust as a foundation for creating the basic conditions of a process that is able to respond to change and is consistent with targets and timeframes.	<p>“We have forged a relationship of trust and generosity anchored in strong collaboration. This helped us to openly resolve any misunderstandings” (EF1).</p> <p>“I would say that dialogue and respect are Orkestra’s greatest assets. They have the ability to adapt to different working styles and ensure that no one is left out” (A4).</p>