

The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A first-person account in policymaking written by Miren Larrea

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Introduction

The book *The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A first-person account in policymaking* by Miren Larrea is a moving, inspiring, and brave account of her own journey into action research for territorial development. Through sensitive accounts of her own, embodied experience as a researcher-facilitator, brought forward by her drawings throughout the book, she invites the reader into her insights in how action research may bring transformation in public policy and territorial development.

Her more than fifteen years of experience working with policymakers, researchers, and regional stakeholders in the Basque Country in Spain is the rich soil in which her personal narrative grows and unfolds in both text and illustrations. Through a combination of personal reflection, conceptual analysis, and illustrative examples, Larrea shows the reader how action research processes can support learning, collaboration, and innovation in governance systems with many stakeholders.

The central aim of the book is to invite for a dialogue with the field, a dialogue of how facilitation plays a crucial role in enabling the transformative potential of action research. Larrea shows us how economic development, governance reform, sustainability, and other complex societal challenges cannot be resolved by traditional top-down policy approaches alone. Instead, they require collaborative processes in which diverse actors engage in joint learning and knowledge creation. However, such processes are often hindered by institutional barriers, power dynamics, and rigid ways of thinking. The author therefore proposes a facilitative approach that helps actors overcome these barriers and create spaces for meaningful dialogue and transformation.

Introducción en español

El libro *The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A first-person account in policymaking* de Miren Larrea, constituye un testimonio conmovedor, inspirador y valiente de su propia trayectoria en el ámbito de la investigación-acción para el desarrollo territorial. A través de relatos sensibles basados en su propia experiencia vivida como investigadora y facilitadora — y apoyándose en los dibujos que ilustran la obra — invita al lector a conocer sus reflexiones

sobre cómo la investigación-acción puede transformar las políticas públicas y el desarrollo territorial.

Sus más de quince años de experiencia colaborando con responsables de políticas, investigadores y socios regionales en el País Vasco (España) constituyen el terreno fértil donde germina y se despliega su narrativa personal, tanto en el texto como en las ilustraciones. Mediante una combinación de reflexión personal, análisis conceptual y ejemplos ilustrativos, Larrea muestra al lector cómo los procesos de investigación-acción pueden fomentar el aprendizaje, la colaboración y la innovación en sistemas de gobernanza que involucran a múltiples actores.

El objetivo central del libro es propiciar un diálogo con el propio campo de estudio: un diálogo sobre el papel crucial que desempeña la facilitación a la hora de hacer realidad el potencial transformador de la investigación-acción. Larrea nos demuestra que desafíos sociales complejos —como el desarrollo económico, la reforma de la gobernanza o la sostenibilidad— no pueden resolverse únicamente mediante enfoques tradicionales de políticas de arriba abajo („top-down“). Por el contrario, requieren procesos colaborativos en los que diversos actores participen en el aprendizaje conjunto y en la creación de conocimiento. No obstante, estos procesos a menudo se ven obstaculizados por barreras institucionales, dinámicas de poder y formas de pensamiento rígidas. Por ello, la autora propone un enfoque basado en la facilitación que ayuda a los actores a superar dichas barreras y a crear espacios para un diálogo significativo y la transformación.

Summary of the Book

Action Research and Territorial Development

One of the main themes of the book is the relationship between action research and territorial development. Unlike traditional research methods, which often focus on observing and analyzing phenomena from a distance, action research involves collaboration between researchers and practitioners in the process of generating learning, knowledge and implementing change. In this work, Larrea focuses on *facilitation* as the key to succeeding in these collaborative processes.

Larrea situates her work within the field of Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD). This approach focuses on how collaborative learning processes can contribute to regional development and improved policymaking. In the case studies discussed in the book, policymakers, academics, business leaders, and other territorial actors work together to address complex policy issues. The goal is not only to produce knowledge but also to implement solutions that improve governance and development outcomes.

Larrea emphasizes that action research is particularly useful when addressing and researching complex and uncertain problems. In such situations, traditional policy approaches may fail because they predominantly rely on predefined solutions or technical expertise. Action research, by contrast, allows stakeholders to experiment, learn from experience, and adapt their strategies over time.

Practical Experiences from the Basque Country

What makes the book particularly worth reading is the way in which Larrea's personal experiences working with regional policymakers in Gipuzkoa, a province in the Basque Country, are described in ways that are simultaneously factual and poetic. This storytelling succeeds because she takes a point of departure in her body as a site for both the experience of facilitation processes and for the emotional and sensual aspects of this experience. She takes us with her into her process of using drawings to reflect on this embodied experience herself on the one hand, and to communicate across various contexts in her research on the other.

Her action research practice has encompassed collaboration with various governmental and institutional actors, where she and her research team have used facilitation to develop new approaches to economic and territorial development. These collaborations are still alive, and they include the creation of policy laboratories, learning spaces, and collaborative platforms where policymakers and stakeholders discuss challenges and explore solutions together. Through these initiatives, participants become able to develop and test new policy ideas, share knowledge, and reflect on their experiences. This is the book's main inspiration, as Larrea highlights several lessons from these experiences. First, she notes that meaningful transformation requires long-term relationships between researchers and policymakers. Short-term projects rarely produce deep changes in institutional practices. Second, she emphasizes that collaborative processes are often messy and conflictual. Different actors bring different perspectives, interests, and forms of knowledge, which can lead to tensions. However, these tensions can also become opportunities for learning and innovation if they are managed constructively.

Another key lesson is that emotions and interpersonal relationships play an important role in collaborative research processes. Trust, empathy, and openness are essential for fruitful dialogue and joint learning. Therefore, facilitation must address not only technical issues but also the emotional and relational aspects of collaboration.

The Concept of Transformative Facilitation

A central concept in the book is "transformative facilitation." According to Larrea, facilitators play a critical role in enabling action research processes to achieve transformative outcomes. Their task is not simply to organize meetings or manage discussions. Instead, facilitators help create conditions in which participants can reflect on their assumptions, challenge existing power structures, and explore new possibilities.

Transformative facilitation involves several key practices. These include encouraging open dialogue among participants, helping actors recognize and integrate different types of knowledge, and fostering a culture of reflection and learning. Facilitators must also be able to navigate complex social dynamics, including conflicts, power imbalances, and emotional tensions. Larrea argues that facilitators should adopt a reflexive approach to their work. This means constantly reflecting on their own role, assumptions, and influence within the process. By doing so, facilitators can better understand how their own actions in connection with others' shape the outcomes of collaborative research initiatives.

The Problem of Dichotomous Thinking

A distinctive contribution of the book is its discussion of “dichotomous thinking.” Larrea observes that many conflicts and misunderstandings in collaborative processes arise from rigid binary thinking. For example, people may see theory and practice as opposing forces, or they may view emotions as incompatible with rational decision-making.

The author identifies several dichotomies that commonly appear in action research and policy processes. These include expert knowledge versus experiential knowledge, planning versus emergence, efficiency versus participation, and objective versus subjective perspectives. Larrea argues that such dichotomies limit the potential for learning and transformation. Facilitators’ role is therefore to encourage participants to integrate different perspectives. For instance, theoretical, conceptual knowledge and practical experience can complement each other rather than compete. Similarly, rational analysis and emotional understanding can contribute to better decision-making when integrated in the same process. By facilitating in a balanced way between these divisions, action research participants can develop less rigid and more holistic and flexible approaches to complex problems.

The Three Spheres of Transformation

The book also draws on theoretical frameworks that describe transformation as occurring at multiple levels. One such framework identifies three spheres of transformation: the practical sphere, the political sphere, and the personal sphere.

The practical sphere involves changes in policies, practices, and institutional arrangements. This is often the most visible aspect of transformation, as it includes concrete outcomes such as new programs or policy initiatives.

The political sphere relates to changes in relationships, power structures, and governance systems. Transformative processes may alter who participates in decision-making and how power is distributed among stakeholders.

The personal sphere focuses on changes in values, beliefs, and worldviews. According to Larrea, deep transformation often requires shifts in how individuals understand themselves, others, and the challenges they face. Facilitators must be aware of these different spheres because transformation rarely occurs at only one level. Sustainable change requires progress across all three spheres simultaneously.

The contributions of the book

One of the main contributions of Larrea’s book is its strong connection between theory and practice, stemming from the embodied point of departure and the way that this embodiment is mediated by drawings. Larrea provides detailed reflections on facilitator work with policy-makers and other stakeholders. This makes the book particularly valuable for researchers who are interested in applying action research in real-world contexts but experience unexpected relational issues in the room of facilitation.

Another contribution is Larrea's emphasis on reflexivity. By openly discussing her own challenges, doubts, and learning processes, Larrea demonstrates how researchers can critically examine their roles within collaborative initiatives. This reflexive approach encourages readers to think more deeply about the ethical and relational dimensions of their research.

The book also makes an important contribution by highlighting the emotional aspects of policy processes. Traditional views of policymaking often emphasize rational analysis and technical expertise. However, Larrea shows that emotions, trust, and interpersonal relationships significantly influence how decisions are made and how collaborations unfold.

In addition, the visual illustrations used throughout the book provide an innovative way of communicating complex ideas. These drawings not only communicate Larrea's own development as researcher-facilitator; they also help readers understand abstract concepts such as power dynamics, transformation, and knowledge integration. They also reflect the author's belief that knowledge can be expressed in multiple forms, not only through written text.

Read this book – and use it!

The Art of Facilitating Action Research provides an important contribution to the literature on participatory research and collaborative governance. By focusing on facilitation and relational dynamics, Larrea highlights aspects of action research that are often overlooked in academic discussions.

The book is particularly valuable for researchers, policymakers, and facilitators who are interested in designing collaborative processes to address complex societal challenges. Its emphasis on reflexivity, dialogue, and knowledge integration offers both practical, reflective, and conceptual guidance for those seeking to promote transformation in governance systems. As such, the book is a rich and creative source of insights and inspiration, and it breaks with traditions of more socio-technical approaches to the facilitation of action research processes.

In conclusion, *The Art of Facilitating Action Research* provides a thoughtful and insightful exploration of how action research can support transformation in policy and territorial development. Through her experiences in the Basque Country, Miren Larrea shows us that meaningful change requires collaboration, reflexivity, and openness to multiple forms of knowledge.

The book is published by Deusto University Press and comprises 156 pages. It can be downloaded for free online at: <https://www.orquestra.deusto.es/en/publications-search/publications/books-book-chapters/2888-240083-art-of-facilitating-action-research>

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