

Rethinking Complexity and Facilitation in Action Research for Territorial Development: Insights from the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank in the Basque Country

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Abstract: This paper addresses a core challenge in Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) processes: the growing difficulty of building shared understanding and co-generating knowledge among actors who operate from increasingly fragmented epistemic, ontological, and communicative frameworks. Drawing on a three-year action research process within the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank (Basque Country, Spain), it asks how can insights from the action research process in the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank contribute to refining ARTD's approach to complexity? The paper develops two contributions: an expanded notion of complexity that includes the epistemic fragmentation and a reconceptualization of facilitation as epistemic translation. These insights aim to strengthen ARTD's capacity to engage with fragmented territorial realities.

Keywords: Action Research for Territorial Development, territorial complexity, facilitation, epistemic translation, co-generation

Repensar la complejidad y la facilitación en la investigación-acción para el desarrollo territorial: perspectivas del grupo de reflexión Etorkizuna Eraikiz en el País Vasco

Resumen: Este artículo aborda un desafío central en los procesos de Investigación-Acción para el Desarrollo Territorial (IAT): la creciente dificultad de construir un entendimiento compartido y co-generar conocimiento entre actores que operan desde marcos epistémicos, ontológicos y comunicativos cada vez más fragmentados. A partir de un proceso de investigación-acción de tres años en el Centro de Pensamiento Etorkizuna Eraikiz (País Vasco, España), se pregunta cómo pueden las perspectivas del proceso de investigación-acción en el Centro de Pensamiento Etorkizuna Eraikiz contribuir a perfeccionar el enfoque de la IAT sobre la complejidad. El artículo desarrolla dos contribuciones: una noción ampliada de complejidad que incluye la fragmentación epistémica y una reconceptualización de la facilitación como traducción epistémica. Estas perspectivas buscan fortalecer la capacidad de la IAT para abordar realidades territoriales fragmentadas.

Palabras clave: Investigación-Acción para el Desarrollo Territorial, complejidad territorial, facilitación, traducción epistémica, cogeneración

1. Introduction

1.1 Framing Complexity within Action Research for Territorial Development

Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD) is both an approach to knowledge generation and a strategy for territorial development, grounded in participation, dialogue, and co-generation (Larrea & Karlsen, 2014; Larrea, Estensoro & Sisti, 2019). Emerging from the intersection of action research and territorial development practices, ARTD has taken shape as a methodological response to the increasing complexity of territorial governance. In contrast to dominant approaches in the social sciences—often characterized by objectivist epistemologies, external observation, and a separation between researchers and social actors—ARTD actively engages territorial actors such as policymakers, business representatives, and civil society organizations through dialogical, participatory, reflexive, and co-generative processes (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014). Its primary aim is to address territorial challenges by integrating multiple perspectives, knowledge systems, and institutional logics into governance processes.

ARTD draws on three main intellectual traditions: the pragmatic stream of action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and the literature on territorial development, particularly Regional Innovation Systems (RIS) and industrial districts (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014). Over more than a decade, these foundations have supported the emergence of a dynamic community of researchers and practitioners. Recent collective contributions—such as *Roots and Wings* (Larrea, 2020) and *The Evolution of Action Research for Territorial Development* (Canto & Estensoro, 2025)—demonstrate the vitality of this field, which is now being reoriented to respond to a shifting landscape marked by climate crisis, rising authoritarianism, emerging voices, and evolving social demands and sensibilities.

Since its inception, complexity has been a foundational concern in ARTD. Early conceptualizations, particularly those of Karlsen (2010) and Karlsen & Larrea (2014), framed territorial complexity as a structural condition in which multiple actors with divergent interests and limited decision-making authority must collaborate to address shared challenges. This perspective aligns with broader governance approaches that emphasize multi-stakeholder coordination, adaptive decision-making, and co-generative learning as essential mechanisms for managing complexity in public policy (Head, 2022; Colander & Kupers, 2014; Weber & Khademanian, 2008).

1.2 Problem definition and Contribution

Karlsen and Larrea's (2014) conceptualization of complexity remains a cornerstone of Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD), particularly in emphasizing interdependence, uncertainty, and the absence of hierarchical authority as defining features of territorial governance (Costamagna & Larrea, 2017; Karlsen, 2024). However, recent action research experiences—such as the Work of the Future process conducted within the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank in Gipuzkoa (Basque Country, Spain)—suggest that these dimensions, while still relevant, are no longer sufficient to capture the evolving nature of complexity in contemporary territorial contexts.