

Book Review

Embodied Governance and Democratic Transformation:

Review of *The Art of Facilitating Action Research: A First-Person Account in Policymaking* (Larrea, 2024)

Antonio Casado da Rocha

University of the Basque Country
antonio.casado@ehu.eus

This review examines a book on organizational and systemic change toward more democratic forms of governance. Its author, Miren Larrea, is a senior researcher at Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness, and the book distills a body of practice-based knowledge that is rarely made explicit. The book draws on her sustained engagement with policymakers and public institutions, most notably the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (Basque Country, Spain), and turns years of institutional experimentation in collaborative governance into a reflective account of how transformative change unfolds in practice when multiple actors attempt to govern together. This trajectory has been personally demanding, shaped as much by collaboration as by resistance. Its value lies precisely in rendering these experiences intelligible and available for reflection beyond the Basque context.

The book is grounded in *Action Research for Territorial Development* (ARTD), an explicitly holistic and place-based approach oriented not only toward economic indicators but toward the health of territorial ecosystems. As a form of action research, ARTD does not stop at observation or interpretation, but intervenes to

learn through attempted change. Larrea situates her practice within the broader tradition of action research while arguing that its transformative capacity depends on holding together three modes of inquiry that conventional research often separates: *first-person work*, understood as self-inquiry into beliefs, emotions, and assumptions; *second-person work*, focused on relational dynamics and collective learning among stakeholders; and *third-person work*, oriented toward institutional change and territory-wide patterns. The decisive move in her argument is to treat first-person work not as an ethical supplement, but as a critical lever of transformation. Without sustained attention to the inner orientations of facilitators and leaders, institutional change risks reproducing familiar patterns under new vocabularies.

In this respect, the book also resonates with recent work in awareness-based systems change, particularly in its attention to the social field, embodied knowledge, and collective sense-making. Larrea's account can thus be read as documenting the practical conditions under which field-level shifts become possible. Her emphasis on facilitation, tacit and embodied knowledge, and the fragile interplay of trust, conflict, and attention suggests that transformative governance depends not only on actors and structures, but also on the quality of the relational field they co-create.

Situated at the intersection of action research, governance studies, and systems change, the book advances a practice-based theory of transformative facilitation. It foregrounds tensions between power, knowledge, and emotion, arguing that democratic transformation depends less on resolving these dynamics than on learning to engage them reflexively. Facilitation thus emerges not as a neutral technique, but as a critical site of political and epistemic intervention.

The Art of Facilitating Action Research was written during a research stay at Arantzazulab, a Democracy Innovation Lab, whose atmosphere of “distance and peace” (Larrea, 2024, p. 4) enabled the consolidation of more than fifteen years of practice. This context is not offered merely as background, but as integral to the form of awareness the book promotes. I have been a research fellow at Arantzazulab and so witnessed this book come to life. I have also heard Miren speak on several academic occasions and sensed a connection between her work and research on awareness-based social change. Recently, Scharmer and Pomeroy (2026) helped me name that intuition more clearly, especially through its call for a broader science attentive not only to systems and outcomes, but also to the social field itself, that is, to the quality of attention, relation, and collective sense-making through which transformation becomes possible.

Larrea's book offers a careful account of how facilitation works in real governance settings, where power, emotion, embodied knowledge, and conflict cannot be bracketed away. What Scharmer and Pomeroy (2026) argue for, the need to expand what counts as valid knowledge beyond external observation, helps illuminate Larrea's insistence on experiential knowledge and on the tacit dimensions of facilitation. Their emphasis on the social field also helps clarify

why Larrea gives such weight to trust, resistance, emotion, and the quality of shared attention. At the same time, her book gives this emerging paradigm a sharper political texture by showing that these subtler dimensions of change are inseparable from power asymmetries, the struggle for democratic legitimacy, and the difficult work of sustaining collaboration across difference.

Facilitation as an Awareness Practice

The book is explicitly framed as a first-person account. This is not merely a stylistic choice, but a methodological and epistemic stance. Larrea deliberately departs from conventional academic modes to foreground forms of experiential knowledge that often remain tacit or undervalued in professional and policy-oriented research. She adopts a mode of self-inquiry that places her own trajectory under scrutiny, revisiting the stories, decisions, and interventions that have shaped her practice. Facilitation is thus not presented as a neutral technique applied to external systems, but as a situated and relational practice, inseparable from the facilitator's assumptions, emotions, and beliefs. In this sense, the book enacts a central claim of awareness-based systems change: transformation begins with how practitioners perceive and interpret the systems they inhabit.

A distinctive feature of the writing process is the use of simple hand-drawn illustrations as a form of art-based action research. Larrea describes this practice as “slow thinking” (2024, p. 19): taking time to draw feelings, tensions, and lived experience before translating them into words. The book allows embodied and intuitive knowledge to surface prior to conceptual framing, creating space for ambiguity, discomfort, and not-knowing. In awareness-based terms, drawing operates as a practice of suspension, interrupting habitual cognitive patterns and enabling tacit relational dynamics to be perceived rather than prematurely resolved. Emotions and uncertainties, often treated as noise in rationalist policy discourse, can be read here as a form of warm data, signals of systemic misalignment or latent potential.

Although written in the first person, the book presents itself as collective in orientation. Knowledge is depicted as something that emerges between people over time, through cycles of action, reflection, and recalibration. The inclusion of two prefaces reinforces this. In the first, Hilary Bradbury emphasizes Larrea's capacity to “unfreeze” social systems caught in polarized power dynamics (2024, p. 11). Conflict and emotional intensity are not treated as obstacles to be minimized, but as potential entry points for transformation. This reframing has important implications for action research practice. It suggests that heightened emotion may signal moments when underlying assumptions are being unsettled, and that facilitation grounded in awareness can help systems work through those moments rather than suppress them. Bradbury situates Larrea's work within a broader cultural shift inspired by feminist and partnership-based principles, while also highlighting how the combination of illustrations and analysis resists binary, either-or reasoning.

The second preface, originally written for the Basque-language edition by Ainhoa Arrona, highlights Larrea’s contribution to reintroducing *phronesis* [practical wisdom] into the social sciences (2024, p. 13). Arrona frames the book as written from the “memory of the body” (2024, pp. 32–40), articulating a form of knowing that integrates expert understanding, lived experience, and process awareness. This wisdom challenges the fragmentation typical of academic specialization while also affirming minority languages as valuable vehicles for action research in different parts of the world.

Governance is sometimes framed as a technical instrument for control, coordination, or the management of legitimacy. Many policy reforms implicitly assume that better designs or incentives are sufficient in themselves to generate change. By contrast, Larrea presents action research as a means of democratizing knowledge production and of engaging with the emotions, mental models, and theories in use that shape policy processes in practice. In this framing, awareness is not an individual achievement, but a collective capacity cultivated through carefully held spaces of inquiry.

What Makes Facilitation Transformative?

Larrea’s central claim is that facilitation becomes transformative when practiced as a deliberate art of *integration*. Rather than treating facilitation as neutral technical support for policy design or project management, she frames it as a disciplined effort to bring into a productive relationship some elements that institutional life usually keeps apart, sometimes explicitly, more often tacitly. In this account, systemic change depends less on choosing the “right” side of familiar oppositions than on cultivating the capacity to work within them, reconfiguring their relations so they can become mutually reinforcing rather than cancelling each other out.

Larrea develops this argument through her long-term collaboration with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, a small Basque province of approximately 730,000 inhabitants,¹ marked by a strong local identity, an industrial legacy, and a dense civic fabric that weaves together coastal and inland communities. Over time, the provincial government shifted from a hierarchical administrative model toward more collaborative forms of governance. Early participatory experiments and public-private initiatives culminated in a strategic turn in 2015 with the launch of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* [“Building the future”] strategy, which institutionalized experimentation, multi-actor collaboration, and long-term anticipation. By the early 2020s, this trajectory had consolidated into a more systemic and polycentric model, underpinned by dedicated governance structures

¹ Official information about Gipuzkoa and its system of governance is available here: <https://www.gipuzkoa.eus/web/council>

and learning-oriented forms of meta-governance. For a collective and nuanced account of this evolving context, see Barandiaran et al. (2023).

Larrea narrates this trajectory through sustained action research conducted in Gipuzkoa between 2009 and 2023, spanning multiple political cycles. The work moves from an initial focus on social capital, through a post-2011 reorientation toward territorial development, to a broader emphasis after 2015 on collaborative governance. The continuity of the research relationship across political change is presented as evidence of durable effects. Larrea argues that the process persisted because it cultivated collective capability among heterogeneous actors, including policymakers, small and medium-sized enterprises, local development agencies, and university partners.

Three Institutional Spaces Where Collective Capability Took Form

Larrea describes the emergence of collective capability in three institutional spaces within the Gipuzkoa policy ecosystem, each addressing a distinct coordination challenge.

First, the Territorial Development Laboratory (TDLab), formally established in 2017, focused on fostering collaborative governance between the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and eleven county-level development agencies. The core bottleneck it addressed was relational rather than technical. The provincial administration was perceived as too large and distant to engage effectively, while small and medium-sized enterprises struggled to navigate provincial structures. The TDLab responded by positioning local development agencies as intermediary facilitators, reshaping relationships between macro-level policy and micro-level economic activity. This achievement was less in policy innovation than in the gradual construction of shared language and trust across institutional boundaries.

Second, the Etorikizuna Eraikiz Think Tank began as a space for reflection parallel to formal decision-making, where stakeholder input could be heard without direct consequences. Through the ARTD process, it evolved from a model of research-for-policy toward a research-as-policy one, becoming increasingly embedded in decision-making itself. Deliberation groups addressing complex systemic challenges are chaired by a Deputy (equivalent to a minister), ensuring that those accountable for outcomes participate in the production of shared understanding. Knowledge is thus not transferred after deliberation but generated within governance processes.

Third, the Governance Laboratory operated as an integrative space, intended to prevent the overall strategy from fragmenting into a collection of loosely connected projects. Larrea's "nervous system" (2024, pp. 28–39) metaphor captures this function: without ongoing communication and coherence, initiatives risk duplication or misalignment. Through ARTD, the Governance Laboratory provided a connective infrastructure through which experiments exchange learning and orient themselves toward a systemic perspective.

Four Process Features: Braiding, Friction, Disagreement, and Suppression

Larrea's analysis then turns to the barriers that made her action research journey both demanding and revealing. Four features appeared as recurring dynamics that shape how collective capability is built and constrained over time.

A first recurring feature is what Larrea describes as a “knowledge braid” (2024, p. 32), the integration of experiential knowledge, disciplinary knowledge, and process knowledge. Experiential knowledge refers to stakeholders' tacit and lived understanding, disciplinary knowledge to formal academic or expert contributions, and process knowledge to the situated expertise of facilitation: the strand that holds the other two together. Without it, expert analysis and lived experience risk passing one another without meaningful engagement. But this exposed a structural weakness: process knowledge is rarely recognized as knowledge by either policymakers or academic communities. Its professional invisibility helps explain later patterns of emotional exhaustion, as demanding relational labor is essential to the work yet remains largely unacknowledged and unrewarded.

Second is the central role of *friction*. Transformation, in Larrea's account, does not occur through smooth collaboration but through managed resistance, when stakeholders challenge researchers' proposals and researchers, in turn, question stakeholders' assumptions. Facilitation involves distinguishing between conflict that opens learning and conflict that closes it, a task complicated by the proximity to power that defines ARTD. Because the work is funded by policymakers who may also be its object, hierarchical authority can sometimes override deliberation, reshaping research agendas unilaterally. In other moments, researchers are compelled to navigate political realities by building alliances within policy structures. At certain moments, the process hinged on a fragile kind of trust. Policymakers did not necessarily share the researchers' perspective, and some of the moves proposed by the facilitation team ran against their administrative instincts. Yet they accepted them, sometimes almost against their better judgment, because they trusted the team's capacity to hold the process. One politician later recalled those episodes as moments of “deep learning” (Larrea, 2024, p. 37), though not without ambivalence: at times, he admitted, it felt as if outsiders had entered the institution and were telling them how to make policy. Precisely there lay the force of the process. Trust could, for a moment, offset formal hierarchy and give facilitation real weight. These were the moments when action research became most transformative, and also when its burden of responsibility was felt most acutely.

The third is what Larrea terms “tacit disagreement” (2024, p. 38), a form of passive resistance. Here, the obstacle is not open conflict but gradual disengagement. Leaders voice formal support for action research in politically appropriate terms while withholding resources, follow-through, or behavioral

change. Processes then stall and dissipate without confrontation, ending in what Larrea depicts as a bureaucratic death by stagnation (2024, p. 39).

The fourth feature concerns *emotional suppression*. Across more than fifteen years of work, the process is saturated with joy, frustration, anger, and sadness, yet institutional dialogue remains apparently rational and professional, relegating emotion to the private sphere. Larrea is explicit that facilitators themselves were complicit, lacking both language and skill to integrate emotion into professional practice (2024, p. 40). Over time, accumulated and unprocessed affect becomes a key driver of exhaustion. It is this largely hidden emotional material, rather than any single methodological insight, that ultimately propelled her toward the integrative framework through which the book's learning is organized.

The Three Spheres of Transformation

Larrea engaged with the literature on complexity-oriented change in search of concepts that could account for her practice. This inquiry led her to the *Three Spheres of Transformation* framework (Leichenko et al., 2022, among other references discussed in the book), which she adapts and mobilizes as a diagnostic heuristic. Used in this way, the framework helps explain why change efforts often falter by situating transformation across three interdependent arenas rather than reducing it to a single level of intervention.

The *Practical Sphere* concerns visible behaviors and technical responses: policy programs, instruments, and concrete actions. It corresponds to second-person work focused on groups and communities and is often the primary focus of reform efforts. The *Political Sphere* addresses the rules of the game, including institutional structures, norms, power relations, and resource allocation. This sphere aligns with third-person inquiry oriented toward systemic patterns and territory-wide impact. The *Personal Sphere* is the least visible yet, in Larrea's account, the most consequential. It encompasses beliefs, values, worldviews, emotions, and paradigms that shape what actors perceive as possible, legitimate, or worth pursuing, and corresponds to first-person inquiry.

Larrea's central claim is that durable transformation requires coordinated movement across all three spheres. What makes the book especially valuable, however, is that she does not present this coordination as harmonious or easily achieved. On the contrary, one of her strengths as a writer is her ability to help the reader stay with the friction that arises when personal dispositions, relational processes, and institutional structures pull in different directions. Rather than smoothing over those tensions, she treats them as intrinsic to transformative work.

This is where her analysis becomes especially useful. She shows that change efforts often stall not because actors lack good intentions, but because movement in one sphere is not matched in the others. New collaborative practices may emerge at the interpersonal level while institutions remain unchanged; formal

reforms may be adopted without corresponding shifts in habits, emotions, or assumptions; personal learning may deepen without altering collective routines. Her account helps the reader recognize these misalignments without reducing them to simple failure.

Just as importantly, Larrea offers conceptual and narrative tools for navigating this thorny terrain. Her recurring attention to dichotomies, expert and experiential knowledge, efficiency and participation, reason and emotion, public and private, gives the reader a way of naming tensions that are common in practice yet often left unspoken. She does not promise their resolution once and for all. Instead, she models a more demanding stance: learning to stay with them, to work within them, to read them diagnostically, and to facilitate processes in which tension becomes a source of movement rather than paralysis. That is one of the book's most useful achievements: changes in programs or practices, and even in formal rules, are unlikely to hold if underlying beliefs and assumptions remain unexamined. Conversely, personal insight unaccompanied by institutional and practical shifts risks collapsing into introspection without consequence. The strength of the framework lies in forcing facilitators to place both political arrangements and personal worldviews explicitly on the agenda, rather than treating them as neutral background conditions.

Dichotomic Thinking and the Work of Mutuality

With these lenses in place, Larrea turns to a set of dichotomies that function as recurring points of resistance in institutional change. These oppositions are not merely conceptual. They describe patterned biases through which organizations legitimize certain ways of knowing and acting while marginalizing others. In Larrea's mapping, policymaking cultures tend to privilege expert knowledge, planning, theory, power, efficiency, reason, objectivity, publicness, actor roles, and masculine-coded qualities. Conversely, experiential knowledge, emergence, practice, love, participation, emotion, subjectivity, private dimensions, facilitation, and feminine-coded qualities are routinely devalued. The task of transformative facilitation is therefore not to invert these hierarchies, but to rebalance systems already tilted, cultivating *mutuality*, understood as a relationship in which opposing poles constrain and enable one another.

Among these dichotomies, Larrea gives weight to the hierarchy of expert over experiential knowledge. In deliberative settings, academic contributors are often privileged, while stakeholders' tacit understanding is relegated to an anecdotal or merely supplementary role. Closely related is the tension between planning and emergence. Linear planning satisfies bureaucratic demands for predictability, yet complex change unfolds through iterative cycles of action and reflection that resist advance specification. Emergent practice must therefore be translated into forms legible to hierarchical systems, a process that can dilute its generative potential. A similar dynamic shapes the theory–practice divide, where demands for theoretical certainty delay action even when situated responses are

urgently required. Against this, action research insists that practice itself is a source of knowledge, not merely its application.

Particularly revealing is the opposition between power and love, articulated in terms drawn from Adam Kahane (2010). Power refers to the drive toward realization and output, while love names the drive toward unity, trust, and care. Larrea argues that power without love becomes extractive, eroding relationships, while love without power becomes unsustainable, placing disproportionate burdens on facilitators who hold cohesion without decision-making authority. The integrative demand is not balance as compromise, but a mutual reinforcement of realization and unity.

The efficiency versus participation dichotomy is illustrated through the story of the Industry 4.0 program (Larrea, 2024, pp. 77–79). An initially rapid, hierarchical design appeared efficient but failed in implementation, requiring a restart. A slower, participatory redesign, initially criticized as inefficient, produced stronger alignment with firms' needs and rapid enrolment once relaunched. Participation is thus framed not as a normative embellishment but as a condition for durable effectiveness.

Larrea also foregrounds the reason–emotion dichotomy, arguing that excluding emotion makes governance both fragile and insincere. Another concrete episode illustrates this claim: during the TDLab agreement process, an eruption of anger, institutionally coded as unprofessional at the time, was later recognized by participants as the moment when genuine change began (2024, pp. 81–82). Emotional expression does not displace rationality but enables forms of truth-telling that reconfigure relationships. The example is compelling, though it raises unresolved questions about how to distinguish between generative and destructive emotional expression.

The opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is treated less as a methodological debate than as a practical barrier to agreement. In the TDLab, quantitative “objective” diagnoses failed to resolve disagreement, while a “subjective” mapping of positions surfaced conflicting narratives and created conditions for intersubjective work. The implication is not that cold data are irrelevant, but that they cannot substitute for addressing the interpretive frames through which actors understand one another.

The public–private dichotomy further constrains deliberation. When vulnerabilities, fears, or career risks remain private, key sources of resistance remain inaccessible. Sharing personal dimensions can humanize positions and enable movement, even as it exposes participants to institutional risk. Larrea then links these dynamics to gendered patterns of labor. In some of the action research experiences she recounts, Larrea observes that male policymakers tended to occupy visible roles associated with rational agency, while women within research teams more often assumed relational and facilitative work coded as feminine and consequently undervalued. As I read her, Larrea is not arguing for the feminization of policy, but for a rebalancing in which feminine forms of facilitation become visible and valued, while women and men can more equally

inhabit roles of agency, research, and care. In this way, agency and care are jointly valued and held in balance, rather than care being relegated to invisible work.

Finally, Larrea critiques the dichotomy between actors and facilitators, one that the research team initially reproduced in its own representations, with facilitators appearing as peripheral presences alongside visible actors. The proposed resolution is the figure of the “facilitative actor” (2024, pp. 142–144), someone who exercises agency while cultivating conditions for others to act. This move carries clear leadership implications: collaborative governance demands roles capable of holding visibility and relational stewardship together, without collapsing one into the other.

Facilitation as Democratic Rebalancing

The Art of Facilitating Action Research culminates in a normative claim: transformative facilitation is not neutral. Because institutional systems are structurally biased toward expert knowledge, planning, power, and actor-centered visibility, facilitative work often requires actively reinforcing what is marginalized: experiential knowledge, emergence, emotion, care, and participation. This is not framed as ideological preference, but as systemic rebalancing oriented toward mutuality. In this sense, *facilitation is political* because it intervenes in what counts as legitimate knowledge, appropriate feeling, and proper action, and because it deliberately connects the Personal Sphere of beliefs and emotions with the Political Sphere of institutional power and the Practical Sphere of policy outcomes. Drawing on her long-term experience in Gipuzkoa, Larrea advances a general conclusion: durable results depend on linking subjective and relational realities with structural governance arrangements, and on cultivating facilitative actors capable of holding these tensions without resolving them into simplistic choices.

The originality of Larrea’s contribution invites several questions that merit more sustained discussion. A first concerns the normative basis of facilitation. The book argues convincingly that facilitation is not, and perhaps cannot be, neutral, particularly where transformation requires counterbalancing perspectives, forms of knowledge, or modes of practice that have historically been marginalized. Yet the criteria by which such rebalancing should be guided remain only partially specified. The reader is left wanting a fuller account of how facilitators might distinguish between necessary asymmetry and undue normative projection, especially in plural and contested democratic settings.

A second issue concerns scope and transferability. One of the book’s great strengths is its rootedness in the concrete institutional and territorial context of Gipuzkoa. At the same time, this situatedness raises the question of how far its conceptual vocabulary, and particularly its account of transformative facilitation, can travel beyond the enabling conditions of that case. The book clearly aspires to broader relevance, but the terms of that generalization could have been more explicitly examined.

A third point concerns epistemic status. Larrea makes a compelling case for the importance of tacit, embodied, and experiential forms of knowing, and this is one of the book's most significant interventions. Yet because her project is not merely descriptive but also methodological and normative, the question of how such forms of knowledge are to be validated, contested, and rendered publicly accountable within democratic governance remains only partially resolved. Part of her answer, however, might be performative as much as argumentative: accountability begins with transparency, and this publication is therefore not an add-on to the action-research cycle but an essential moment within it. Published open access in Basque, English, and Spanish in the University of Deusto's Territorial Development Series, the book treats facilitation as a site of knowledge production, power, and democratic transformation. Its central achievement is to make visible dimensions of governance that are usually obscured: the relational, emotional, and awareness-based work through which collective action becomes possible. By articulating the Three Spheres of Transformation and grounding them in lived practice, Larrea offers practitioners a coherent orientation for navigating complexity without reducing it to technique. Her emphasis on slow thinking, knowledge braiding, and relational accountability provides a timely counterpoint to accelerated, transactional, and output-driven models of governance, especially in "times of rupture" (Scharmer and Pomeroy, 2026) when democracy appears increasingly fragile.

This is a brave book. By writing in the first person, legitimizing bodily memory and emotion, and treating care work and facilitation as politically consequential, Larrea departs from dominant academic and institutional conventions. These choices give the book much of its ethical force and reflective depth. They also mark the point at which some of its greatest strengths become, at times, its principal limitations. Readers seeking prescriptive guidance, scalable tools, or tightly specified causal claims may find the argument demanding. The reliance on reflective narration and visual material leaves some analytical tensions unresolved, especially concerning how facilitative practices travel across contexts marked by different configurations of power. Larrea emphasizes the multilocal character of the research team, working across Spain, Norway, and Argentina, to suggest that the learning generated is not reducible to a singular Basque case. At the same time, the text leaves open how far this trans-territorial relevance might extend beyond contexts with comparable institutional density and long-term commitment to experimentation. This openness, however, appears intentional. Rather than closing debate, Larrea invites readers into an ongoing practice of inquiry. The book therefore succeeds less as a how-to manual and more as a reflective and generative account, one that reshapes how governance, democracy, and action research might be understood and practiced together.

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