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The Art of Facilitating Action Research

A first-person account in policymaking

Miren Larrea

Deusto
University Press

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Territorial Development Series

«*Andrezaharra* naiz, hezur-haragizko gizakia, baina aldi berean metafora, figura poetiko-politikoa.»

Mari Luz Esteban
Andrezaharraren manifestua

«I am an *old woman,* a being of flesh and bone, yet also a metaphor, a poetical-political figure.»

The Manifesto of the Old Women
Mari Luz Esteban

Contents

Preface

Because women hold up half the sky

With enthusiasm I have followed Miren Larrea's work on action research since our first meeting in 2017. That meeting concerned Miren's paper in Action research journal (Larrea, 2019[1]) on alchemizing conflict dynamics among stakeholders. I found Miren's thesis refreshing - namely that conflict can be a resource in action research. It nudged my longstanding sense that conflict (and all emotionally charged dynamics) offer a path into transformation, absent which social scientist struggle to offer resources for stakeholder. Miren's break with the usual social science oblivion suggested not just why systems remain frozen in divisive power plays, but how they may become unfrozen. I also recognized in the approach that the stiflingly narrow, positivist conception of research was being questioned, far beyond the typical action research orientation of "doing something" with that we know. Action researchers' doing something has often become mere project management in so far as it colludes in the disappearance of human centered feelings, cognitions and stakeholders' theories-in-use. Perhaps no wonder so much value in action research is lost when yielding results that are inapplicable to real humans confronting real dilemmas. Miren's book continues her transformative efforts and invites us neither to fear nor avoid the emotionally charged obstacles, instead treating them as opportunities for clarifying and reframing that can ensue. In what is now Miren's first book length treatment of these emotive matter, we are invited to go deeper still. We're invited under the frozen mass of stuckness in our political and social systems. We're invited to ask what gives life to systems. We're also offered solutions which point to the necessity for helping —or facilitating— a new, more responsive fluidity in our social systems, on —with luck— that is capable of meeting the planetary crisis now escalating in the form of runaway climate change and social inequality. Our entirely human made crisis —warned about for decades— is as much social and relational as it is about carbon emissions, human greed, biodiversity loss and material toxicity. It is produced by people. From the perspective that through divisiveness may come opportunity, we may also consider that perhaps it is produced for us. We are the ones that can turn things around. Doing so requires better facilitation of change processes. For this Miren's book is invaluable both for understanding better our stucknesses and taking constructive action.

The saying "women hold up half the sky" came to mind as I read. It's a saying —"妇女能顶半边天— first made popular during the cultural revolution of the 20th Century in China.

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[1] Larrea, M. (2019). Changing universities through action research: The dilemma of scope in pluralistic environments. Action research, 17(3), 400-416.

Miren's work points also to a cultural revolution, albeit one informed by feminine values, and eschewing the violence of radical change. Yes, women matter. However, women, can stop replicating the modernist, top down, rationalist, system of old that we have been socialized to. We must tell the truth of what we experience. In a nutshell, patriarchy is killing all of us and women, with all people, may be best positioned to experience, discern and ultimately help different kinds of transformations happen. Miren's book helps us see and feel what it means in practice that women matter and that feminine —we might say partnership— principles need more support.

The facilitation that Miren's book describes concerns her years supporting transformation of the political culture in the Basque region of Northern Spain. Like cultures of politics worldwide, it is a bastion of male coded assumptions and practices. The power of Miren's book is to point out how these practices and assumptions go quite deep and that making them visible is important work. Then as any action researcher worth her salt would do, she shows how to adopt a more partnering ethos.

Key to Miren's analysis is that either-or thinking, i.e., dichotomist thinking, fuels the invisible obstacles that hold old culture in place. For new culture to emerge we are benefited by seeing the 10 dichotomies, which are beautifully illustrated. This juxtaposition —on the one hand a hard insight— and the other a beautiful illustration is but one way in which binary thinking is transcended. Seeing the dichotomies often as contradictions, she finds energy in reframing them in a way that is both/and. After all the very term, "action research' points precisely to the power of transcending either research or action. There is clearly more to be learned at a time when action research contribution, as a participatory process which democratizes knowledge generation, will surely spread.

We are not invited, primarily, to linger around in subjective truth finding, but to try to find a generative relationship among perspectives, our own included. The devil is in the details of how one goes about it as a facilitator. The challenge is to help generate mutuality between the poles and divisions. This work is not neutral because it requires an over stressing of the side that has been marginalized. Thus, it requires over attention to the very subjectivity and psychological processes that have been disappeared and, in their absence, have allowed too many to stay enthralled by their unseen, unnoticed, unquestioned perspectives. Miren writes that after her fifteen years facilitating action research, she has learnt that the normative principle of finding balance (e.g., mutuality) is not at all as straightforward manner as all perspectives are equally valuable.

The ecological, social, and political challenges of our time demand transformation, and action researchers have the potential to respond to this demand, but only if we too transform by turning to what's been marginalized within and among us.

Oh, and did I mention how fabulous the diagrams are?!

Enjoy!

Hilary Bradbury

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Preface to the original version of the book in the Basque language[2]

Starting from Aristotle's intellectual virtues, Professor Bent Flyvbjerg proposes phronesis, i.e., practical wisdom, as the basis of social sciences that want to be meaningful. This wisdom is what allows us to work on problems within specific contexts, and it stands as the greatest intellectual virtue, even more so in the face of today's complex challenges. When I first read about phronesis, the work of Miren Larrea came to mind because, for me, that word represented what I saw Miren doing through action research for territorial development.

Miren says that this book is written from the memory of the body. And, even though she refers to it as knowledge based on experience, this body memory is the knowledge that incorporates, combines, articulates, and creates many types of knowledge: in other words, WISDOM. Given its complexity, it is easier to capture this wisdom in action when it is happening than to capture it in books or articles. In this book, however, Miren has managed to bring out and capture particularly well what is so difficult to reach. This is probably, to a large extent, because she has written free from academic conventions and formalities that sometimes become mere corsets.

The book combines words and drawings to propose the foundations of the transformative facilitation of co-creation processes and integrate certain dimensions that seem dichotomous along the way. And, with great skill, she embodies the integration of some of these dichotomous ways of thinking in the book. With great mastery, the author —Larrea the expert and at the same time Miren the person— manages to reach the entirety of the reader, to speak to reason and emotion, to mind and heart, in a beautiful journey that becomes a real vicarious learning experience. It is amazing how drawings can make the reader feel and bring learning to life.

The book is also an integration of love and power (two concepts she proposes for the work of facilitation). It is love because it is an exercise of bringing together the different when it proposes to unite what is separated. It is love because she shows herself with great courage and consistency, putting into practice what is preached. And finally, also because

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[2] The first version of this book was published in the Basque language. This preface, originally written in that language, has been kept as part of the English version to acknowledge that minority languages are a valuable vehicle of action research in different territories around the world.

even though many of the lessons were learned during difficult and painful times, the words used to describe those moments convey nothing but understanding, sweetness, and care.

But it is also an exercise of vindication, done with love, but a vindication of great strength and power. The drawings, which seem to be made for children, become a representation and critique of certain elements that take place in collaborative processes and that are at the base of many social challenges: Miren provides us with coloured glasses to explore areas that are in the dark. This is relevant because co-creation and collaboration have become vogue in the new narratives of policy and research as a means of responding to social challenges, but in most cases, they have also become empty words, used with superficial meaning or with a naïve perspective far removed from reality. However, as the book shows, the dynamics that characterise society and the visions, beliefs, and emotions of those of us who are part of them can be found in these processes and can either stimulate or become an obstacle to transformation. The book does an excellent job of identifying, visualising, defining, understanding, and conceptualising some of them, combining micro-practices and deep structural dimensions through dilemmas and dichotomies. As a result, Miren has managed to develop studies of great richness and sophistication.

And because of what follows, it is also an exercise in vindication, advocating certain ways of approaching the world, oneself, and others, as well as certain types of knowledge. The book is a vindication of a particular way of creating knowledge in action, for action and transformation, while containing the knowledge developed in that way. Indeed, it is unlikely that the treasure found in this book could be created and transmitted from the places and approaches of those who look down on the individuals who work in and for action.

Innovative in form, the book is truly beautiful, sometimes even touching in its beauty. At the same time, it is a significant contribution to the knowledge fields of action research, territorial development and public policy, for its contribution to the practice of collaboration and the understanding of co-creation, for its invitation to address these issues, and because it illustrates how to create and share knowledge in a way that will become increasingly necessary. Flyberg argues that intelligent social action requires phronesis. This book is a clear example of that.

Ainhoa Arrona

Introduction

1. **The book in brief**

The ecological, social, and political challenges of our time demand transformation, and action research has the potential to respond to this demand, but only if we transform it. In this book, I share the results of a self-inquiry process based on fifteen years of experience facilitating action research for territorial development (ARTD) with policymakers. The goal is to contribute to developing more transformative approaches for the facilitation of action research.

The book's rationale is that transformation is often hindered by dichotomic thinking (of stakeholders and action researchers), and facilitators can help overcome these obstacles, unlocking the transformative potential of action research. The goal of the book is thus to help make facilitation more transformative.

Figure 0.1. **The book in brief**

1. My experience
2. A conceptual framework
3. My experience revisited using the conceptual framework
4. A proposal for more transformative facilitation

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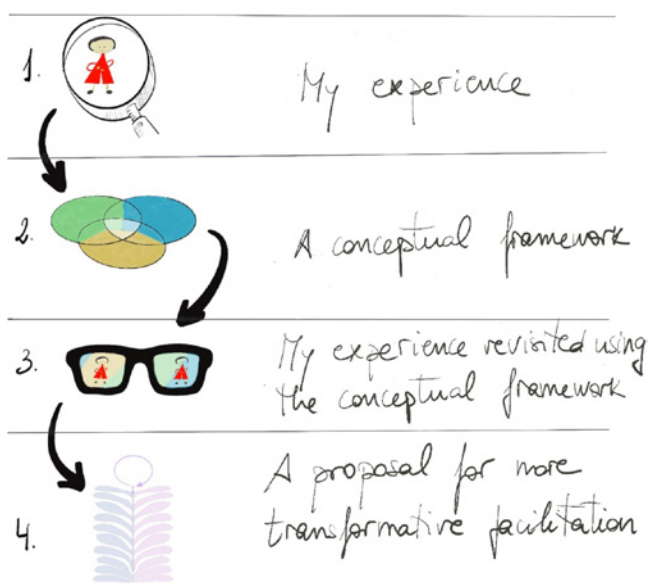
I develop this rationale through four chapters represented in Figure 0.1. Chapter 1 introduces my experience through the eight features that I found to be the most relevant. In Chapter 2, I present a framework used in Chapter 3 as a heuristic to revisit my experience. This process revealed ten dichotomies that impeded the transformative potential of action research. I go through each of these dichotomies in Chapter 4, sharing my position as a non-neutral facilitative researcher and reflecting on how facilitation can help overcome dichotomic thinking.

Having seen other researchers and practitioners struggle with the same type of dichotomic thinking that I have experienced, I decided to write this book in the hope that my contribution can serve to help them improve their practice.

2. **An exploration of intuitive knowledge in facilitation**

There are multiple minutes, diaries, systematisations, and papers, i.e., explicit knowledge, about the action research I will present in this book. However, I feel that I have not yet been able to share the most valuable knowledge I have gained during these years, namely the experiential knowledge acquired through the practice of action research, which remains mostly tacit. This book is my experiment in trying to share this experiential knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is intuitive and translates into the ability to understand a situation immediately without using conscious reasoning. It does not mean that we ignore what we know, but rather that we use this knowledge faster than we can rationally explain. Intuition plays a critical role in action research facilitation because, when we facilitate in action, we often lack the time to consciously reason our understanding of the situation and consider every answer we give in the dialogue with stakeholders. We understand the situation and respond intuitively, and it is only afterwards that we debrief, reflect, and make sense of what happened. Yet despite this, when we read about action research in books and journals, most narratives share this latter rational perspective.

There is another feature that I have experienced about intuition. When we grasp a situation intuitively, our understanding is more systemic than we can explain. This means that when we are facilitating, we can establish connections that we are unable to explain, yet our responses incorporate those connections.

The most representative examples of tacit, intuitive knowledge in the book are the selection of the most relevant features of my experience (Chapter 1) and the dichotomies depicted in Figure 4.2 (Chapter 4). Figure 4.2. presents ten forms of dichotomic thinking I have experienced. The choice of these dichotomies, and moreover, the distribution of the different concepts on the left or right side of the figure, is based on my intuitive knowledge. The choice of locating each dimension on the left or right side of Figure 4.2 generates connections that are not only too many but also too complex for me to justify through theory and data. Had I ruled out intuition as a source of knowledge for this book, I could have illustrated each single dichotomy with data from our projects, and I could have used theory to argue that these were complex situations, but I would not have been able to share the connections in Figure 4.2. And these connections, which mirror my experience of complexity, are precisely the most important contribution of this book.

One of my recurrent sources of inspiration to explore what I intuitively know is Paulo Freire and his description of his writing processes for the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He shares how this book emerged from the memory of multiple stories that he took to exile in his body, which he described as "soaked in history, cultural prints, memories, feelings, doubts, dreams that were broken but not undone […]" (Freire, 2008, p. 27). He says that when writing, he tried to "re-understand the stories, the facts, the actions" he had been in-

volved in (p. 62). Moreover, all that he had started to experience years before in Brazil and that "he had brought with him to exile, in the memory of his body, was intensely and rigorously lived in his years in Chile" (p. 63).

These words inspired me to shift my attention from data to my body and its memory of the lived experiences. This is thus a self-inquiry process that situates me, and the memory of my body, under the magnifying glass (see Figure 0.2).

Figure 0.2. **The memory of my body under the magnifying glass**

3. **A book triggered also by emotion**

My motivation to write this book would not be complete if, in this introduction, I avoided saying something about my emotions.

When writing this book, I not only rationalised my experience, but I dealt with my emotions, too. In that process, I worked with five basic emotions: joy, love, anger, fear and sadness.

The experiences I share here have given me (and us) much joy and love. I felt joy when a workshop worked out, when participants expressed it was helping them, when we constructively dealt with a situation of conflict, or reconducted a process that had deteriorated. I felt love when researchers took care of each other in the process, when we worked as one team with policymakers, when participants asked us to continue their transformation journeys with them, and when all of the previously mentioned grew aware that what we were achieving, we were achieving together.

However, there were other emotions, too. Since I started doing research thirty years ago, and especially since I started to facilitate action research, I have heard things like, "That is

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not research."; "Yes, but that is *just* a subjective opinion."; "The process is chaotic and we cannot accept that."; "Those documents do not have the rigour we require for these processes."; "You are making a fuss out of nothing. "; or "It is good that the group has more cohesion now, but we cannot present that as a result". When this happened, in public, I used theory, reason, and objective data to argue for the validity of our action research, while inside, I shrank, as I have tried to illustrate in Figure 0.3.

Figure 0.3. **The subjective experience of shrinking**
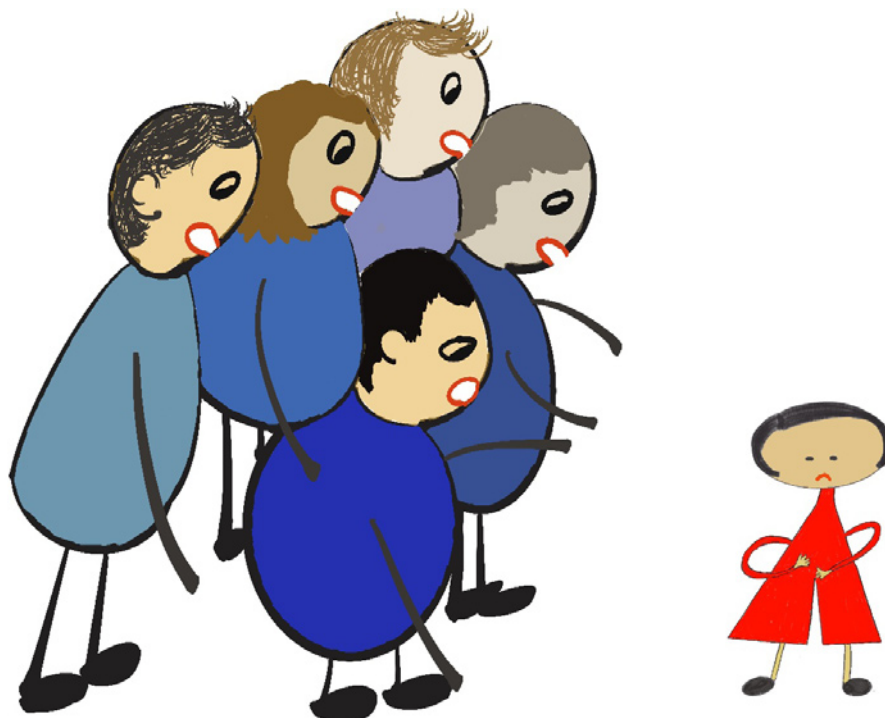
I have learnt that shrinking resulted from not connecting with the emotions of fear, anger, and sadness that these situations generated in me. I have also learnt that fear is good because it helps us react; anger is good because it helps us establish limits; and sadness is good because it helps us figure things out. This book also explores my responses to the emotional strains of facilitation. The personal narratives of other researchers about their emotions in similar situations helped me, and by sharing my experience, I want to try to help others realise that they are not alone.

I want to clarify that the source of the happiness, love, fear, sadness, and anger are not the projects that I will share, nor the organisations where I developed them (Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness, the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, and the county development agencies), nor the people I have met in these organisations. The origin is rooted much deeper than all of us, and our path is not exceptional. Our experiences were instrumental in sharing trends and attitudes that are universal. Therefore, the reflexive capacity and open-mindedness of all my colleagues and travelling companions in action research have been essential for the learnings shared in this book.

4. **Drawing, a form of art-based action research**

When I started to explore self-inquiry and first-person action research with Hilary Bradbury around 2018, she helped me see how focused I was on reason and the cognitive dimension of my experience. I used words, words, and words to share this dimension. However, I had difficulties reaching my emotions. She invited me to start drawing, and, despite my lack of technical skills, I discovered a different way to access my experiences and share them.

The ideas I have illustrated in the drawings of this book are based on concrete experiences, and these drawings were my way to "re-understand the stories, the facts, the actions" I had been involved in (Freire, 2008, p. 62).

The decision to use my own drawings in this book follows the path I initiated with Hilary. Essentially, it is my attempt to get closer to what I intuitively know, to my emotions, and to the subjective experience of action research.

When I started on the book, I first wrote what I wanted to say, and then created a drawing that represented it. However, I realised that it worked better the other way around, so I began by drawing what I felt to be relevant and then using words to express what the drawing depicted.

I describe this way of making sense of my experience as *slow* thinking. When writing, I moved forward from one idea to the next with every sentence. When drawing, I felt immersed in one idea for hours, as in Figure 0.4. After finishing a drawing, I often felt I had distilled what was important about that experience and exactly what I wanted to convey. I also felt that I did not need to write much anymore.

Figure 0.4. **Slow thinking**

One of the main challenges I came up against when drawing was how to be inclusive while representing my experience. Many of the pictures show groups of people, as well as communities of action researchers and stakeholders. One option was to depict how these groups should be, including people of different races or genders. The other option was to be true to my experience, where participants were white, and roles were often influenced by gender.

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I have chosen to represent the process as I experienced it. Nonetheless, I have tried to be inclusive in the drawings that are not based on my lived experience.

5. **Acknowledgements**

By incorporating intuition, subjectivity, emotions, and drawing, this book falls outside the category of a traditional academic book. I have liberated myself from providing the theoretical explanation of my practice and the data that supports it; instead, conceptual frameworks are instrumental in sharing my experience. Therefore, this book is for readers who trust my experience and accept its subjective value. If you still plan to continue reading, my first acknowledgement is for you, the reader of this book.

The book is written in the first person because it is the result of my reflection on my fifteen years of experience with action research, but I was never alone in that process. The action research I describe, the reflections and decisions we made, and the actions that emerged were the outcome of teamwork. The different teams that have navigated the four political terms that I share in this book were composed of action researchers from Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness (Basque Country, Spain), Praxis- Research Institute (Rafaela, Santa Fe, Argentina), University of Agder (Norway), and University of Tierra del Fuego (Argentina). We worked together with stakeholders who, in the experiences I share, were policymakers from the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and county development agencies of this territory, together with other territorial actors with a stake in their policies (firms and their associations, vocational training centres, third sector organisations, universities, etc.). My next acknowledgement is for all of you. I wrote in the first person because the emotions and subjective interpretations are mine. Nevertheless, our action research was a shared endeavour that belongs to all of us. I have tried to make this visible throughout the book.

I also want to acknowledge the contribution of the group of young researchers from the Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness that participated in the educational process on action research during 2022-2023. The ease with which you accepted subjectivity and emotions as part of research makes me believe that the transformation this book aims at is possible.

Beyond the recognition of the collective efforts this book builds on, there are some names I need to mention. I heartfully acknowledge Hilary Bradbury for introducing me to self-inquiry and for helping me construct my own experiential gender-sensitive glasses, through which I unavoidably see action research now. Thank you also for inviting me to experiment with drawing.

I thank Ainhoa Arrona for her comments and preface to this book, but most of all, for the countless hours of debriefing during these fifteen years. I sometimes felt you were the only one who could see me facilitate while we struggled through it. I thank Xabier Barandiaran because our honest attempt to understand each other was a fruitful source of self-awareness, and Pablo Costamagna and James Karlsen because the path we shared was important for me to reach where I am now. I am also grateful to Olatz Errazkin and Sebas Zurutuza for their comments on the first draft, which helped me improve its contents; and to Bridget Saavedra Scanlon for such a nuanced English editing.

Thank you, Miren Estensoro, for your invaluable ability to be sunshine when I most needed it, and Mari Jose Aranguren, for every time you visited me in Azpeitia while I was writing this book. And thanks, Amaia, for helping me understand that describing my emotions is not the same as connecting with them.

I am grateful to Naiara, Ione, and Ane for welcoming me into Arantzazulab during the writing of this book, and to Edurne, Ander, Amaia, and Ainhoa for the daily breaks from the solitude of writing.

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I am happy that Libe, Edurne and Malen were my first readers, and I have great memories of how, together with your father, you encouraged me to draw and found my drawings amusing. Finally, more than ever, this book is dedicated to my parents, my brother and my sister. Figure 0.5 is for all of you.

Figure 0.5. **Acknowledgement of the collective endeavour behind the first-person narrative**

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Chapter 1

Action research in the memory of my body

1. **Introduction**

In this chapter, I share the eight features of action research that I consider most relevant in a series of projects facilitated by our team in the Basque Country (Spain) since 2008. These features stood out in the memory of my body when I re-understood the stories, the facts, and the actions of these past fifteen years. Consequently, they best represent my facilitative experience.

My goal in sharing them is twofold. On the one hand, this is a way to present the cases on which the book is based. On the other hand, they are the experiential grounding for what I say about facilitation in the rest of the chapters. I have depicted this in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1. **Position of Chapter 1 in the book process**
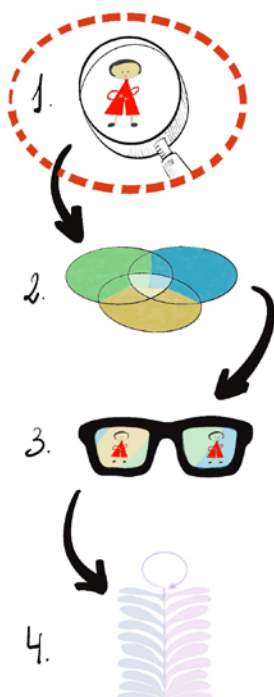
The eight features are:

a) Action research worked.
b) The impact of action research consistently increased in the long term.
c) We integrated experiential knowledge, expert knowledge, and process knowledge.
d) It was a story of collaboration but also of mutual resistance.
e) Action research was close to power.
f) Tacit disagreement stagnated processes.
g) Emotions remained tacit.
h) I transformed (in) my community and (in) the world.

Throughout these years, our action research team has extensively published about the projects I share in this chapter. In those publications, we discussed theory and provided detailed thick descriptions showing the data that sustained our conclusions. While I do not use those theoretical insights and data in this case description, I acknowledge that they are part of my experience and have, therefore, influenced my narrative of the cases in this chapter.

The next section presents two introductory timelines, after which each section is dedicated to one of the lessons learnt.

2. **Two timelines of my experience with action research**

In this book, I focus on my experience of action research with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, a provincial government in a territory of around 750,000 inhabitants in the Basque Country (Spain). The stakeholders that we (the research team) have worked with were government policymakers (elected politicians as well as civil servants) and other territorial actors involved in policymaking (including county development agencies, firm associations, firms, third sector organisations, universities, and research organisations).

The political timeline is pertinent to understand our processes better (Figure 1.2). We have collaborated with the provincial government since 2009 when, midterm, it initiated a project to foster social capital in the territory that would improve its competitiveness. Following the 2011 elections, with a different political party at the helm of the government, we reoriented the project to target a *new mode of relationship* for territorial development. The 2015 elections saw the political team with whom we had started working in 2009 return to power. They maintained the previous territorial development project and also initiated a new one focused on collaborative governance. We have worked with this twofold goal (territorial development and collaborative governance) for the last eight years.

Figure 1.2. **Timeline of action research in the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa**

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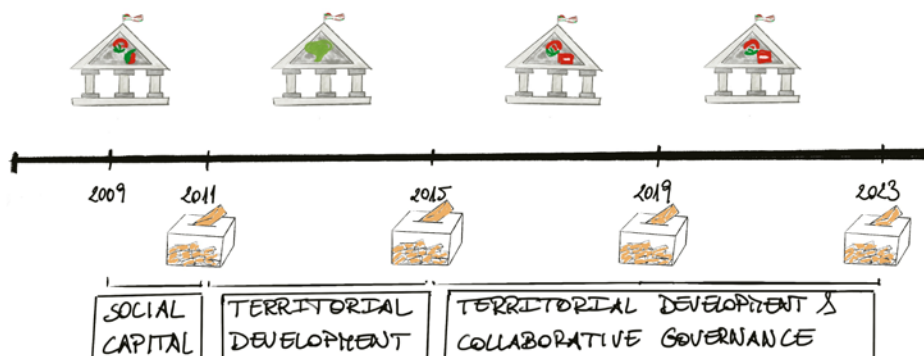
I mentioned in the introduction to the book that during this period of fifteen years, our action research team has grown as a multilocal team operating through the collaboration of four different organisations: Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness in the Basque Country (Spain), University of Agder in Agder (Norway), Praxis-Institute of Social Studies in Rafaela (Santa Fe, Argentina), and University of Tierra del Fuego (in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina). Although each local team has focused on improving their territory (see Figure 1.3), we have also worked together in this endeavour, and through our practice, we have developed methodological contributions that we have named *Action Research for Territorial Development* (ARTD).

Figure 1.3. **The multilocal team engaged in Action Research for Territorial Development (ARTD)**
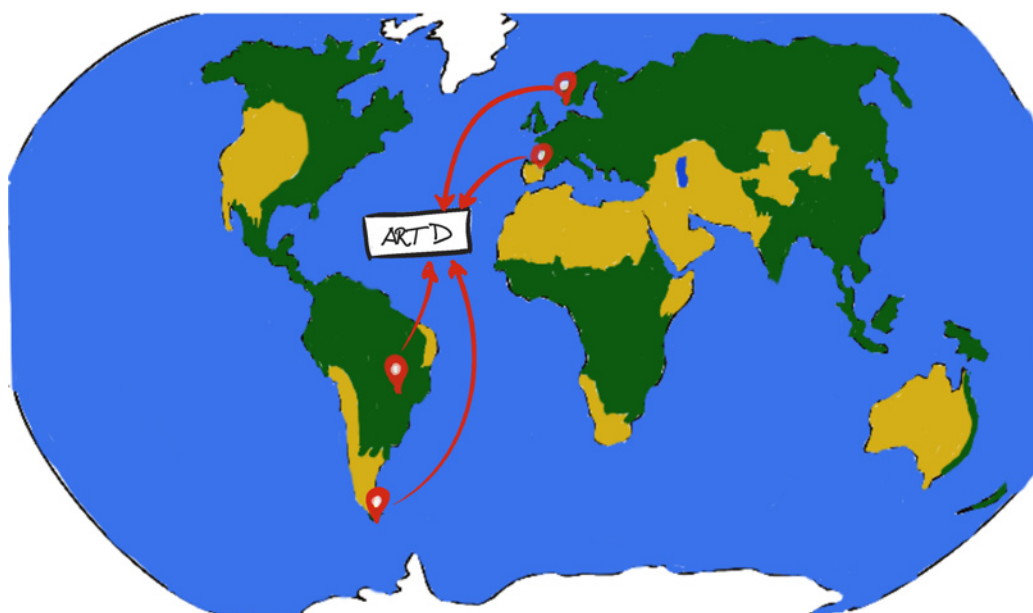
ARTD has built on the praxis of this multilocal team since 2008. Our main initial influences were Industrial Democracy (Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin, Bjorn Gustavsen) and the work of Paulo Freire. However, it soon became apparent that our emerging praxis did not always fit within their frameworks, and we started proposing our own. As a result, ARTD became the anchor connecting the different frameworks and ideas that arose from the systematisation of our praxis.

Our focus has been, and still is, on developing our territories through second-person action research, which is conducted in the context of a community where action researchers and community members work together to solve a specific problem. However, we began interacting with action researchers worldwide when our multilocal team and ARTD opened to new international relational spaces in 2018. One consequence of this was that we approached self-development (first-person action research) as another dimension of ARTD. We also had the same goal as other action researchers to make a relevant contribution to global challenges (exploring third-person action research, which aims to have an impact on people who have not directly participated in the process). Figure 1.4 shows that we started with second-person action research and later integrated first- and third-person.

Figure 1.4. **The focus of ARTD on the community, self, and the world**
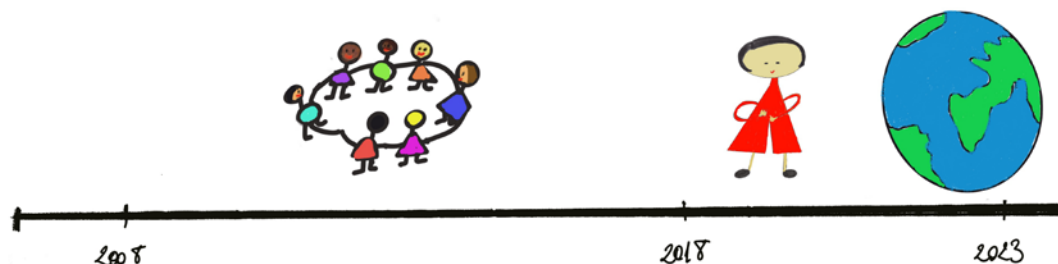
After 2018, through self-inquiry, I began paying attention to how our action research processes affected my emotions and my body. Since then, I have come to realise that other participants were undergoing similar processes as well.

Having presented the timelines that frame my experience, the following sections are dedicated to what I consider to be the core features of action research in that experience.

3. **Action research worked**

In my experience, the first feature of action research is that it worked. I am aware that participants in the processes I will describe have different opinions on the results of action research. Nonetheless, I believe that we have developed a collective capability among territorial actors (policymakers, researchers, and others) to solve problems together, which is a strength for the territory in the future. It is for this reason that I consider action research to have worked.

During these years working with policymakers, we have often referred to the *policy ecosystems*. These are communities of diverse territorial actors that are influenced by government policies or have relevant knowledge about them. When I think of the policy ecosystems of the provincial council, I see three main spaces where the collective capability I have referred to has developed. One is a collaborative agreement for territorial development policies in Gipuzkoa, which has materialised as the *Territorial Development Laboratory*. The second is a deliberative space to help policymakers through collaborative governance, which has taken the form of a *Think Tank.* The third is a coordination space for developing a systemic perspective of policy named the *Governance Laboratory*.

Given that the first step in ARTD is for researchers and stakeholders to agree on the problems they want to solve together, I describe the issues addressed in these three processes and how we are responding to them in the next paragraphs.

a) *The Territorial Development Laboratory*

The problem that the council policymakers stated at the beginning of the Territorial Development Laboratory was: "We are not reaching small firms, and small firms are not reaching us." Policymakers and researchers agreed that the eleven county[3] development agencies

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[3] Counties are supra-municipal but sub-provincial territorial units with no related government level, while various municipalities own county agencies.

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operating in the territory could help the council solve this problem. Action research was then used to facilitate the dialogue between the council and the agencies, leading to a new stage in their collaboration. Therefore, as of 2013, the provincial council and eleven county development agencies have been working with a collaborative governance approach that they subsequently institutionalised in 2017 through a formal agreement. Small firms in the territory have designated facilitators in their development agency who act as their connection not only to municipalities, as they did before 2013, but also to the provincial government (see Figure 1.5). The Laboratory has created a new pattern of relationships that has been adopted to collaboratively develop new policies, for instance, on digitalisation and the development of meaningful work in small firms. The scope of policies is now widening, evolving from exclusively economic development to social policies, and some policy processes follow this pattern even outside the formal procedures of the Laboratory.

Regarding the initial problem, I argue, in synthesis, that there are new channels through which small firms can reach the council, and the council can reach small firms.

Figure 1.5. **Dialogue between provincial government, county development agencies, and firms**
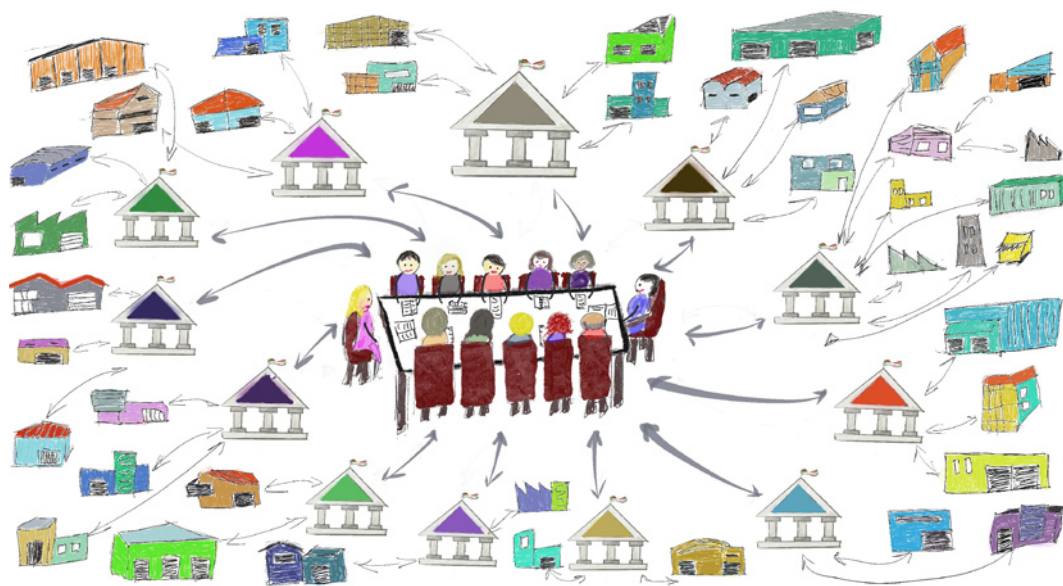
b) *The Think Tank*

Another result of action research is the *Think Tank* with four deliberative spaces connected to the core challenges defined by the provincial council: (a) transforming the political culture to face the crisis of liberal democracies; (b) supporting green recovery as a response to the challenges of climate change; (c) developing *meaningful work* as part of the challenge of competitiveness; and (d) creating the next generation of social policies to face the challenge of a sustainable welfare state. Policymakers and researchers agreed that the problem was that the previous methodology of the Think Tank separated reflection and action, in that although territorial actors were invited to deliberate on policy problems, their contribution remained parallel to the policy process in the hierarchical organisation of the government.

To solve this issue, and inspired by the principle of praxis, each deliberation group is now led by a Deputy (equivalent to a minister) and their team so that the results of deliberation are integrated directly into the agenda of decision-makers in the council. Members of the policy ecosystem participate in the deliberation process to cogenerate knowledge that inspires better policies. The central characteristic of the Think Tank is the joint deliberation between these territorial actors and the policymakers responsible for the government's related policies. Consequently, the Think Tank combines the hierarchical structure of the government with more horizontal deliberation spaces with the ecosystem (see Figure 1.6). This makes facilitating the process more complex but also means that the impact of policy deliberation is more effective.

Figure 1.6. **Praxis through the combination of hierarchy and participation in the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank**
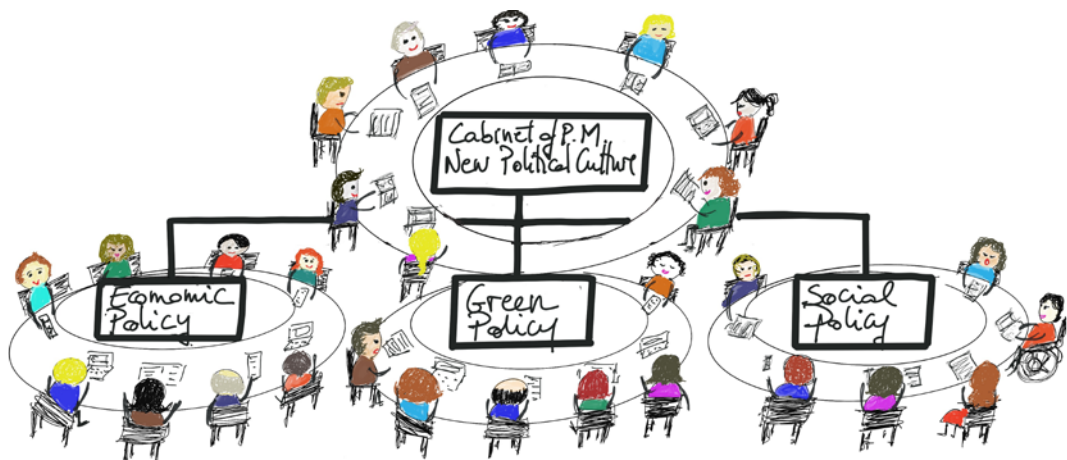
c) *The Governance Laboratory*

The Territorial Development Laboratory and the Think Tank are part of a flagship programme initiated by the council in 2015 and named Etorkizuna Eraikiz (which means *constructing the future* in the Basque language). This programme has three main types of relational spaces with different goals: (a) spaces for dialogue with (or to listen to) territorial actors (both of which the Territorial Development Laboratory and the Think Tank are part); (b) spaces for experimentation, through developing projects; and (c) collaborative organisations called *reference centres* where the government works with other territorial actors to address core challenges such as climate change, sustainable mobility, cybersecurity, collaborative governance, or the future of the Basque language.

The central issue agreed on by policymakers responsible for Etorkizuna Eraikiz and action researchers was that the whole initiative required a more systemic approach to avoid evolving as a mere sum of numerous projects. I represent the systemic perspective of ARTD in Figure 1.7, using the metaphor of the programme's *nervous system*, where neurons (facilitators) help all its parts communicate with each other and react together to changes both outside and inside the programme. The black circular arrow depicts the action research *process*.

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Figure 1.7. **A systemic perspective of facilitation
in overarching policy programmes**
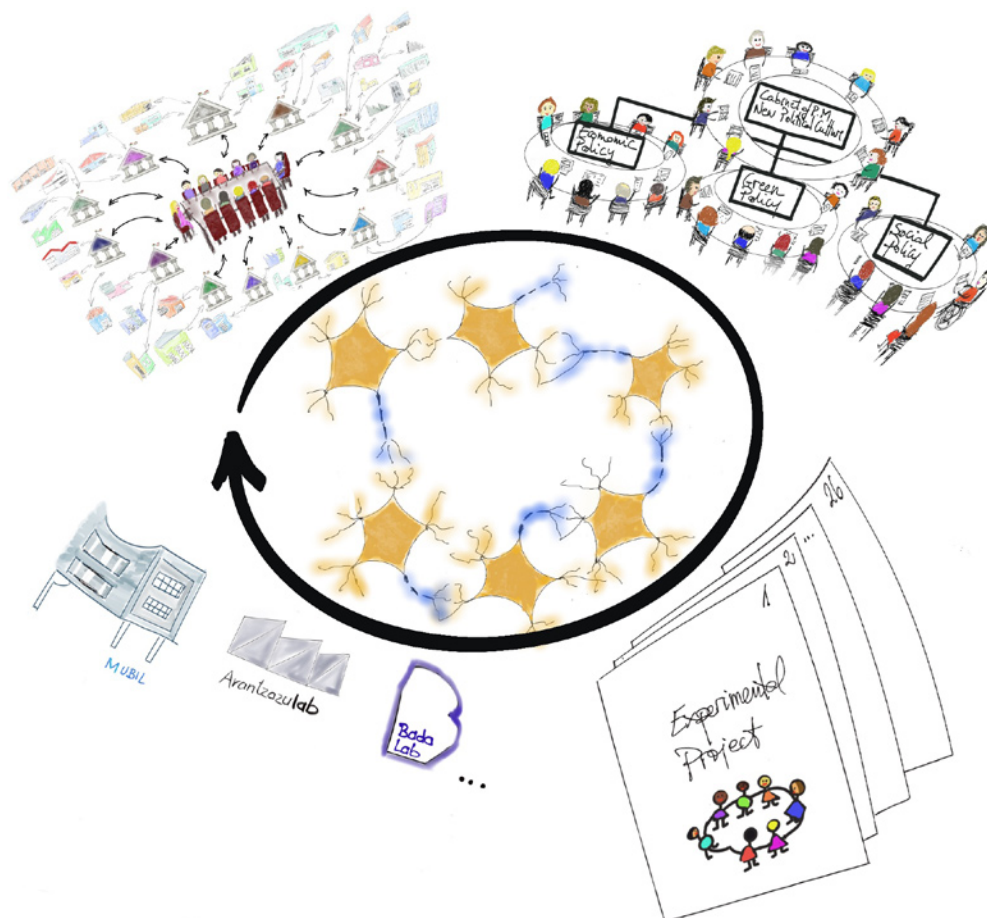
The *Governance Laboratory,* which operates through ARTD, serves as a fundamental relational space for developing the systemic perspective of Etorkizuna Eraikiz. Several policymakers and territorial actors within the policy ecosystem who have a broad angle of vision of the programme's various aspects collaborate to develop an emergent and systemic perspective of the whole (see Figure 1.8). The aim is to facilitate the development of collaborative governance in those relational spaces of the initiative that most require it, thus helping bring together the different parts into one whole. Metaphorically, this laboratory works to construct what I described above as the nervous system of the programme.

Acknowledging that action research worked is relevant because that is why I know that action research has the potential to generate transformations that contribute to solving complex social challenges. The fact that it worked is what makes the rest worth exploring.

Figure 1.8. **Action research as part of the nervous system of policymaking**
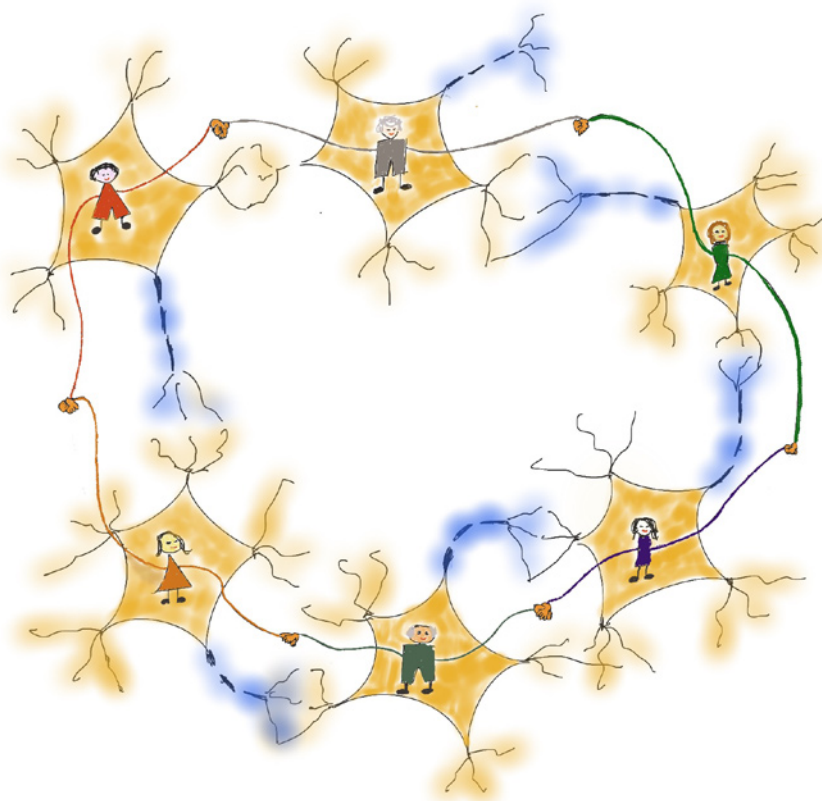
4. **The impact of action research consistently increased in the long term**

One of the defining features of ARTD is that it has been conducted through long-term relationships between governments and action research teams. The process with the provincial council described in the previous section, with its ups and downs, has been a continued process of collaboration for fifteen years and is still ongoing.

Our action research team is more strategic for the government now than before, and our research has a greater impact on policy. There are two dimensions of this increased impact: (a) the projects we participate in now are more relevant to the government than the previous ones we took part in, and (b) action research is more important in these projects than previously.

When we started to collaborate with the provincial government in 2009, our project was a small part of a bigger flagship programme, with four research teams in the process. Action research was one more methodology in the project. From 2011 to 2015, a new government transformed our project into the new flagship programme, and action research became the core methodology. In 2015, with a different government in power, our research was out of the government's new flagship programme and became less influential until 2017, when our team was integrated into the programme, and the impact of action research increased.

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Therefore, in different moments of the long-term process, we have participated in projects that held varying degrees of relevance to the government. Simultaneously, action research played a greater or lesser role in those projects. Both dimensions have had a consistent positive evolution in the long term (see Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9. **Impact of action research on policymaking**
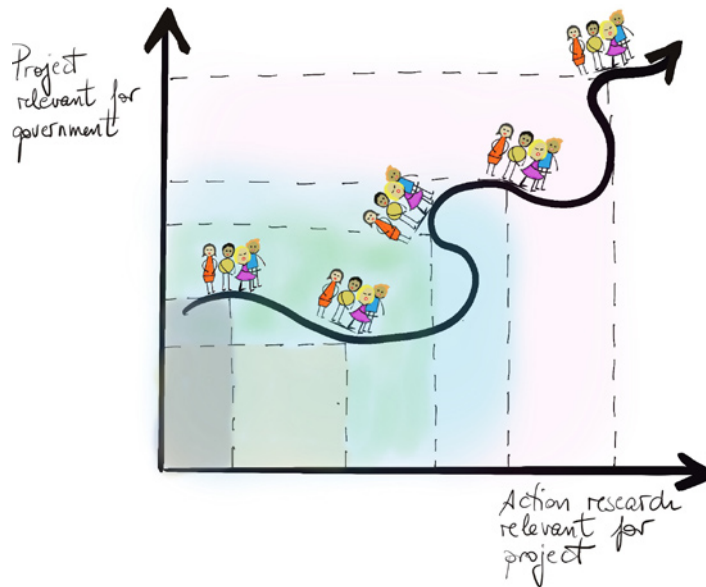
My aspiration is to contribute to making action research relevant in the face of urgent socio-ecologic challenges. One way of achieving this is to make action research relevant to the projects we are invited to; another approach is to find our way into pertinent government programmes. By doing both, we will have a greater impact, although it is important to note that these are long-term processes, and action research projects that last 1-3 years, even when successful, have a limited capacity to impact policy on their own.

Impact, in our experience, is a result of systemically linking diverse projects in an ongoing long-term relationship between action researchers and stakeholders.

5. **We integrated experiential knowledge, expert knowledge, and process knowledge**

Following the ARTD cogeneration framework, we have used three types of knowledge that we have combined in praxis:

a) *Experiential knowledge of stakeholders (policymakers)*

This is the knowledge that participants have developed through their lived experiences and is the core of action research. Sometimes, it was tacit, as they had experienced something, but they were unable to say what or how they had experienced it. Part of the process was to make

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it explicit and share it. Other times, they used tacit knowledge in action, keeping it tacit as they were unable to explain all the knowledge they had used to make something happen.

b) *Process knowledge of facilitators*

This is enacted through facilitating the process and is the core contribution of action researchers. This is knowledge of action research about processes, praxis, co-generation, or how to connect reflection and action. It is also experiential to a great extent, as facilitation requires experience. Therefore, process knowledge materialises in the process of facilitating, and it remains mostly tacit when facilitators work. However, simultaneously, action research is for many of us action researchers, an academic field, and when we write and publish about it, like in this book, our process knowledge can become disciplinary knowledge. Process knowledge is the main contribution of action researchers, either in its tacit or explicit form.

c) *Disciplinary knowledge, often referred to as expert* knowledge

This is knowledge that mostly entered the projects I have described through the experts invited to participate.

Most experts were academics. Academia has different disciplines, and each has its own procedures for generating disciplinary knowledge. This is a type of knowledge that is legitimised when it is made explicit, mostly through publications. In action research for territorial development, we have often joined the critique of action researchers of presenting it as superior knowledge to the experiential one. However, we have also proposed a pluralistic approach that integrates this type of knowledge in our processes, always letting participants determine which disciplinary knowledge is useful and which is not, depending on whether it helps solve the problem addressed. This expert knowledge was presented to participants, mostly through speeches where experts shared what they had already published.

To share my perspective on how these kinds of knowledge interact, I use a set of three different coloured strings with stakeholders. Each string represents one type of knowledge in the process. When I first try to make a braid with two strings representing policy knowing (or policy knowledge in action) and disciplinary knowledge of invited experts, the two strings do not hold onto each other.

I then introduce the third string, process knowing. This third string holds the other two together in a braid. Process knowing (or process knowledge in action) can connect what experts say with what policymakers enact. The braid that integrates the three types of knowledge is stronger than any of the isolated strings (see Figure 1.10).

Nevertheless, process knowing has a downside when trying to make action research relevant in the terms I described in the previous section. The fact is that knowledge that is *enacted* is seldom recognised as knowledge, and even less so as relevant knowledge, whereas knowledge that is "transferred" through speeches is. I consider this to be a downside because action researchers had valuable knowledge about how transformation occurs that could have enriched the dialogue between policymakers and experts. I elaborate on this idea further in Chapter 2, Section 2.

When I listen to the memory of my body and all my experienced contradictions, I discover my belief that action researchers should also share our praxis in more declarative ways, creating the language that can introduce action research to increasingly strategic policy processes.

Figure 1.10. **Three types of knowledge intertwined in ARTD**
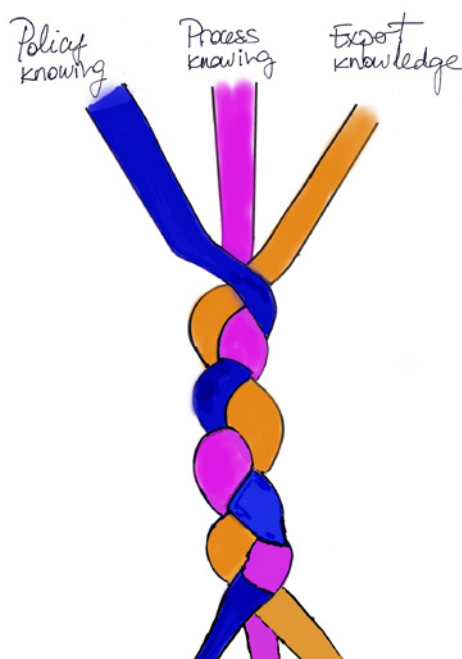
## 6. **It was a story of collaboration but also of mutual resistance**

Our research team is part of the territories where we do action research, and we own many of the problems that policymakers address through their policies. In this context, mutual resistance, which we have conceptualised as *soft resistance*, has been another representative feature of our action research.

Soft resistance emerges through the interaction of two dimensions of the action research process: the relational and the critical. When playing the relational role, we (the action research team) helped stakeholders achieve their stated goal in ways they considered desirable (which were not necessarily the ways we would have chosen for action research). When playing the critical role, we worked to raise awareness of the limitations of that practice regarding the action research principles, influencing policymakers to change it.

For instance, policymakers sometimes prioritised listening to experts instead of working with the participants' experiential knowledge. When playing the relational role, we helped them integrate expert knowledge into the process, even though action research focuses on participants' experiential knowledge. By acting this way, trust between our action research team and policymakers increased. On the other hand, when playing the critical role, we reflected with policymakers about the difficulty of making experts' knowledge actionable and the potential of the participants' experiential knowledge. These processes generated tensions and reduced trust. Nonetheless, they also led to transformation.

Figure 1.11 illustrates the path of mutual resistance. Through the relational role, stakeholders drive researchers away from paths they would have walked down otherwise. Simultaneously, through the critical role, researchers put pressure on policymakers to avoid paths they would have chosen.

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Figure 1.11. **Mutual resistance as a source of transformation**
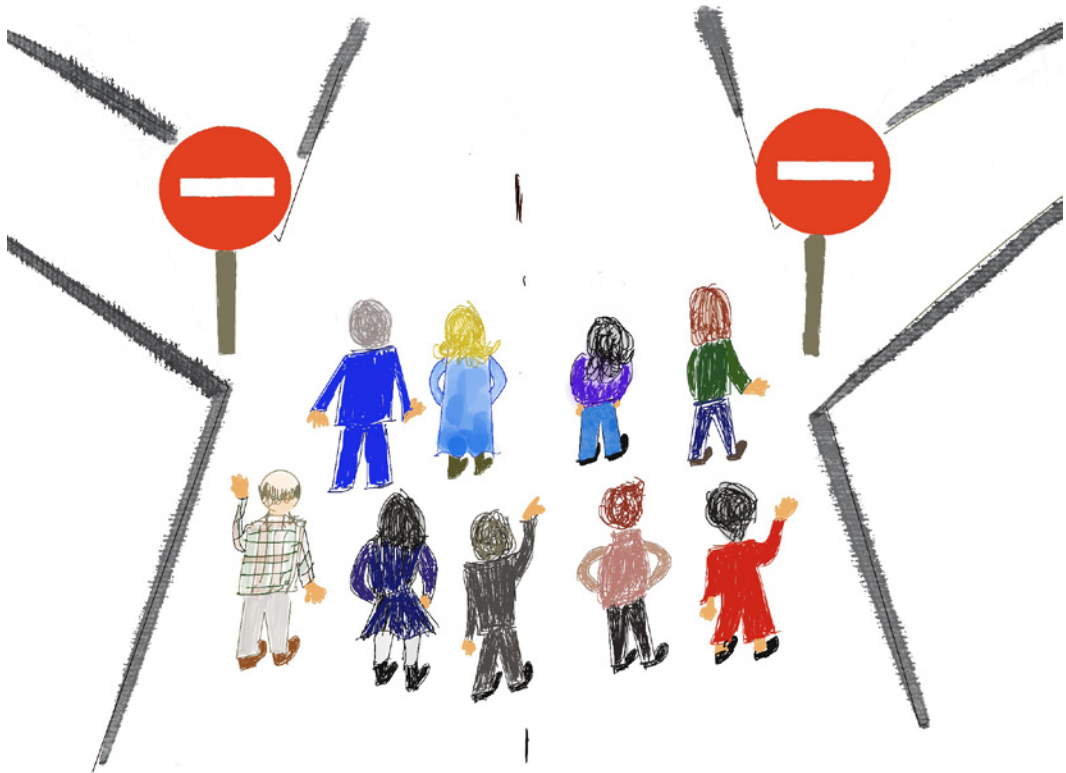
Many narratives of the relationship between action researchers and stakeholders focus on collaboration, while tensions and mutual resistance are seldom presented as an engine of transformation. Our experience differs from these narratives.

> Mutual resistance is one of the features of action research that has most clearly marked the memory of my body. When collaboration materialised in not letting the other participants walk the paths they would have chosen independently, the shared path required that we all compromised.

7. **Action research was close to power**

In the projects I have presented in this chapter, action research and policy unfolded within the same process. Therefore, the process that action researchers and policymakers shared was simultaneously research and policy, which has led to comments from other (action) researchers that we were "too close to politics" or "too close to power".

This closeness was most significant in the meetings our action research team regularly held with the policymakers (elected politicians and civil servants) co-leading the projects. These groups were often named the promoting, management, core, direction, or leading groups. From the point of view of policymakers, the leading group was a space to make pol-

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icy decisions and manage their projects. For us, action researchers, they were the dialogue spaces for action research.

Action researchers facilitated the leading groups, and the leading groups (policymakers and researchers together) facilitated bigger relational spaces where the government met other organisations of the territory with a stake in the issues addressed (e.g., development agencies and SMEs working on Industry 4.0 technologies).

There were various ways in which closeness to power was tangible. All projects were funded by policymakers, which created a clear sense of hierarchy in the relationship with action researchers. Nevertheless, facilitation provided a platform for action researchers to be influential. Figure 1.12 depicts an average leading group in our action research processes, with squares being policymakers and circles being action researchers. The size represents a hierarchy.

Among the policymakers were Deputies (ministers) and their directors, the highest-ranking civil servants, technical-level civil servants, and staff. Coordinators and team members were among the researchers.

Figure 1.12. **A leading group in ARTD**
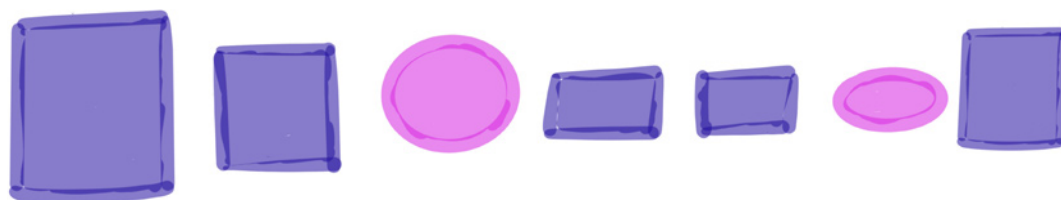
Action researchers usually proposed the agendas for the leading groups, which were normally accepted. In the figures below, I have drawn the most representative situations that emerged when following these agendas.

Occasionally, as seen in Figure 1.13, there was a clear consensus among all participants on the issues discussed and the decisions to be made. In these cases, no negotiation was needed, and power remained tacit.

Figure 1.13. **Agreement between policymakers and action researchers**

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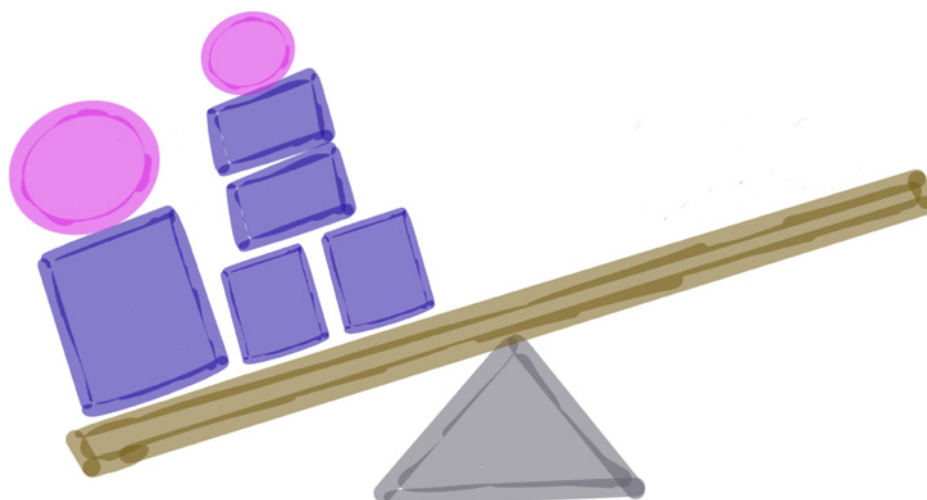
However, there were times when what policymakers considered was "right" for their policies and what action researchers believed was "right" for action research differed. On these occasions, policymakers felt action research could jeopardise policy, and we, action researchers, felt policy could jeopardise action research. Disagreements emerged on a number of issues, such as the role of invited experts, whether or not we needed a plan, who should participate, the kind of indicators that captured the results of the process, and what efficiency meant in each case. Furthermore, questions arose concerning who appeared formally in public as owner of the process, whose knowledge was considered as strategic, who made what decisions, or whose resources (mostly time and money) were used to sustain the process. Sometimes, policymakers would listen to action researchers but ultimately made their own policy decisions without incorporating the perspective of action researchers (Figure 1.14). Considering that their policy and our research were intertwined within the same process, this affected our research in key areas, such as participation, knowledge cogeneration, and praxis.

Figure 1.14. **Differing perspectives between policymakers and action researchers**
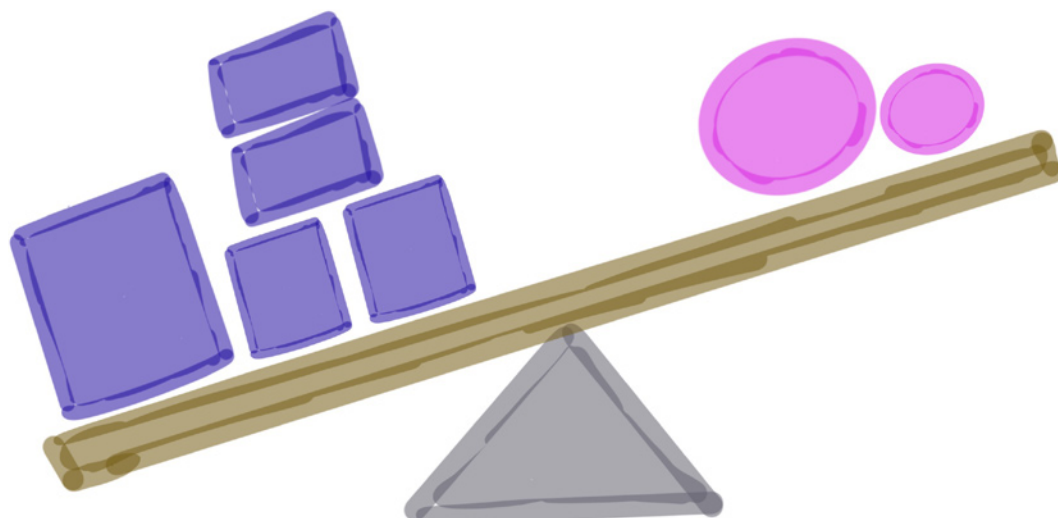
What made these situations sustainable was that we, action researchers, could maintain the basic conditions we had established to keep going: speaking truth to power and publishing about the process. As long as these conditions were met, we were able to conceptualise these situations as conflict and learnt how to handle them. The closeness to power is probably the main reason why ARTD has multiple frameworks addressing conflict and, most importantly, its resolution.

At times, there were also different viewpoints on an issue among policymakers and some of them aligned with action researchers' perspectives, as in Figure 1.15. The result was a negotiated decision.

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Figure 1.15. **Negotiated decisions**
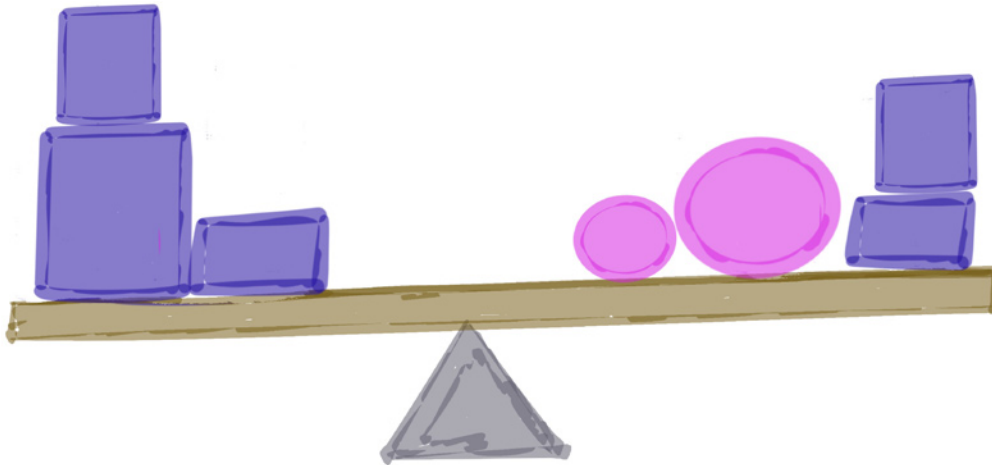
Finally, I recall the times when policymakers had a different perspective from action researchers but trusted our capabilities to facilitate the process. They agreed to things that were consistent with action research but counterintuitive to them. One politician once described these instances as moments of deep learning, though he also noted that sometimes he felt that there were outsiders in their organisation telling them how to do policy. In these cases, trust made our criteria weigh more in the process, which compensated for hierarchical power (see Figure 1.16). These were the moments when action research was the most transformative. They were also the moments when responsibility felt the heaviest on our shoulders as action researchers.

Figure 1.16. **The impact of action research on the policy process**
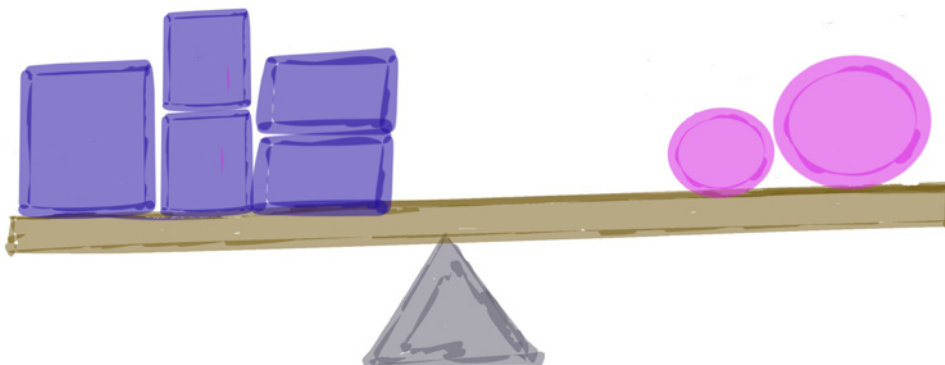
Transformation requires that we enter the real-life situations that we want to transform. If action research is used to transform power, action researchers need to be close to power.

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What I know in the memory of my body is that working close to power can jeopardise the ideal principles of action research. Yet we never had more fruitful scenarios than those where we were working close to it. These were the instances where power dynamics became the most evident and tensions were the strongest. They were also the moments of the deepest learning and transformation for all of us involved.

8. **Tacit disagreement stagnated processes**

At the start of our action research processes, our team always received confirmation from policymakers stating that they understood what action research was and wanted to engage in it. We also developed a shared narrative of what we wanted to change through action research. For instance, one of the shared narratives currently is that we are working to transform the political culture that separates citizens and government, with collaborative governance being part of the solution to this problem and action research one of the methodologies for collaborative governance. All participants readily agreed on all of this in the abstract.

However, during the last fifteen years, when action research processes were healthy, tensions usually emerged when discussing the concrete changes required by these types of abstract goals. By making these conflicts explicit and dealing with them, we were able to reach agreements for action.

While these tensions and agreements are a constructive feature of ARTD, a destructive feature also emerged occasionally. Some participants never evolved from the initial politically correct discourse to the stage of explicit tension and disagreement, which did not mean that they agreed but merely that they kept disagreement tacit.

To deal with these situations, our team often reflected on a story once told to us by a consultant. He said that change follows the typical Gaussian curve (he drew a curve on the board) and that in any change process, 10% of the people will unconditionally support it, 10% will be against it no matter what, and 80% will be somewhere in the middle, ready to consider change as long as certain requirements are met. He argued that the biggest mistake we make when facilitating change is to focus our time and energy on the 10% who are against it. His invitation was to focus on the enthusiastic 10% and the 80% in the middle and work on realistic requirements for change. If the enthusiastic 10% and part of the 80% in the middle mobilise towards a certain change (e.g., more social capital, participatory territorial development, or collaborative governance), the curve moves forward. The more people are mobilised, the more the curve moves. He then drew overlapping curves (see Figure 1.17) to represent movement. When he had completed drawing the third curve, he turned to us and asked, "The 10% resisting change have kept their position in the group, but do you see where they are now?"

Figure 1.17. **The Gaussian curve of engagement with change and its transition over time**
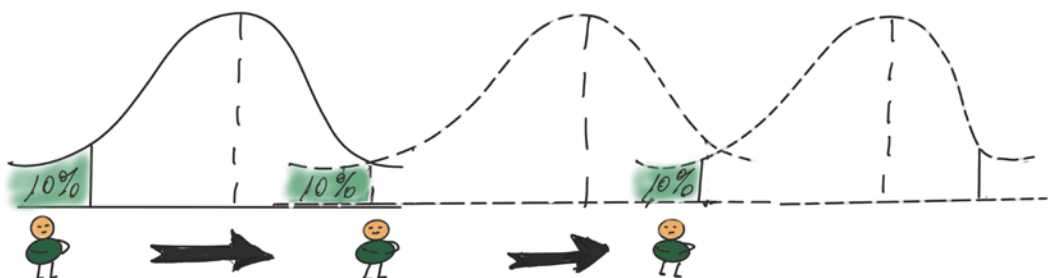
It was helpful not to focus our time and energy on those who kept their disagreement tacit, with one exception, as we learnt: the processes where those who did not make their disagreement explicit were the ones with the formal authority to make the decisions and take the actions that the process required. In these cases, even with a politically correct discourse and a reasonable number of participants mobilised, processes slowly stagnated without any apparent problem or conflict hindering them.

> One lesson learnt in these situations is that if, in the stage of concrete changes, those who are formally leading the process have a favourable discourse on action research but tacitly resist it, it is better to give up. We should focus participants' time and effort elsewhere.

This is something we have often failed to do, and I know in the memory of my body that this was the origin of much emotional exhaustion.

9. **Emotions remained tacit**

Another relevant feature of action research in my experience is that there was joy, enthusiasm, hope, and love in the process, together with frustration, anger, anxiety and sadness. Yet, in the dialogue between action researchers and stakeholders, the process was represented and discussed in rational terms.

Conceptually, emotions were described as relevant. In practice, however, they were referred to as something accidental (happening unintentionally, unexpectedly, or by chance) or incidental (happening as a minor accompaniment to something else), and thus, we did not take the time to reflect on or talk about them, nor act consequently. We intentionally or unintentionally suppressed emotions. That is not to say that no emotions were present or did not affect the process. It only means that the dialogue between action researchers and policymakers exclusively focused on the rational dimension of policy/action research. In Figure 1.18, I depict how we participated with our rational minds and not with our whole bodies.

Figure 1.18. **My experience of action research in the rational dimension**

I now wonder, where did emotions go? What were their consequences? And I realise that the memory of my body is mostly marked by emotions (Figure 1.19). Those emotions are much easier to trace in my body than the ideas, facts, and theories that we discussed.

Figure 1.19. **My emotional experience of action research**

An example of how we supressed emotions is our team's approach to debriefing after each meeting with stakeholders. To answer the first question, *What happened?* We usually took a long round because we all had rational interpretations of the meeting we wanted to share. Then, we asked *How did I feel?* And *How do I think the others felt?* To which we often gave telegraphic answers like I felt good/bad, comfortable/uncomfortable.

One defining feature of our action research was that even when we acknowledged the relevance of emotions, we lacked the language and the practical skills to integrate emotions into the process.

10. **I transformed (with) our community and (with) the world**

I now address the eighth feature of action research in my experience. From 2008 to 2018, our multilocal team of action researchers had little interaction with other action research communities. After that decade, our opening to international networks coincided with our exploration of self-inquiry and first-person approaches. We started to learn about the relationship between "me" and "our community" (which we have named *first-person action research for second-person action researchers*).

Moreover, thanks to this opening process, we are also seeing third-person action research as feasible. Local researchers are the ones who can best transform territories together

with the rest of the local territorial actors. Nonetheless, by providing spaces where these action researchers transforming multiple territories worldwide can relate to one another and learn collectively, we will create something greater than the sum of our individual projects. Our action research will, therefore, have an impact beyond those directly participating in it.

These times require that we contribute to transforming the way we live, produce, and consume on this planet. Numerous conflicting interpretations exist of what this means and calls for, and I believe action research can help establish some of the urgently needed agreements.

Figure 1.20. **Action research in first-second-third person: me, our community, the world**
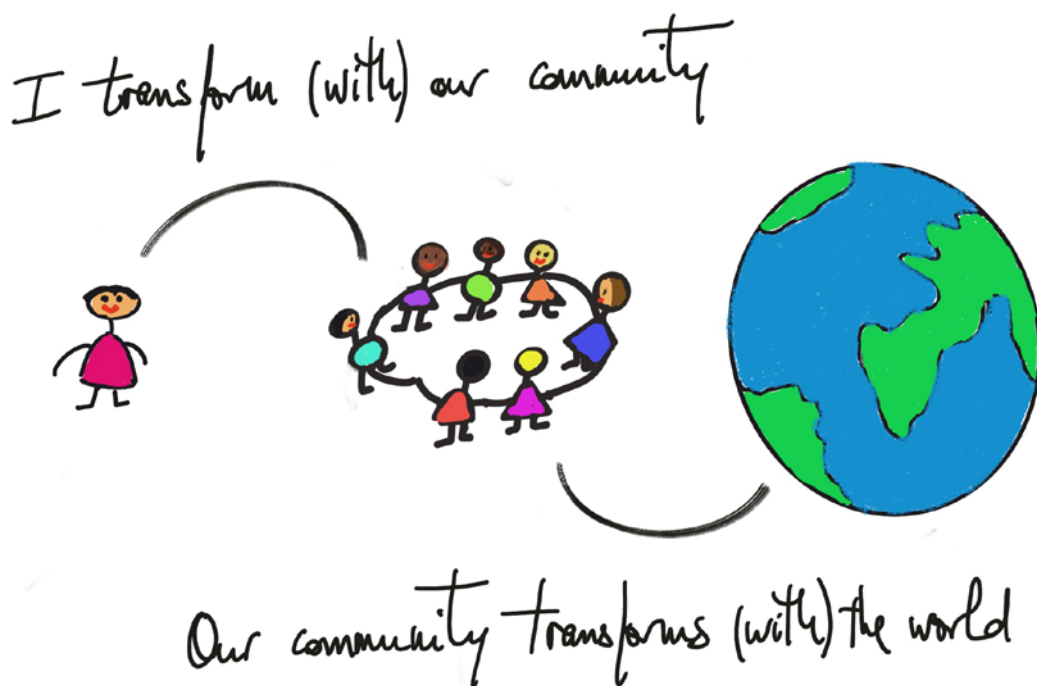
The last feature of ARTD, as we have practised it in Gipuzkoa, is an emergent connection between the development of our territorial communities, our development as individuals and, simultaneously, the development of the action research community worldwide (see Figure 1.20). These connections are unfolding in a context where I see a growing acknowledgement among action researchers in our networks that we are not always capable of having a constructive dialogue amongst ourselves, which has resulted in calls for action researchers to come together.

The growing awareness of our team that we cannot transform our communities without transforming ourselves and, simultaneously, that the transformation of our communities is part of a bigger transformation, constitutes the last feature of our action research that I consider relevant to understanding the rest of this book.

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11. **Closing comments**

The goal of this chapter was to present my experience with action research during the last fifteen years. To do so, I have chosen eight features that I consider the most representative of the specificities of my/our practice. While some of these have to do with the projects we have developed and the stakeholders we have worked with, others relate to our closeness to power and the explicit focus on conflict and resistance as constructive forces for transformation. Finally, others respond to our latest endeavours to complement second-person action research with first- and third-person, integrating emotions and reaching out to other action research communities around the world.

Chapter 2

A conceptual framework of transformation through action research

1. **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I shared eight lessons learnt in the memory of my body, and in the next two, I revisit those experiences to articulate my insights on how transformation can be facilitated. This chapter connects the previous and the subsequent chapters by sharing the conceptual framework that helped me revisit my experience (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. **Chapter 2: a conceptual framework to learn from experience**
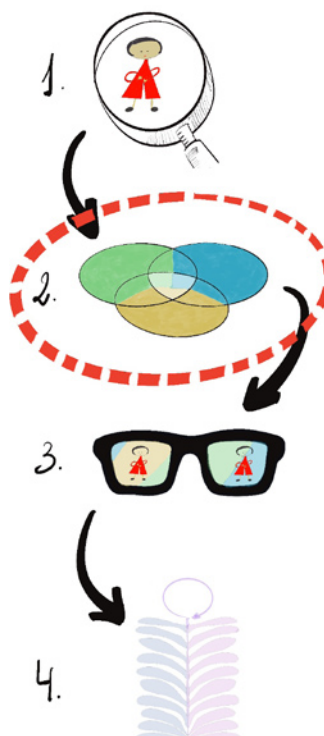
To write this chapter, I was again inspired by Paulo Freire. In describing his writing process, he refers to elucidating readings that made him "laugh with joy, almost as a teenager" when he found in them "the theoretical explanation of his practice" or "the confirmation of the theoretical understanding he had of his practice" (Freire, 2008, p. 63). With this idea in mind, I navigated different literature that addressed transformation, looking for the concepts and frameworks that would theoretically explain my practice or confirm my theoretical understanding of it. This search led me to the *Three Spheres of Transformation* by Leichenko, Gram-Hanssen, and O'Brien (2022) (see Figure 2.2).

In this chapter, I argue why ARTD (Action Research for Territorial Development, which is the approach to action research I practise) needs a framework for transformation. I start by presenting the original framework I found in the literature, followed by my adaptation and a discussion of its implications. While doing this, I use the term *theory* to refer to general principles that are applicable in any case, and the term *conceptual frameworks* for analytical tools that help us focus on a series of elements and their interactions to better understand a situation. Conceptual frameworks can be derived from theory, but the ones I use in this chapter have emerged from the combination of theory and practice.

2. **Why a new conceptual framework of transformation in ARTD**

In this section, I go deeper into the discussion initiated in Section 5 in the previous chapter, where I argued that action researchers must find more comprehensive ways to convey our process knowledge.

Our research team's experience is that we have often facilitated spaces where other researchers (in their roles as experts and policy advisors) were invited to share their theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks with policymakers. Many of the experts in policy sciences, political science, public administration, or sociology had solid theoretical explanations for specific dimensions of policymaking. Some of them provided conceptual frameworks that helped understand the challenges faced by policymakers, and most of them also offered examples that illustrated their arguments. Nevertheless, when policymakers said, "Ok, that [collaborative governance, democracy, cocreation] is what we want, let us do it here and now", the experts were no longer in the process, and policymakers had trouble connecting the contribution of experts to their daily policymaking. This is precisely where we were expected to provide facilitation. However, the conditions often proved unfavourable for action research because the problem had already been framed without a process perspective. Policymakers misunderstood action research as a way to apply and implement the proposals by experts instead of a way to cogenerate solutions through praxis.

The rationale of this chapter is that action researchers not only enact knowledge through facilitation (knowing) but also have process knowledge (a stock of knowledge about how processes work that we have accumulated through years of practice). By sharing this knowledge in the initial discussions between policymakers and experts, we can avoid reaching the process "too late", thus creating more favourable conditions to conduct action research in later stages.

For instance, early in the process, we could explain that policy would not look like the theory shared by experts, even though policymakers wanted what experts had recommended. Theory acknowledges complexity, while practice faces it, which can make the proc-

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ess look slow and formless, nothing like the clean and clear theory initially discussed. Yet nobody spoke about this in the meetings between policymakers and experts.

One of the things that most shocked me during these years was the difficulty of some experts who had theoretically discussed a phenomenon to recognise that actual phenomenon in practice, in its incipient, struggling, and emergent form, when all the forces resisting change (power, institutionalised norms, emotions, inertia, etc.) were playing against it. I think we have discarded processes with a high potential because they did not look like theory.

In conclusion, process knowledge can be useful for territorial development policies, but if we only enact it through facilitation, we might reach policy processes too late. Therefore, I believe that action researchers can play a significant role in the initial stages of the dialogue between policymakers and experts by *better making our process knowledge explicit* and helping develop more critical perspectives on how expert knowledge and practice can connect. But to do this, we first need to find the language we want to use to share experiential knowledge, which is a result of praxis, and thus not exclusively theory nor exclusively practice.

In this context, a conceptual framework on how transformation happens can serve as a scaffolding on which to construct our narratives of process knowledge. Chapter 3 is dedicated to this purpose, using the conceptual framework I present in the following sections.

3. **Transformation in ARTD, a conceptual framework**

In this section, I share a conceptual framework where theoretical perspectives on transformation and my lived experience merge. That framework was reached after searching for literature on transformation until I found contents which, following Freire's wording, made me "laugh with joy, almost as a teenager" when I discovered "the theoretical explanation of my practice, and the confirmation of the theoretical understanding I had of my practice" (Freire, 2008, p. 63).
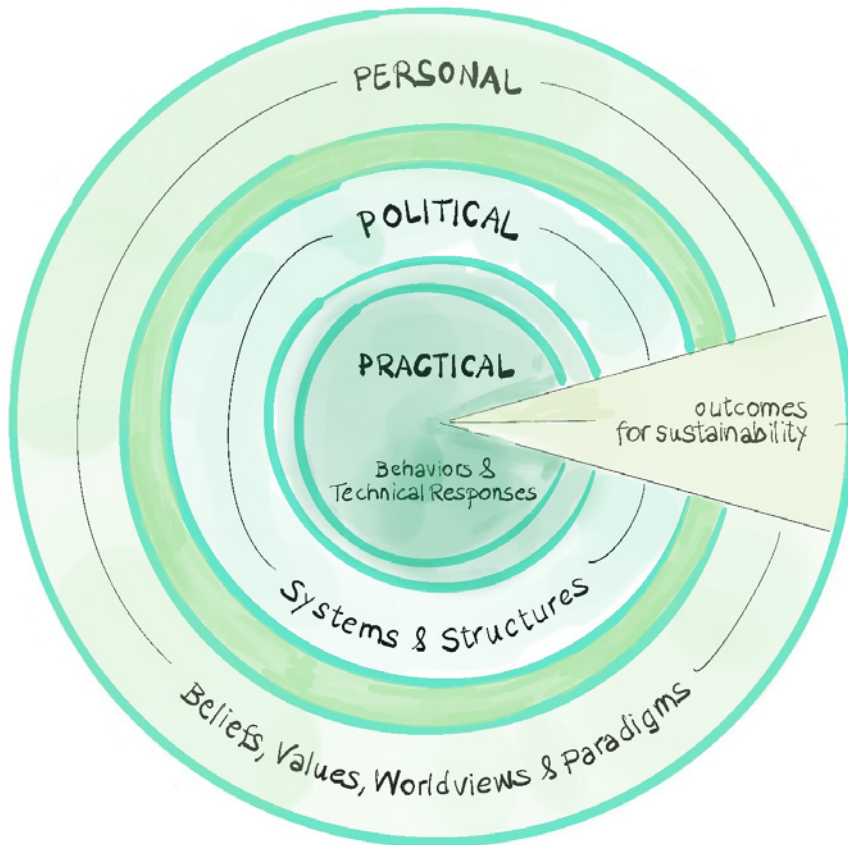
My starting point was Bradbury (2022), who proposes ART (Action Research for Transformations), emphasising transformation at the core of action research. Departing from that, I found a thread to follow in the publications by Karen O'Brien, whom I had listened to in an AR+ Gathering[4] in 2019, where we explored the connections between research on climate change and action research. I consider environmental sustainability, with its multiple implications, as the principal challenge of territorial development and, thus, the primary motivation to improve how action researchers can facilitate transformation.

3.1. *The inspiration from literature:* Three Spheres of Transformation

O'Brien (2012) argues for the relevance of an "explicit heuristic" to address transformation. Together with other colleagues, that is what she provides with the *Three Spheres of Transformation* (Leichenko *et al.*, 2022; O'Brien and Sygna, 2013; Sharma, 2007). I have reproduced this framework in Figure 2.2, where the authors illustrate how transformation occurs in the search for sustainability.

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[4] https://actionresearchplus.com/ar-action-conference-march-8-10-2019-chalmers-university-gothenburg-sweden/.

Figure 2.2. **Three Spheres of Transformation**

PERSONAL

POLITICAL

PRACTICAL

outcomes for sustainability

Behaviors & Technical Responses

Systems & Structures

Beliefs, Values, Worldviews & Paradigms

Source: Leichenko *et al.* (2022).

The practical sphere is the space where technical and behavioural changes contribute to achieving results that can be measurable. The political sphere deals with how society is organised (norms, rules, regulations, and institutions). Addressing the political sphere requires addressing power and politics (Bentz, O'Brien, and Scoville-Simonds, 2022; Blythe, Silver, Evans *et al.*, 2018). Finally, the personal sphere acknowledges the importance of the subjective perspectives held by individuals and groups. An explicit focus on the personal dimension avoids attitudes geared towards fixing external factors and the "other" while failing to reflect on one's own patterns, interests, assumptions, and blind spots (Lahsen and Turnhout, 2021; Ives, Freeth, and Fischer, 2020).

The connections between these spheres, which are what enable transformation, are at the heart of this framework. These connections link values, worldviews, and mindsets (personal) with the goals and means (practical) they shape, identifying them as acceptable or not. Moreover, these values, worldviews, and mindsets can —and must— themselves be reshaped. Which (and whose) values do the shaping and which (and whose) are shaped are evidently political questions. As a result, transformation emerges as an outcome of the interaction between the practical, political, and personal spheres.

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3.2. *The spheres of transformation in ARTD*

In the following chapters, the conceptual framework I have used to revisit my experience is an adaptation of Figure 2.2, which elucidates some connections with ARTD because (a) it connects to the modes of action research (first-, second-, and third-person), (b) it makes facilitation explicit and central, and (c) it connects to the categories of territorial development. Table 1 introduces some of these connections, which are then represented in Figure 2.3.

Table 1. **Connections of the spheres of transformation with ARTD**

	Practical	Personal	Political
Colour in Figure 2.3.			
Focuses on	Behaviours and technical responses	Beliefs, values, world-views, and paradigms	Norms, rules, regulations, and institutions
Connection with modes of AR	Second-person	First-person	Third-person
Scope in ARTD	Community involved in policymaking	Self	The territory where policy has an impact

Figure 2.3. **Spheres of transformation in ARTD**
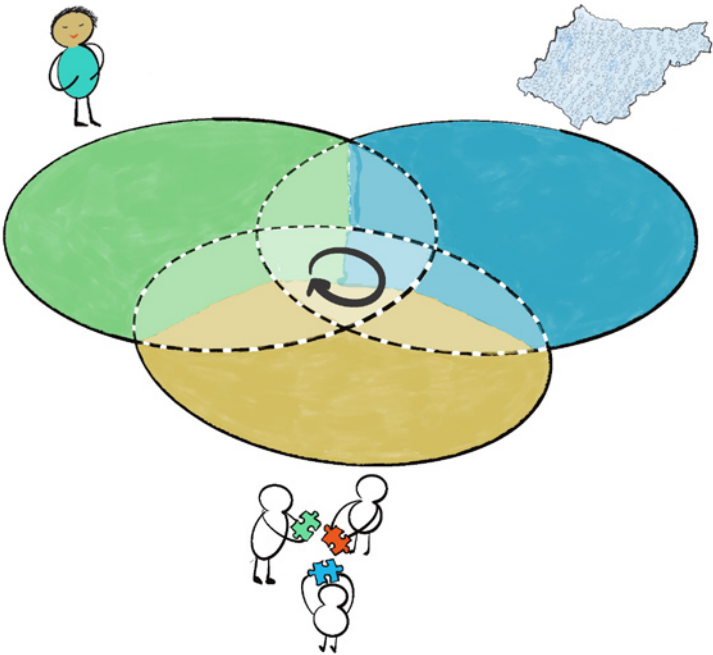
Source: Adapted from Leichenko *et al.* (2022).

I briefly present how I have adapted the representation of the three spheres to ARTD.

a) *Connections to the modes of AR (first-, second-, and third-person)*

I have substituted the three concentric circles with three partly overlapping ones to better represent the different combinations of (non) overlapping spaces I have seen in my action research experience. Sometimes, action research focuses on one of the spheres; other times, it combines two, but rarely do the three overlap in terms of the explicit focus of the process and intended facilitation.

Moreover, in my experience, the spheres (the practical, the personal, and the political) are closely connected to the modes of action research (second-, first-, and third-person[5]). Consequently, the overlapping spaces illustrate action research processes that connect at least two of these modes, and the space at the centre shows action research when it generates change in self, the community, and beyond that community. That threefold process (and impact) is what action research must address to be transformative.

b) *Representation of facilitation at the core*

Given that this book focuses on facilitating action research, I wanted to make facilitation explicit when adapting the three spheres to ARTD. To do so, I have included the circular arrow in Figure 2.3. The type of facilitation I have represented is not any type, but specifically transformative facilitation, as it unfolds in the intersection of the three spheres, and thus, of first-, second-, and third-person action research.

c) *Connections to territorial development*

Finally, the framework connects the personal, practical, and political spheres to territorial development. The personal dimension is linked to citizens and is concerned with their transformation at an individual level. The practical dimension relates to specific communities of citizens, which, in the case of ARTD, are communities involved in policy processes, often called policy ecosystems in our projects. The political dimension is associated with the concept of territory in ARTD, which refers to all citizens together with the economic, social, and political system they are embedded in, as well as the norms, rules, and institutions that regulate these systems.

This concept of territory is multiscalar because a citizen or a community is usually part of economic, social, and political systems that are regulated at different scales (thus, a citizen is affected by norms and institutions at a municipal, provincial, regional, and national level). This book provides examples of how municipal, county, and provincial scales interact.

Figure 2.3 and Table 1 were ever-present on my desk while I revisited my experience as a facilitative action researcher and wrote the next two chapters of this book.

4. **Relevant concepts related to the Three Spheres of Transformation**

I argued that I chose the conceptual framework of the *Three Spheres of Transformation* because I found the theoretical explanation of my practice in these readings. What made me feel that connection were the following features:

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[5] See Chapter 1, section 2 on how first-, second-, and third-person relate to the transformation of self, the community, and others outside that community.

a) The emotional toll experienced by change agents (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022).
b) The acknowledgement of emotions such as frustration, anger, grief, anxiety, and sadness and the role of emotions such as hope, connection, and love (Leichenko and O'Brien 2019).
c) The focus on self-awareness and the acknowledgement of resistance to self-reflection (Leichenko *et al.,* 2022).
d) The integration of the subjective realm of meaning-making into both understanding and action (O'Brien, 2021).
e) Transdisciplinarity to overcome tensions between theory-oriented and practice-oriented participants in a process (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022).
f) Transgression to advance without deciding or establishing whose view of the world is "right." (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022).
g) Transcendence to look at beliefs and paradigms rather than through them (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022).
h) The perceived dichotomy between individual and collective change (Leichenko and O'Brien 2020).
i) Awareness of the existing disconnection between critical thinking and experiential and embodied learning, as well as consideration of the role of personal practices in transformation (O'Brien, Hochachka, and Gram-Hanssen, 2019).
j) Acknowledgement of resistance to more creative, imaginative, and experiential ways of thinking, communicating, and generating change, for instance, using arts and storytelling (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022).
k) Description of the experience of tension between planning, leaving to emerge, and individual, collective, and political agency (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore these features in depth. Nonetheless, I touch on three concepts that inspired my writing: transdisciplinary, transgressive, and transcendent approaches.

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In the case of *Transdisciplinary approaches*, I mostly related to the idea of taking diverse types of knowledge seriously, which involves respecting various ways of knowing and perceiving what is real. In this context, Vogel and O'Brien (2022) define "the included middle" as a fecund middle ground where knowledge is open, emergence is held, inclusive logic is respected, and tolerance in contradictions can be explored. This brings everyday experiences to the centre of the process, raising tensions around power differentials. Figure 2.4 is my representation of that included middle.

Figure 2.4. **Transdisciplinary approaches and the included middle**
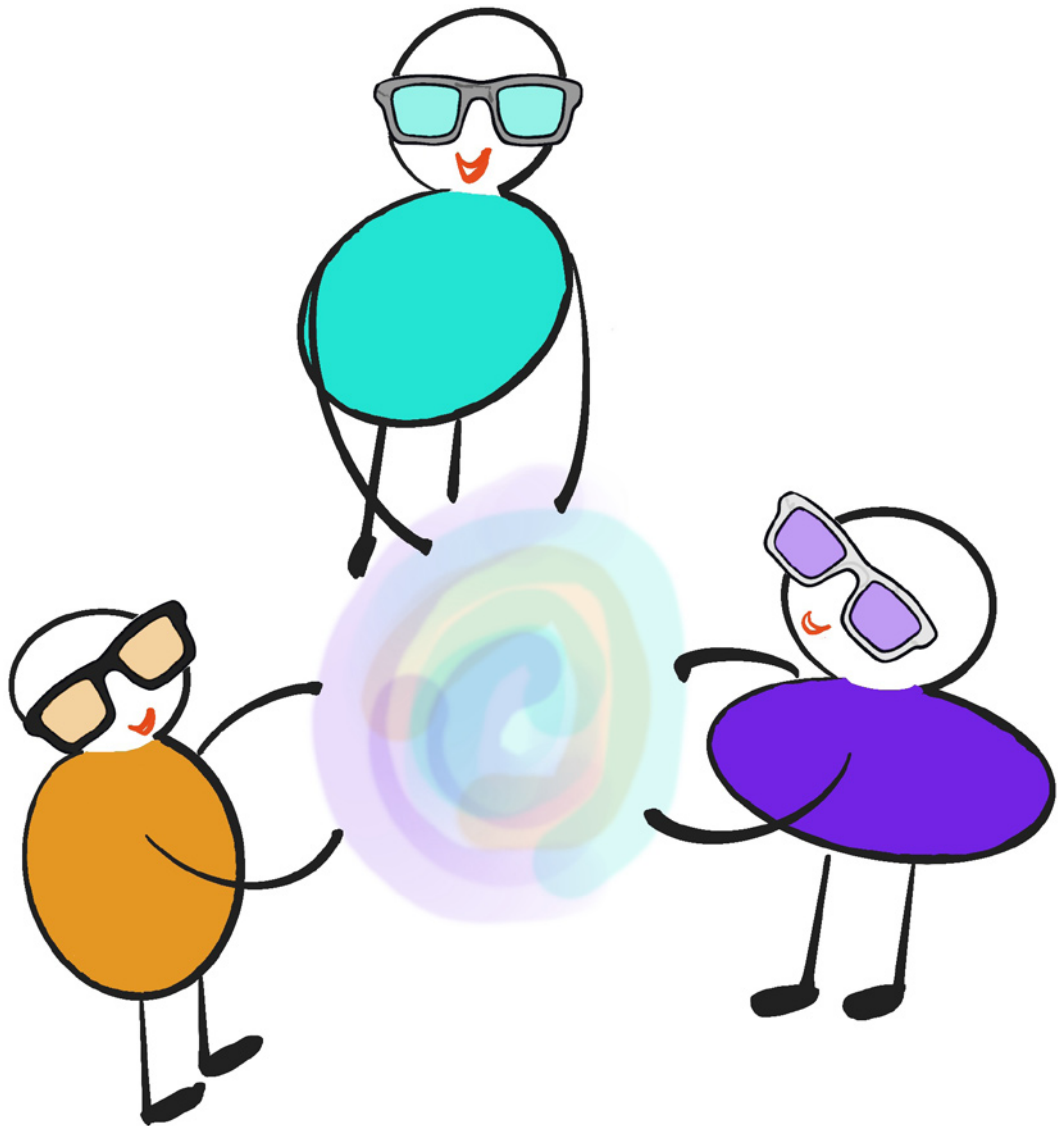
Transgressive approaches to transformations challenge what is presented as a given and bring to the surface the normative framings that underlie those "givens", pushing for a re-evaluation and re-imagination of the status quo. They can help to challenge the systems and structures, as well as the mindsets and interests that perpetuate them. Both transdisciplinary and transgressive approaches often call for a capacity to go beyond trying to decide or establish whose view of the world is "right" (Vogel and O'Brien, 2022). Figure 2.5 depicts the normative framings we take for granted through the glasses we use to look at the world.

Figure 2.5. **Transgressive approaches to challenge the "given"**
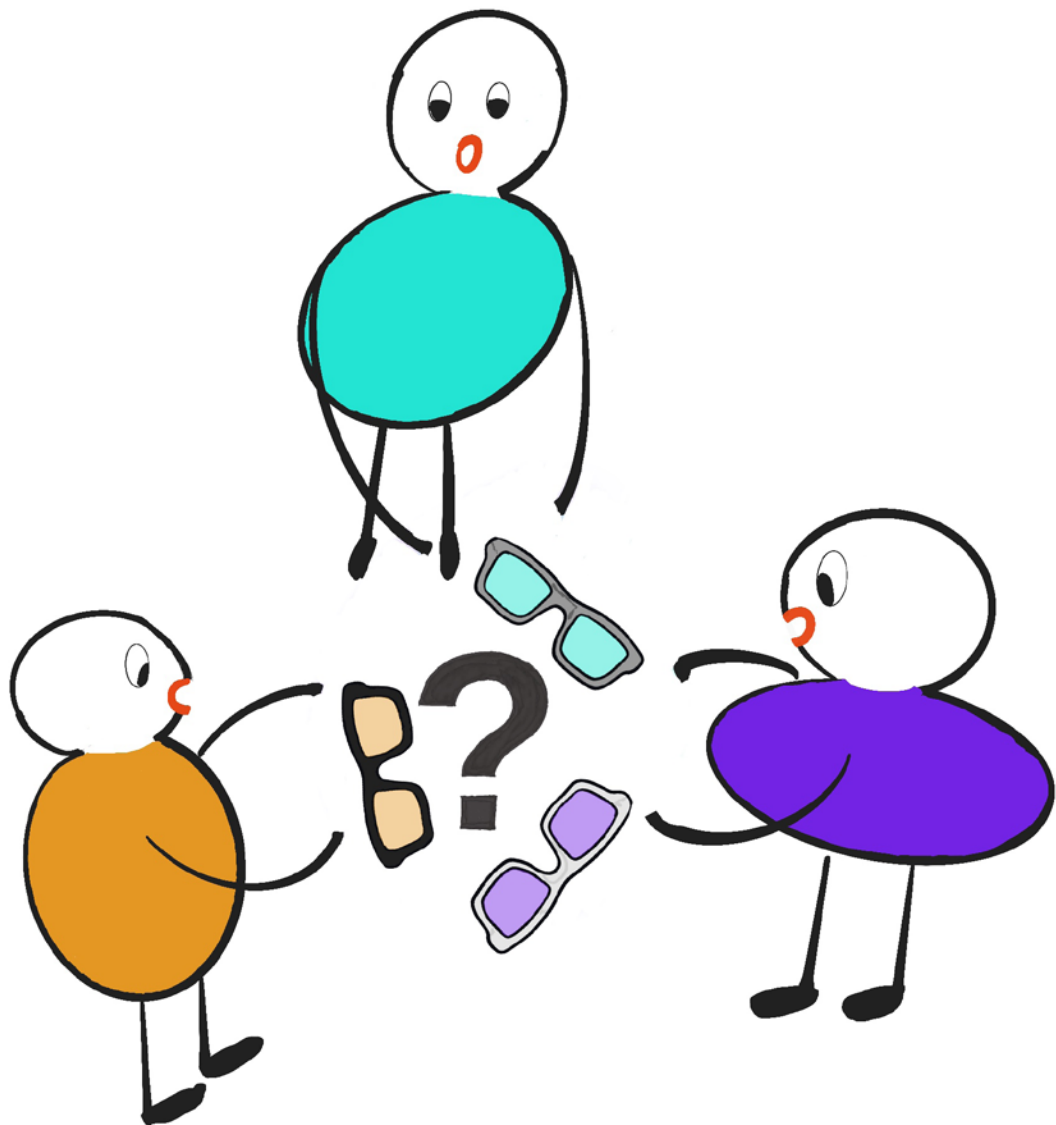
Finally, transcending something involves going beyond the usual conceptual understanding or human experience. It does not mean ignoring the prevailing context, conditions, contradictions, and grievances, but rather, it entails developing a "perspective on perspectives", which includes, for example, being able to look at beliefs and paradigms instead of through them (O'Brien 2021). Figure 2.6 is inspired by this idea.

Figure 2.6. **Transcendent approaches and a perspective on perspectives**
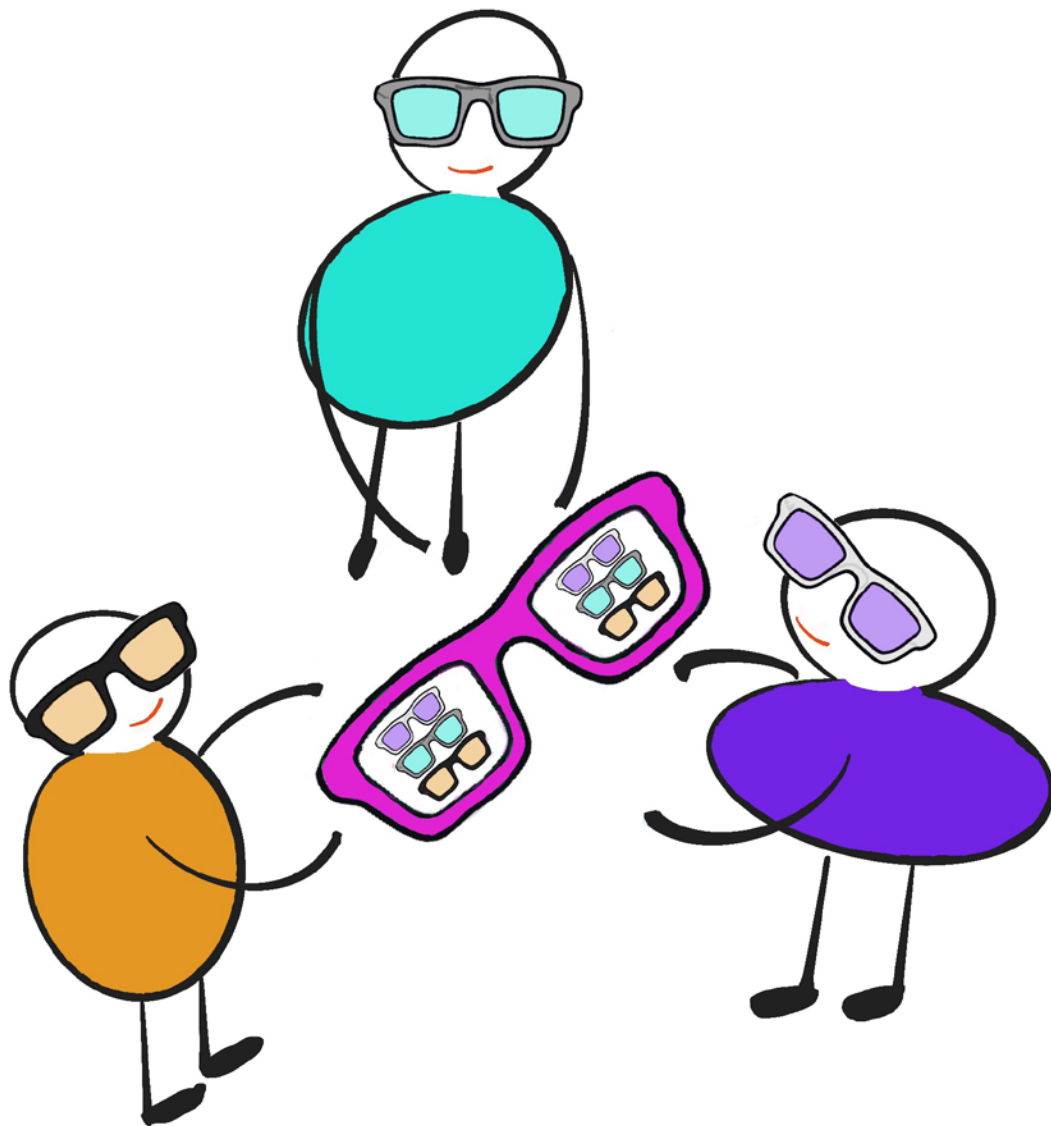
All these concepts and insights are part of how I have used Figure 2.3 to revisit my experience.

5. **Bridging the inspiring literature and my experience**

To bridge this chapter and the next, I share some insights in this section on how the Three Spheres of Transformation connect with my previous experience.

The Three Spheres question how our team has addressed action, change, and transformation. Action research unfolds in action. However, action does not necessarily mean there are significant changes or transformation. When there is action without change or transformation, action research can become a process that reinforces the status quo (despite this not being the aim of action researchers).

Change means to *become* different or to *make* somebody/something different, while transformation is defined as a *complete* change in somebody/something. Thus, there is no transformation without change, but there can be change without transformation. Leichenko *et al.* (2022) consider change to be non-transformative when it deals exclusively with practical behaviours and technical responses without generating any differences in the political sphere (systems and structures) or the personal sphere (beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms); and change is transformative when all these aspects change in interaction.

In the adapted framework, I have related this conceptualisation of transformation to integrating first-, second-, and third-person approaches. In ARTD, when we create new dialogue spaces, agree on specific solutions, or even develop new policy programmes, but participants do not change their beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms (first-person), or we do not institutionalise that change into new norms and rules that will influence future programmes (third-person), what we generate is change but not transformation. Something similar happens in many of the action research cases I see published in that they often have a clear focus on one of these dimensions yet not on their interaction. Does this mean that action research often generates change but not transformation?

In my experience, even when we focus on one sphere, the others change. However, I also think that we could multiply our capacity to transform if we consciously facilitated the connections between the three spheres.

To illustrate this point, in Figure 2.7, I start by depicting that most of my first-person processes remained as self-development with little explicit impact on the second or third-person processes I facilitated.

Figure 2.7. **Focus of first-person action research on self**
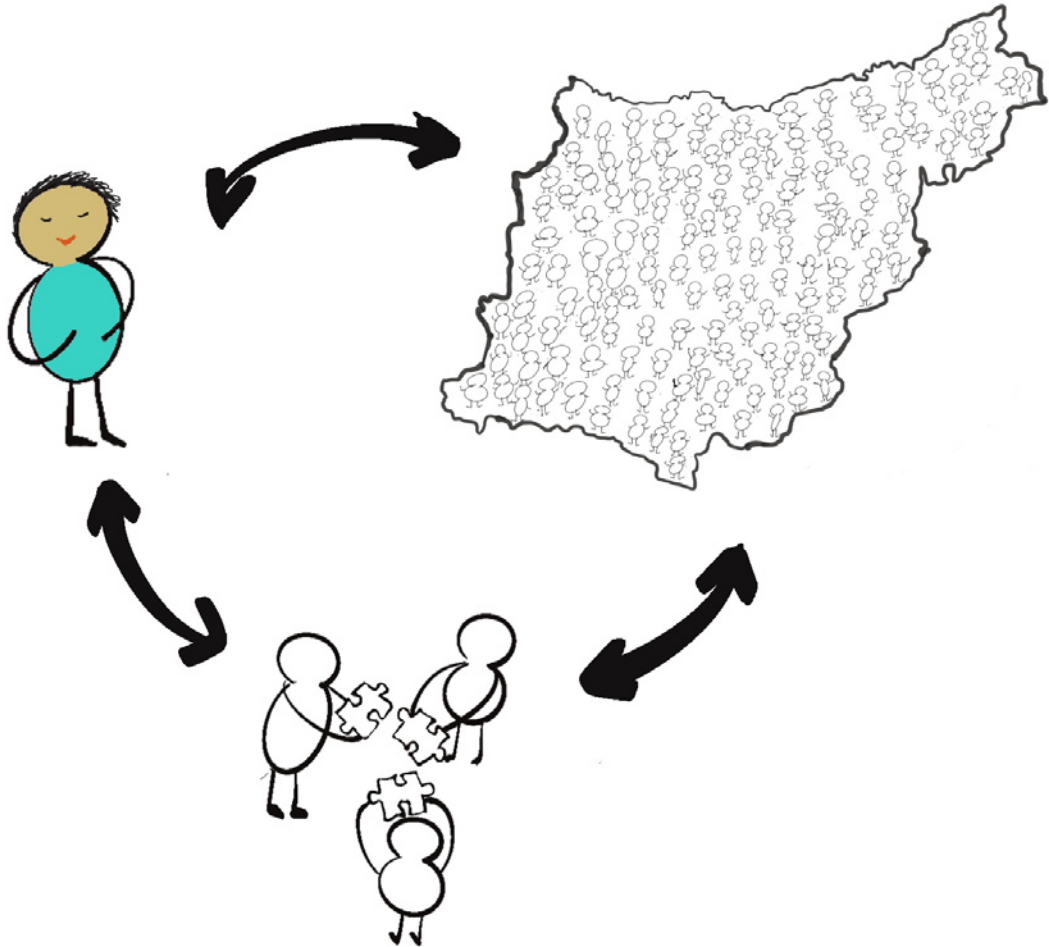
Next, in Figure 2.8, I represent our second-person action research processes as focusing on generating change in practical behaviour and technical responses (collaborative governance, new policy programmes, etc.) in specific policymaking communities. It was acknowledged that participating in these processes could be good for self-development (first-person) and that, if we transformed a particular community, this could influence other connected communities and the political dimension in the territory (third-person). Nevertheless, these impacts on self and the political dimension were not seen directly as goals but rather as collateral effects, and consequently, they were not directly facilitated.

Figure 2.8. **Focus of second-person action research on practical solutions**
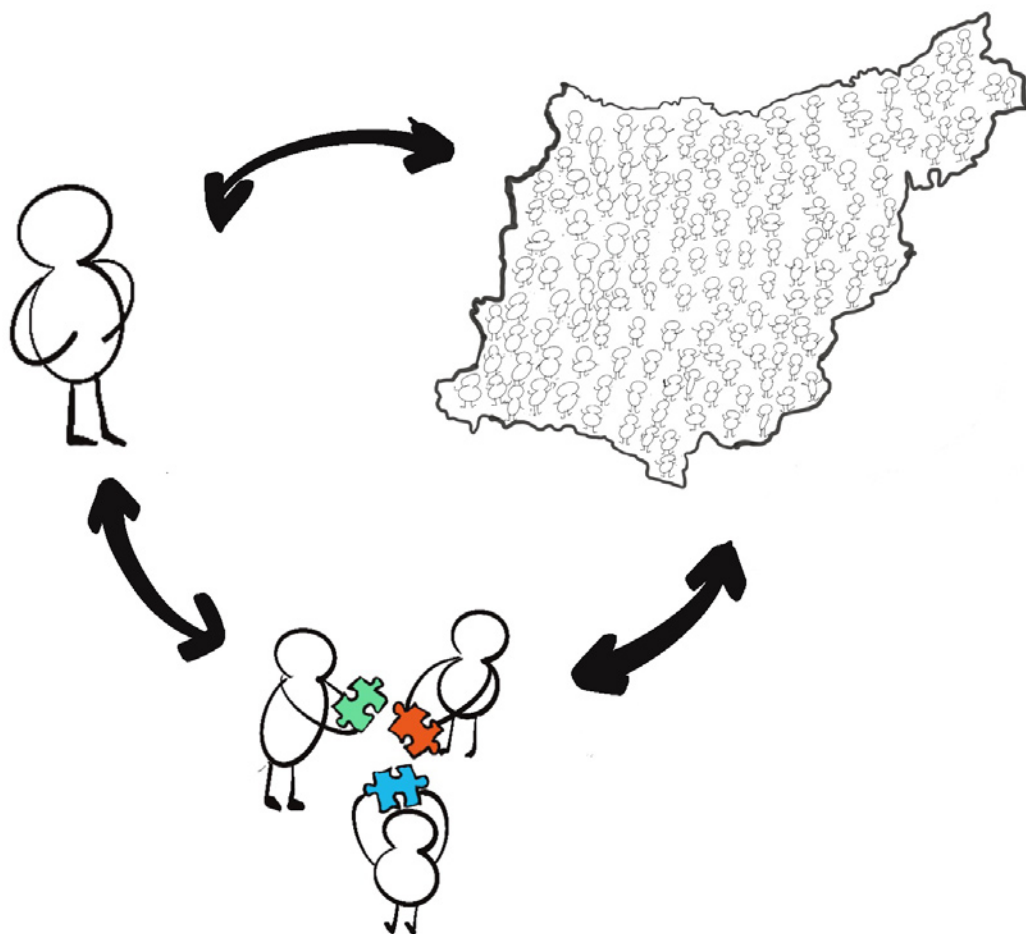
Finally, in Figure 2.9, I illustrate that our third-person action research experience was based on a few cases when we explicitly decided to gain scope and reach territorial actors who were not directly involved in the second-person dynamics. One example was the signing of an agreement in the Territorial Development Laboratory that institutionalised the dialogue spaces and procedures built through second-person action research (see Chapter 1, Section 3). Once signed, the agreement became a new norm that regulated the relationship between the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and the county development agencies of this territory regarding economic development (political level). This norm has since affected participants in policy processes who, before its signing, were not connected with the action research processes we had been facilitating.

Notwithstanding, we have learnt that institutionalising a new norm or procedure is not enough to generate transformation. New norms can become a dead letter unless the affected individuals also evolve in their worldviews and paradigms, and new processes led by specific communities keep the norm alive.

Figure 2.9. **Focus of third-person action research on scope**
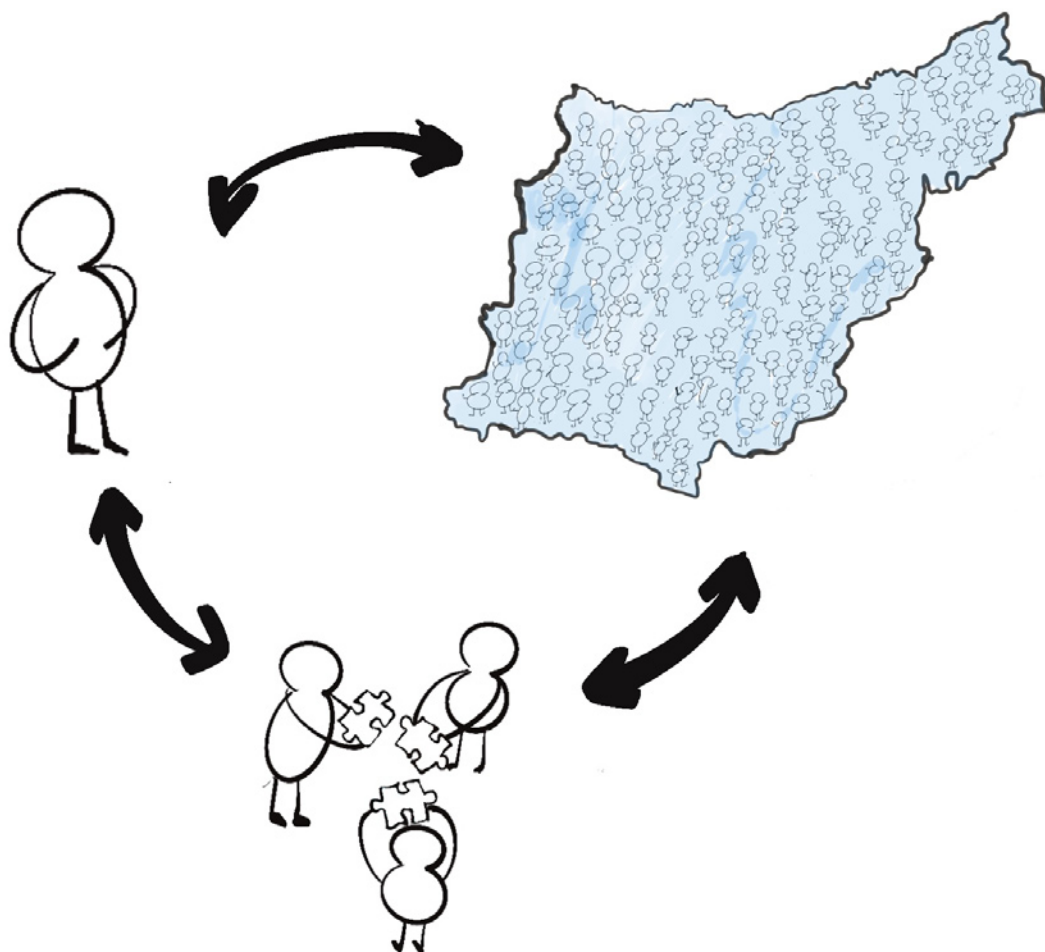
It is difficult to focus on these three dimensions and their interactions simultaneously, and it is rare to find one action researcher with all the capabilities and experience that first-, second-, and third-person processes require. That is why I believe the challenge lies in combining these different capabilities through teamwork, thereby creating multidisciplinary action research teams that can address transformation through interactions between first-, second-, and third-person action research.

Figure 2.10 depicts action research when the personal, the practical, and the political, and thus first-, second-, and third-person action research interact within one policy process.

Figure 2.10. **Transformative action research for territorial development**
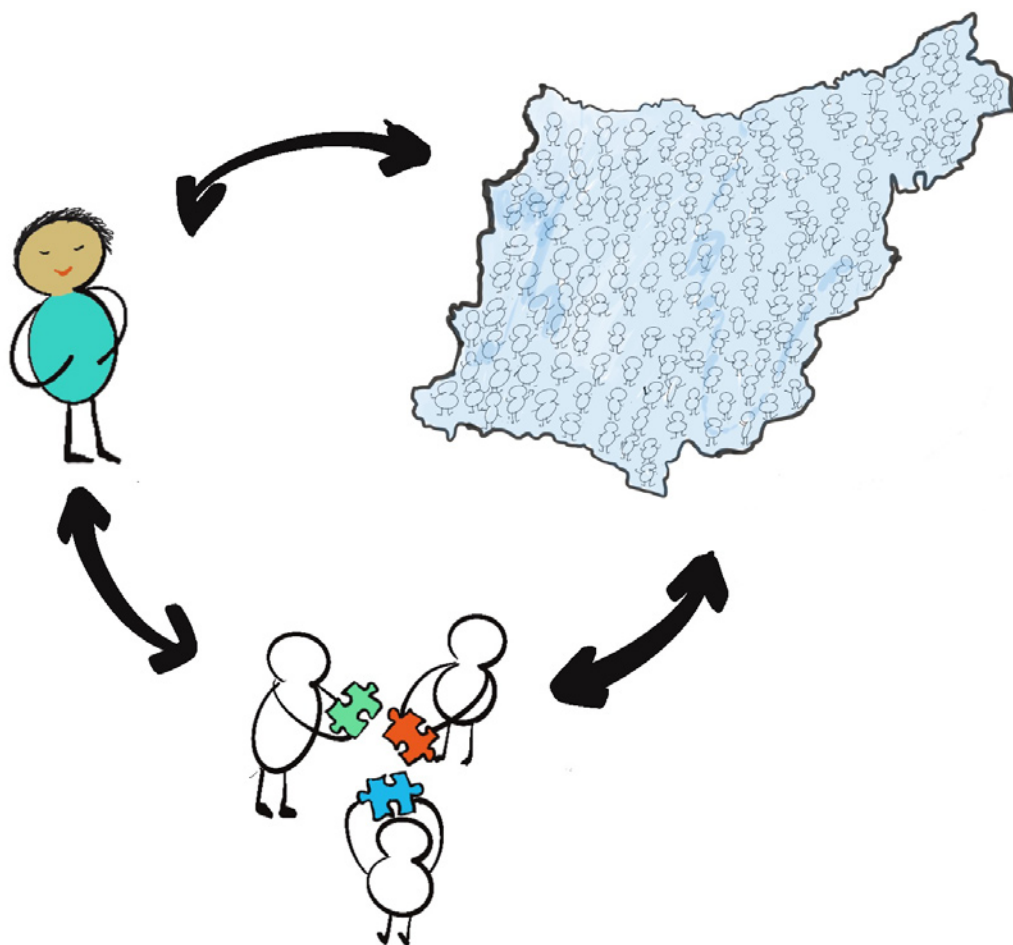
Action research is transformative when the personal, the practical, and the political spheres change interactively, and the connection between first-, second-, and third-person approaches facilitates these interactions.

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6. **Closing comments**

The concluding reflection concerns how this framework contributes to action research for territorial development (ARTD), where most of our processes focus on changing behaviours and developing technical solutions in the context of specific policy programmes.

Together with the rest of the participants, our team aspired to change the political sphere (e.g., changes in governance and, thus, distribution of power). We also acknowledged the relevance of the personal sphere (e.g., emotions, worldviews, and beliefs). However, the political and personal dimensions were not explicit in the agenda. Figure 2.11 represents this practice.

Figure 2.11. **Focus of ARTD processes on the practical dimension**

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 2.3 moves the focus of facilitation from the practical sphere to the connection of the three spheres. I illustrate this in Figure 2.12, where the political and personal spheres are not treated as a given and are included in the agenda of the facilitators of the process.

Figure 2.12. **ARTD in the intersection of the practical,
political, and personal levels**
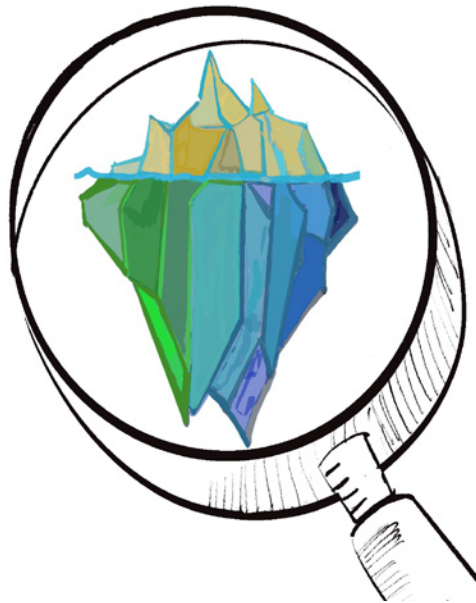
In the following chapters, I revisit my experience through the lenses represented in Figure 2.12.

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Chapter 3

Revisiting practice: dichotomic thinking in action research

1. **Introduction**

In Chapter 1, I shared my experience through eight things I had learnt in the memory of my body, and in Chapter 2, I adapted the conceptual framework of the *Three Spheres of Transformation* to ARTD (Figure 2.3). In Chapter 3, I go back to my experience, this time using the adapted conceptual framework as a heuristic (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. **Goal of this chapter: to revisit my experience using the adapted conceptual framework**
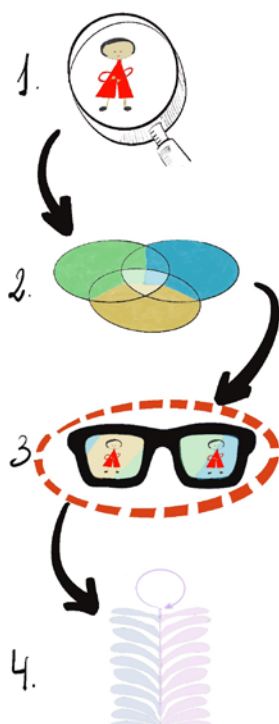
To revisit my trajectory, I have chosen four specific facilitation experiences of the Territorial Development Laboratory (TDLab) and the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank (see Chapter 1, Section 3). When I refer to *our processes* in this chapter, I am referring to these projects. The experiences are:

a) Negotiating an actionable mission for the Think Tank.
b) Improving the efficiency of economic development policies through collaborative governance in the Territorial Development Laboratory (TDLab).
c) Signing an agreement between the provincial council and county development agencies for economic development in the TDLab.
d) Gaining awareness of gender at the core of action research roles in the TDLab.

When revisiting these experiences through the lenses of the spheres of transformation —thinking about the connections between the personal, practical, and political— I found that ten dichotomies have influenced our facilitation of action research (see Table 3.1. at the end of this chapter).

Dichotomies represent things that are considered to be opposed or entirely different. When I refer to dichotomic thinking, I am referring to a way of thinking that frames dichotomies as a matter of choice, of right and wrong, and invites us to choose one side. To ground my argument in Chapter 4 that facilitation can be more transformative when we do not choose a side, I share some of my experiences of how dichotomic thinking is ingrained in our routines in Chapter 3.

The emergence of this type of thinking seems quite predictable if we consider the nature of ARTD. When we agreed to do action research with policymakers, ARDT's principles of transformation, democratisation, participation, action, and praxis were consistent with the future policymakers desired. However, they had invited us to change a situation, which meant that the actual context of policymaking did not fully respond to those principles. Since action research generates change *here and now*, our processes unfolded in policy contexts where action research principles were desirable but resisted in practice. In my experience, this is the root of dichotomic thinking and the pressure to choose: resistance of action research to the status quo and resistance of the status quo to action research.

My experience of facilitating action research is not about perfectly enacting action research principles. It is about struggling in contexts where these principles are not mainstream and creating the environment for them to be enacted. In such situations, action research principles unfold together with other seemingly opposed or entirely different (dichotomic) ones.

In the next four sections, I revisit the four experiences I listed above and share the most influential dichotomies. The concluding section provides a table and a figure synthesising the ten dichotomies, which are the basic pillars to discuss facilitation in the next chapter.

2. First experience: Negotiating an actionable mission for the Think Tank

In this section, I focus on the stage of our action research processes when, through weekly sessions for three months at the end of 2019, I met three policymakers (two politi-

cians and one civil servant) in the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (see Figure 3.2). The government had a Think Tank that had difficulties connecting participants' reflections with actual changes in the council's policies, and they wanted to reformulate how the Think Tank worked to improve this connection. My role was to prepare the meetings, including the agenda and proposals that could trigger reflection on relevant issues. I also wrote the documents that synthesised the discussions, the decisions, and the emerging proposal of a renewed Think Tank.

Figure 3.2. **The dialogue space for reformulating the Think Tank**
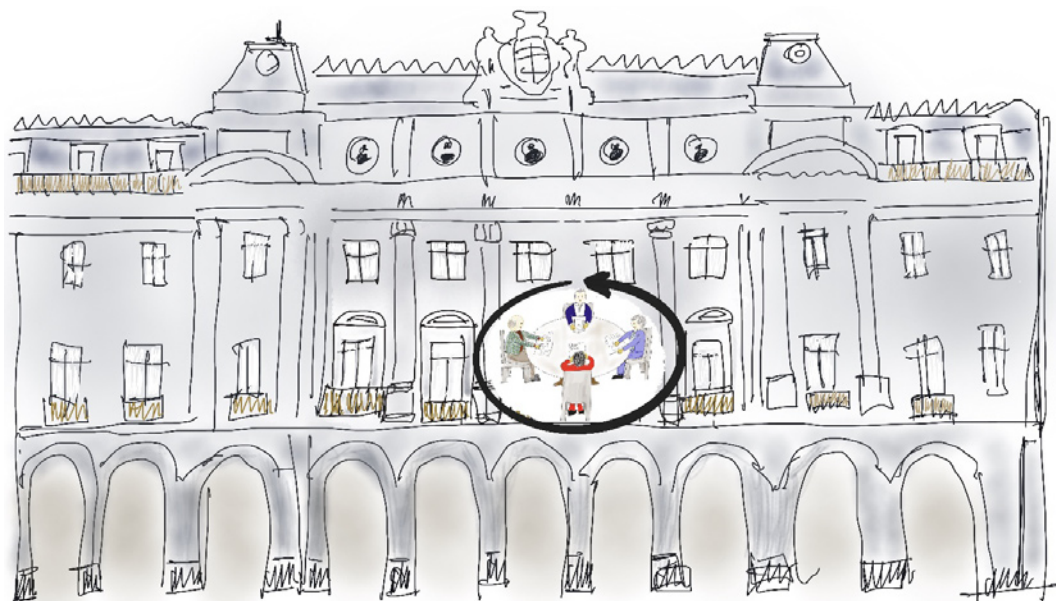
The agreements we reached in this process were relevant because they sparked the initiation of a new stage for the Etorkizuna Eraikiz Think Tank based on action research (see Chapter 1, Section 3). I now focus on one of the practical features we agreed on, and will later reflect on the political and personal spheres, which we did not explicitly address at that time. Using the metaphor of the iceberg (Figure 2.12), I will depart from the visible peak to subsequently try to understand what was underneath.

2.1. *The practical sphere*

One of the results of the dialogue process with policymakers was to establish the Think Tank's mission:

> "To cogenerate knowledge that is transferable and applicable, through collaborative governance, so as to introduce a new political culture that will modernise the policy ecosystem (actors, contents, and processes) of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa."

This mission reflected a new way of making policy, which required changes in both organisation and behaviour, and inspired many decisions in the Think Tank. It represented the

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practical sphere of transformation and was also the result of second-person action research, cogenerated by three policymakers and one action researcher.

Following the agreed mission, this group of four participants first evolved into a direction group of three action researchers and nine policymakers, and finally into four deliberation groups with around ninety participants (action researchers, policymakers, and other territorial actors from the ecosystems). That is the process that Figure 3.3 represents. The mission also inspired the new dialogue spaces.

Figure 3.3. **Timeline of the Think Tank integrating new participants in every stage**
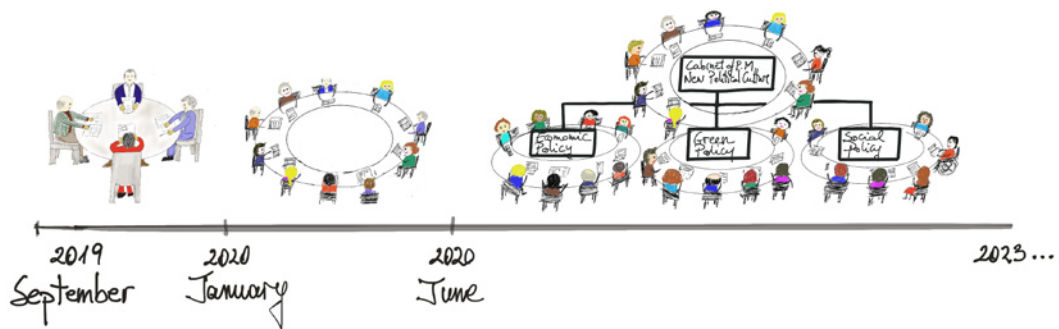
To explore the personal and political dimensions underlying this mission, I go back to something I published with a colleague (Larrea and Karlsen, 2022, p. 2341):

> "This mission shows how the language of policymakers (transferable and applicable) and the researcher (cogenerate) blended in a way that is conceptually inconsistent since transferring and applying knowledge are connected to linearity assumptions, while co-generation requires overcoming such linearity. The agreement on this mission was an initial step in a dialogue mediated by knowledge and power where different epistemological positions were working together."

2.2. *Connecting the practical with the political and personal*

The choice of words by policymakers (transferable and applicable) and my own (cogenerate) was deeply rooted in our beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms and, therefore, belongs to the personal sphere. I also think that the perspective of these policymakers was consistent with the norms, rules, regulations, and institutions of mainstream policymaking, and even with institutionalised research methodologies in university environments in Gipuzkoa (political sphere). Meanwhile, cogeneration and action research were not part of the mainstream. In this section, I share three examples of dichotomic thinking that emerged in this context: expert knowledge and experiential knowledge, planning and emergence, and theory and practice.

2.2.1. *Expert knowledge and experiential knowledge*

My next reflections are mostly based on my experience with the deliberation group for a new political culture. I participated in this group alongside the three policymakers with whom I cogenerated the mission.

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Around twenty participants in the deliberation group met every month for a two-hour session. The first hour was set aside for the main speech and the subsequent questions and answers related to it. University-related guests usually made these speeches based on disciplinary knowledge from political science, public administration, or sociology. We referred to these speakers as experts.

The role of the territorial actors in the deliberation process was to listen, ask questions, discuss the experts' contributions and, finally, based on their experience of the policy ecosystem, analyse how the new expert knowledge helped improve the problem at stake (namely, the transformation of the political culture to more collaborative forms).

The role of action researchers was to help develop the group's voice. We systematised the different contributions that participants made after the speech and expressed their experiential knowledge in working papers, which were distributed to participants through email but not presented or discussed in the prime time of the session.

We were consistent with our action research framework, as we had disciplinary knowledge (primarily from invited experts), experiential knowledge (primarily from participants in the deliberation) and process knowledge (primarily from action researchers).

However, these types of knowledge did not interact as the action research team hoped. Many participants regarded expert knowledge as more valuable than experiential knowledge. Moreover, since many of the members of the policy ecosystem came from universities and research centres, they tended to use their disciplinary knowledge more than their experiential one. This made action research more difficult, as the process ended up having "too many experts sharing disciplinary knowledge" and "too few participants sharing their experiential knowledge".

In Figure 3.4, I show a hierarchy between those sharing disciplinary knowledge and those sharing experiential knowledge. I have drawn a sieve in the hands of those sharing experiential knowledge because they were in charge of sieving the disciplinary knowledge shared by experts to choose the one that best helped think about the problem and its solutions.

Figure 3.4. **Hierarchies between different types of knowledge**

The *transferability* and *applicability* policymakers had included in the mission responding to their paradigms (personal sphere) called for expert knowledge and, following decisions by policymakers, experts were the higher-ranking source of knowledge at this initial stage. As part of our relational role, our team assisted policymakers in finding the right experts. Nevertheless, we also played a critical role in arguing for *cogeneration* and the relevance of dedicating the prime time in workshops to the experiential knowledge of participants. That is why the first dichotomy I propose is between expert knowledge and experiential knowledge.

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Expert knowledge and experiential knowledge

When the paradigms at the personal level and the institutions at the political level prioritise expert knowledge over experiential knowledge, the agreements on the practical level to do action research can be jeopardised.

2.2.2. *The planning perspective at the core of policy*

The language used in the mission by policymakers (transferable and applicable) has strong connections with one of the government's core policy instruments: planning. As in many other places, strategic plans have been a significant tool for Gipuzkoa's provincial council and county development agencies.

Plans respond to a linear perspective where participants first reflect and decide on what to do to solve a specific problem or tackle the challenges facing an organisation or a territory. These decisions are then implemented in a later stage, and the knowledge generated in the initial definition of the plan is thus transferred to be applied (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5. **A linear transition from reflection to applying knowledge**
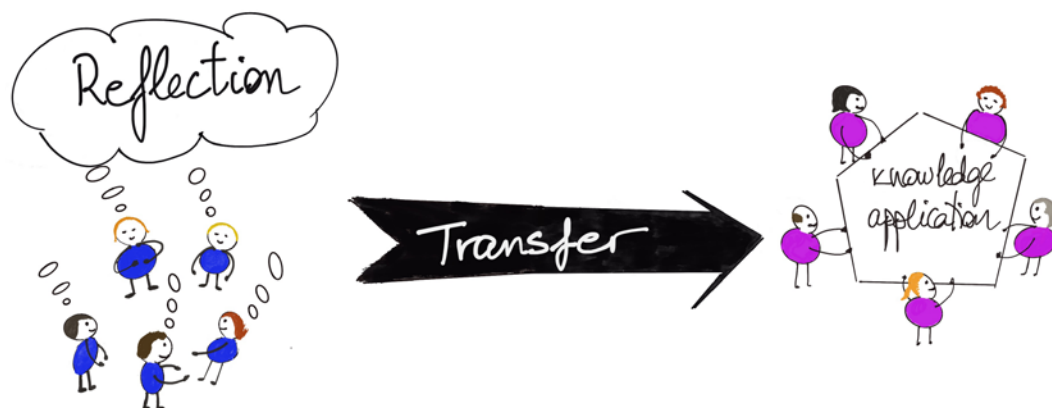
Action research, however, proposes emergent processes of reflection and action (praxis). Action is the context of knowledge generation, and there is action before we know what the solution to the problem or challenge will be. Those solutions emerge as reflection and action transform through their interaction. As Figure 3.6 shows, the cyclical move from action to reflection an back to action generates progress.

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Figure 3.6. **Praxis as an emergent process**
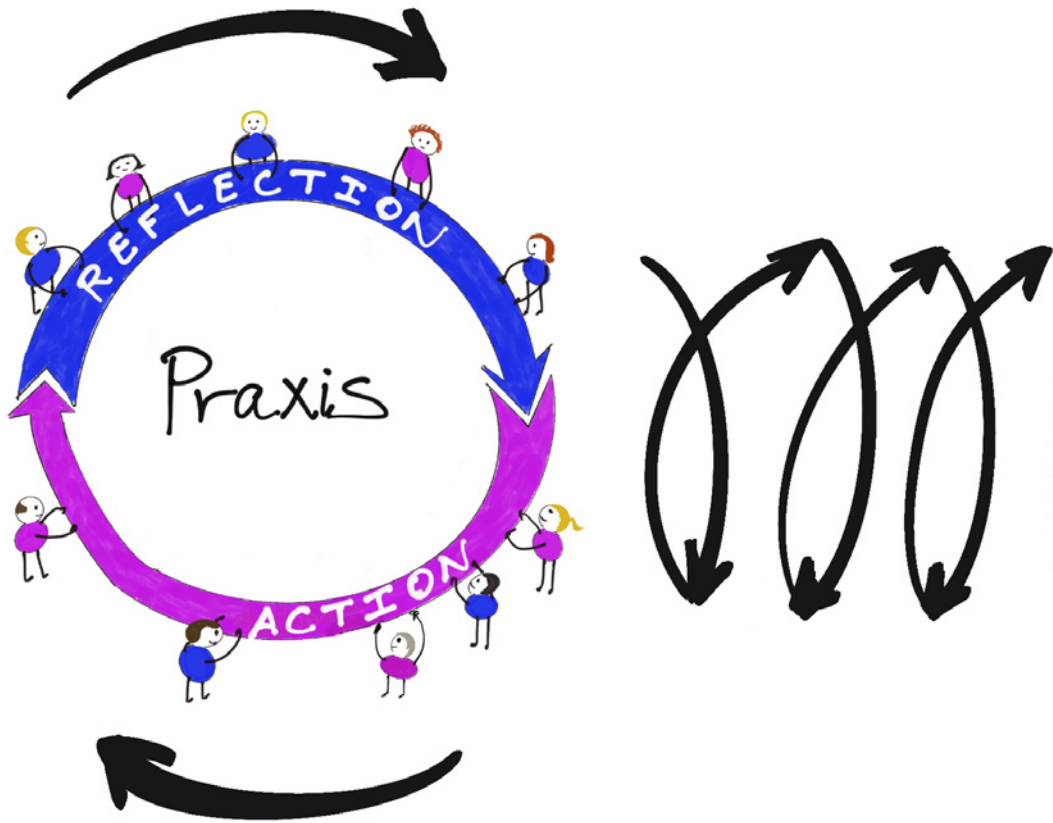
Our practice combined both Figures 3.5 and 3.6. We aligned our process with a specific government plan, but solutions also often arose from learning and negotiating. And these solutions were frequently different from what the plan had originally stated, which led to tensions. Moreover, the differences that became visible in the practical sphere were connected to differences beneath the surface, in the paradigms of the participants (personal sphere) and in the ways they interpreted the institutionalised procedures (political). These paradigms and institutions had been ingrained in "how policy is done" for many years. Another dichotomy that has been relevant in our processes is, therefore, the one between planning and emergence.


Planning and emergence

When planning is ingrained in a government's policymaking habits, it is not easy for participants in an action research process to feel comfortable with emergent processes.

2.2.3. *Theory and practice at the core of policy*

If we dive deeper than the previous dichotomies, we discover a third underlying dichotomy, the one between theory and practice.

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Experts usually brought theory into the processes that our action research team facilitated. This contribution was consistent with the rationale expressed by some policymakers and representatives of the ecosystem that we first needed to solve our problems theoretically to be able to solve them in practice, as in Figure 3.7. This perspective is often institutionalised (political sphere) not only in policymaking but also in academic environments.

Figure 3.7. **The role of theory in linear processes**
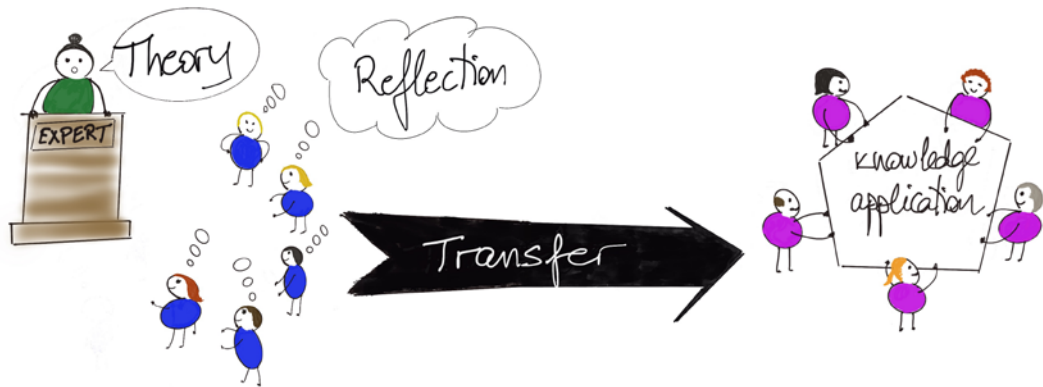
I have already described that we initially worked following the process depicted in Figure 3.7. Nevertheless, we challenged this rationale throughout the process.

Linearity is not consistent with the principles of action research on participation, knowledge cogeneration, and praxis. However, when practitioners express a rationale based on linearity, this perspective becomes our action research team's starting point. Considering that the centrality of theory and experts was ingrained in the policy process, our role was first to raise awareness about that. With this goal, we helped participants enact their beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms by working together linearly.

Consequently, during the first six months of the deliberation group on political culture, we gave centrality to experts and their theoretical contributions. Participants first listened to the speeches and then, in groups, discussed how they helped respond to our challenge of transforming political culture.

After six months, participants began sharing their opinion that it was unfeasible to connect the presentations by experts with the practical goals of the Think Tank. We used one of the workshops to discuss exclusively this challenge and the methodology of the Think Tank (action research), and the decision was made that no outside experts would be invited for the next four months. Participants in the deliberation group (working together in four teams) shared their learnings in the process, one group every month. And this is how the participants' experiential knowledge took the lead in the process. This knowledge was not atheoretical, but participants integrated theory into praxis, as illustrated by the green lines in Figure 3.8.

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Figure 3.8. **Theory integrated into the process
through the experience of participants**
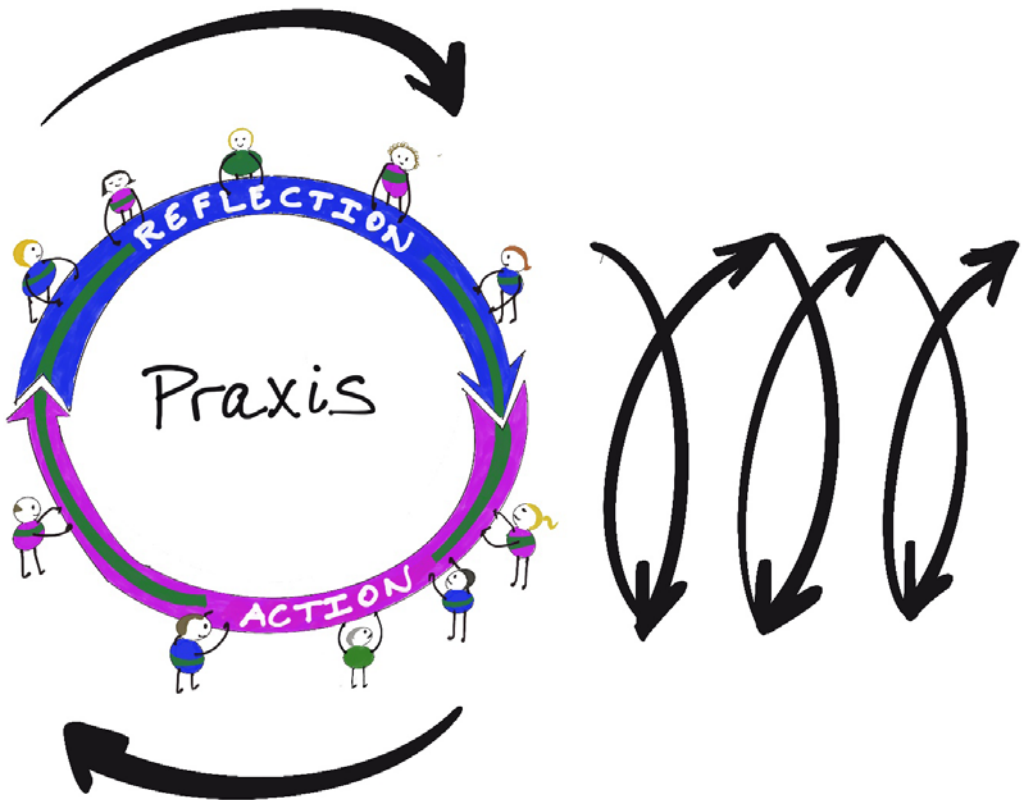
Theory and practice
When core stakeholders in an action research process believe they must find the right theoretical answer before acting, praxis can be jeopardised. In such a situation, it can be useful to undertake a linear process together (even though it does not respond to action research principles) and raise shared awareness regarding the limitations of that approach.

2.3. *Exploring first-person action research to transform the personal sphere*

What I have described up to now is a contradictory action research process. How was it possible for us (action researchers and policymakers) to work together with such deep contradictions? In this section, I once again navigate through the practical, political, and personal spheres of transformation to present a new dichotomy which, in my opinion, helps answer that question: power and love. I will argue that the interaction between power and love created the conditions for both perspectives to coexist in one mission.

The previous dichotomies emerged in the context of second-person action research, where power was profusely discussed. However, no discussion on love emerged there. To integrate love as part of our action research, I had to experiment with first-person action re-

search and, more specifically, with a mutual inquiry process between the politician in charge of the Think Tank and me, which was facilitated by Hilary Bradbury. We started this dialogue by discussing power before Hilary introduced love, causing some discomfort. Love is a difficult concept in the public/professional space, where it feels inappropriate. The main contribution of our mutual inquiry was the acknowledgement, later shared in various Think Tank spaces, that love is a relevant concept in the policy process.

The author who most inspired me to follow up on this acknowledgement of love is Kahane (2010). He defines power as the *drive of everything living to realise itself with increasing intensity and extensity*, describing it as a centrifugal force. That is what Figure 3.9 represents.

Figure 3.9. **Power as a centrifugal force**
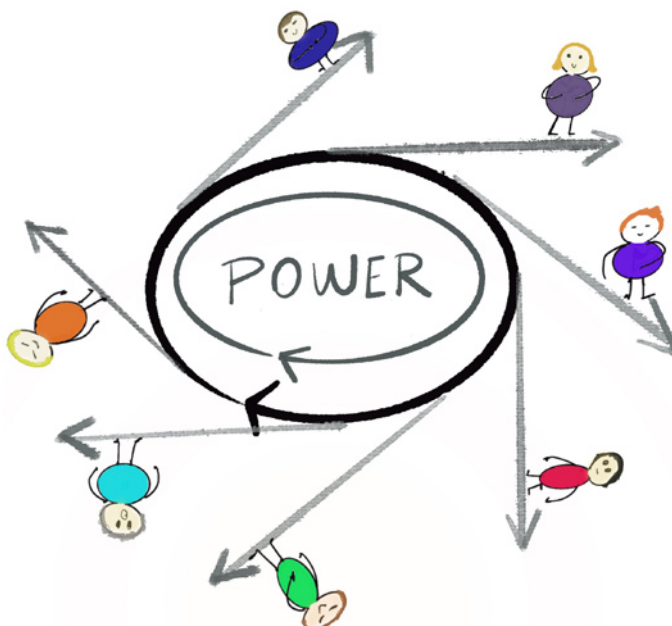
Power, in our action research processes, represents the aim and ambition to transform policy and politics. In a specific project, it might mean, for example, the driving force behind a new regulation or programme, the reorganisation of government structures, or the establishment of a new institutional procedure. When these new regulations, programmes, structures, and procedures are enacted, those promoting them (individuals or groups) experience realisation. They are seen as the owners of that process, achievers of their goals, and agents that changed a situation.

Kahane defines love as the *drive towards the unity of the separated*, as Figure 3.10 represents. Our action research enacted this primarily through facilitative work by researchers and policymakers. It required knitting together the contributions of different participants to create a shared vision, developing trust and cohesion, caring for and taking care of participants, and listening to their worldviews and emotions. Kahane (2010) describes it as a kind of centripetal force.

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Figure 3.10. **Love as a centripetal force**
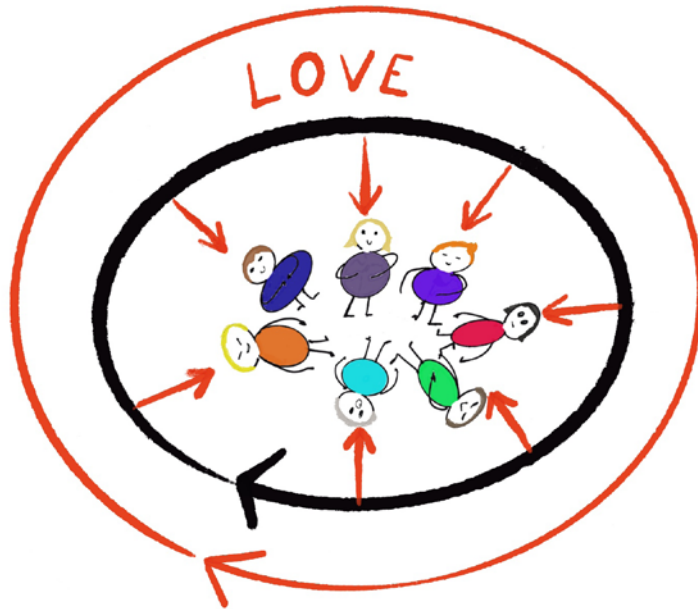
In our team's conceptualisation of action research, all participants are potentially facilitative actors (for instance, facilitative researchers or facilitative policymakers). This means that we can all enact power and love. Nonetheless, these roles are not evenly enacted, with some participants focusing on their role as actors, searching for realisation (enacting power), and others focusing on their role as facilitators, searching for the unity of the group (enacting love). The perfect balance between them is very difficult to achieve. Figure 3.11 illustrates that each participant combines the drive towards realisation and unity asymmetrically, and in my case, I think I was more driven by love than power.

Figure 3.11. **Personal enactment of love and power**

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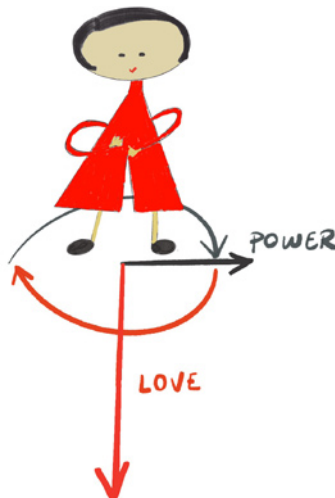
But given that power and love operate socially, this asymmetric tension that each of us was experiencing at a personal level was also relevant to understanding how the Think Tank as a community was developing. I start exploring this idea by proposing in Figure 3.12 what an ideally balanced enactment of power and love could look like in a community.

Figure 3.12. **A balanced enactment of power and love**
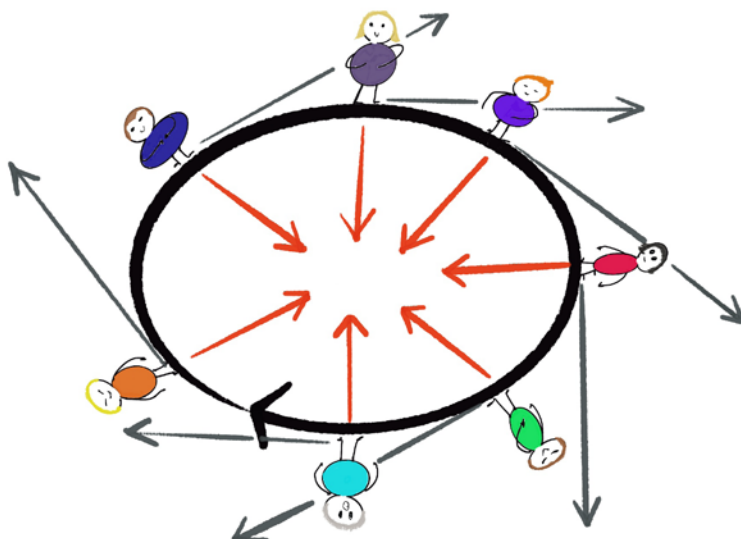
However, processes are seldom as balanced as that. In Figure 3.13, I have depicted policymakers in blue and action researchers in fuchsia. I found that in our processes, some policymakers reached quite balanced enactments of power and love, while others mainly enacted power, and a few policymakers, together with most action researchers, focused on enacting love. I think our team was often too focused on facilitation (love) and had difficulty playing our role of territorial actors/researchers (power).

Figure 3.13. **Biases in power and love in ARTD**

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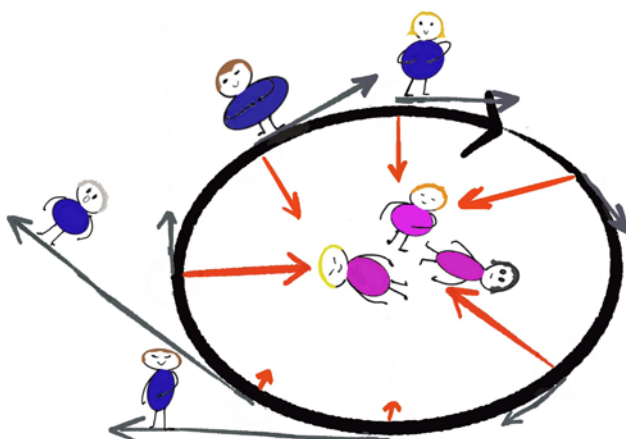
The more we reduce the biases shown in Figure 3.13, the closer we get to overcoming dichotomic thinking in our action research processes. This is consistent with Kahane's (2010) affirmation that power without love and love without power are degenerative.

Power and love

When facilitation of action research is understood exclusively as love (the drive to the unity of the separated) and the role of stakeholders exclusively as power (the drive to realisation), degenerative dynamics can emerge.

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3. **Second experience: Democratisation of policymaking in the TDLab, the challenge of efficiency**

Since democratisation can be interpreted in multiple ways, I use subsections 3.1 and 3.2 to contextualise what it meant in our action research processes and argue that participation was the main strategy for democratisation. After that, in subsection 3.3, I discuss the dichotomy between efficiency and participation.

3.1. *Action research as democratisation*

Action research is a participatory process which democratises knowledge generation, and since knowledge is cogenerated, it changes power relationships. The most widespread approach to action research is second-person, and consequently, action research usually democratises micro-processes and power relations in specific groups of stakeholders.

However, when the stakeholders of action research are politicians and policymakers —thus governments and public administration— different understandings of democracy interplay. In most of our projects, the interpretation that prevailed among stakeholders was representative democracy, where politicians held the mandate and the decision-making power.

The democratisation that we have aimed at in our action research processes included both of the previous perspectives, as policymakers explored ways to use the power and the mandate they had received from citizens through elections in the context of participatory knowledge cogeneration processes developed with specific territorial actors. This is what Figure 3.14 represents.

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Figure 3.14. **Representative democracy as the framework for action research**

The core concept to bring these two interpretations together was collaborative govern-ance, defined as "the institutionalised collaboration between public institutions, social actors and citizens to empower and operationalise the ecosystem of public policies by reinforcing the social capital between institutions, social agents and citizens by means of deliberations and shared actions"[6].

In the practical sphere of transformation, our action research contributed to generating spaces of direct participation for territorial development actors in policymaking. Meanwhile, tensions emerged in the political and personal spheres because of the implications of these processes related to representative democracy.

The central dilemma underlying these tensions concerned the legitimacy of participants in the process of influencing policy when they did not represent *all citizens*. Some partici-pants felt that unless all citizens were represented, we were "betraying" the results of elec-tions; however, having all the citizens in a territory as participants in an action research proc-ess is not feasible. And, whereas direct democracy has explored procedures to avoid biases based on choosing representative samples or randomising the selection of participants, ac-tion research requires the involvement of the problem owners, i.e., those citizens who are

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6 Cogenerated in the deliberation group on new political culture, Working Paper n.º 23, November 2022.

experiencing the specific problem being addressed. Not only might they not be representative of the whole citizenry, but they cannot be chosen randomly. Action research responds to problems in a specific moment and place and seeks the participation of the people experiencing that problem in that moment and place. Specific participants acquire legitimacy based on their experience of the problem (if they are part of the problem, they should be part of the solution, too). Thus, they represent themselves and not all citizens.

Consequently, when action research is used in public policy, it can raise concerns about respecting representative democracy principles. The main concern in our action research processes was expressed as follows:

> "Society gives power/responsibility to public organisations through elections. What are the conditions that should be in place to share that power/responsibility without losing political legitimacy?[7]"

This was one of the main discussions in the Think Tank, documented in its working papers[8] and depicted in Figure 3.15.

Figure 3.15. **The dilemma of who participates in action research and policymaking**

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[7] Cogenerated in the deliberation group on new political culture, Working Paper n.º 22, September 2022.

[8] See working papers at https://www.etorkizunaeraikiz.eus/en/think-tank-new-political-culture.

Another related discussion was whether we should invite citizens or organisations. In many policy challenges, individuals with knowledge concerning the problem at stake can be invited to deliberate. It is important to note, however, that action research and praxis involve not only deliberation but also action, and that action in territorial development often requires the involvement of organisations and their decision-making structures (see Figure 3.16).

Figure 3.16. **The role of individuals and organisations as participants in action research**

Therefore, despite being considered a democratising process, action research challenged deeply rooted norms, rules, and institutions (political sphere), as well as beliefs, values, and paradigms (personal sphere) about democracy. When theoretically addressed with experts, these dilemmas led us into a conundrum[9]. Nonetheless, in practice, taking each situation at a time, we have established the conditions for participation that policymakers who raised questions to safeguard representative democracy found acceptable.

3.2. *Democratisation in first-person*

How each participant in our action research processes enacted democracy in the different dialogue spaces was deeply connected to our beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms (personal sphere). Notwithstanding, we seldom openly discussed these in the group.

With its principles of democratisation, participation, knowledge cogeneration, and praxis, action research aligns with certain beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms, and not others. This means that not all participants will feel equally comfortable doing action research. Despite our research team having often discussed the practical implications of action research with stakeholders, over these 15 years, we have seldom openly addressed the tensions between action research principles and the beliefs and values of stakeholders. Furthermore, this has definitely not been openly used to decide whether to do (or not) action research. I now share a quote[10] from a workshop when we discussed collaborative governance. I think that the same reflection applies to action research, and it shows that not examining this connection between action research and the personal sphere of participants might have hindered our processes:

> "If, at the time of launching a process, we do not have people with suitable profiles for this type of work, is it worth going ahead with the process? Wouldn't it be more effective to focus the transformation on other areas?"

In that session, participants agreed that some people have "natural" attitudes and behaviours toward collaborative governance, while others do not. Moreover, they agreed that it is extremely difficult for stakeholders, in this case policymakers, who do not have these "natural" traits to work collaboratively. I think that what the group referred to as "natural" is linked to the personal sphere and the beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms of stakeholders.

This strong connection of the personal with the practical and the political has often been overlooked in our decisions on who will participate in action research or even on whether action research is feasible in a specific context. However, it is essential to find a balance between participants who have the traits that make these processes feasible and those who do not. That means that we need enough participants who are ready to adapt the power/responsibility they have gained through representative democracy to participatory cogeneration processes.

3.3. *Participation and efficiency*

I now focus on a specific project where the democratising aim of action research was materialised through the participation of SMEs in the policy processes that affected them.

During the dialogue processes in the TDLab in 2016, one of the politicians of the provincial council shared that they had made a call for a programme to help SMEs develop Industry 4.0[11]. If we only focus on the delivery of the programme, we could say that the process was efficient, as policymakers delivered it promptly. Figure 3.17 illustrates the efficiency of making fast decisions in the corresponding hierarchical positions.

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[10] Deliberation group on new political culture, Working Paper n.º 18, February 2022.
[11] Digital transformations to improve their competitiveness.

Figure 3.17. **Hierarchies as a source of efficiency**
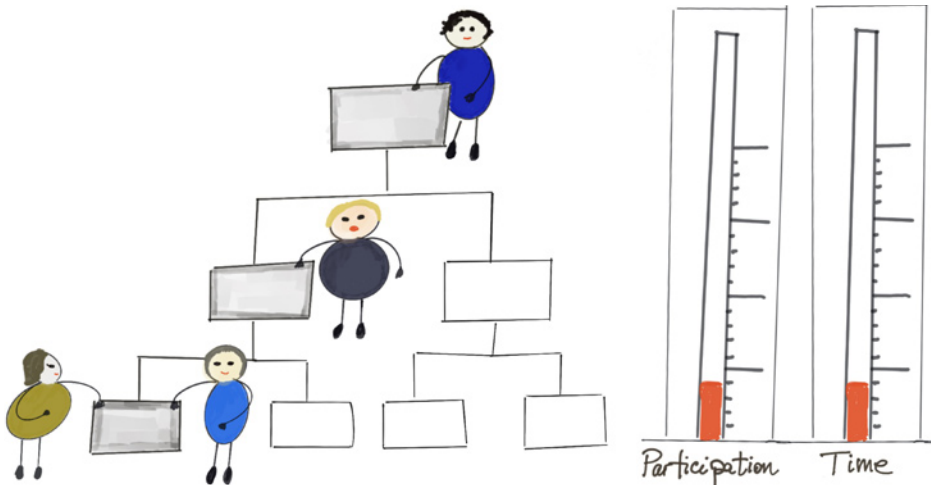
Yet the funds assigned to the programme had not been used because very few firms had applied. Our working hypothesis was that SMEs had not applied to the programme because it was not adapted to their needs, and in order to find out what their needs were, we needed to collaborate with them. Thus, although the lack of participation had accelerated the initial stage of offering the programme, it might also have hindered SMEs' later use of the funds.

This seemed like a good challenge for the collaborative governance procedures we had been developing over the last three years between the council and the county development agencies (see Figure 3.18). It was also a good moment to act as, although we had created trust and a shared vision in this process, some policymakers told us that we were holding too many workshops and obtaining too few tangible results. Time was a valuable resource.

Figure 3.18. **Investing in trust and a shared vision (2013-2016)**
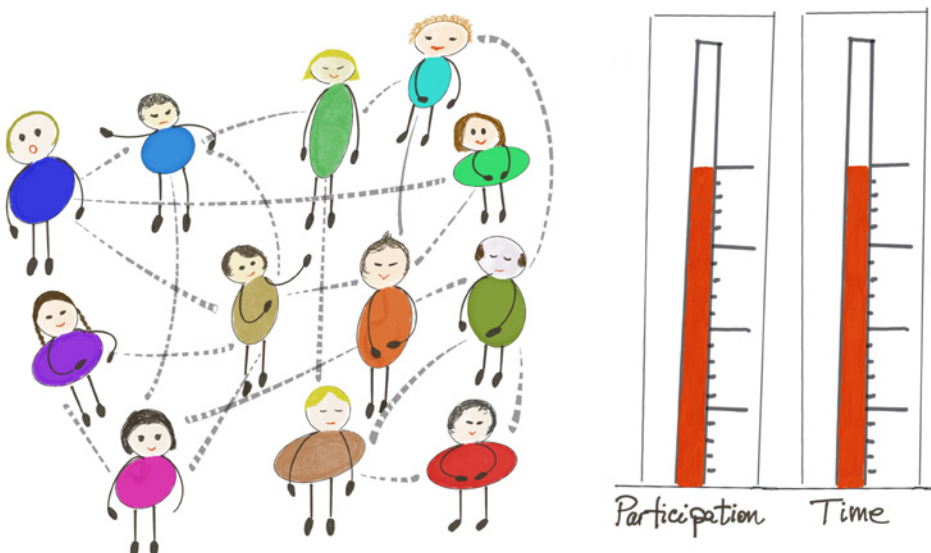
The Industry 4.0 challenge was, therefore, an opportunity to use the trust and shared vision generated previously to solve a concrete problem. The council and agencies agreed that agency staff collaborating with policymakers from the council would reach out to SMEs to understand how the programme should be tailored to respond to their needs. They would then redefine the programme.

The council policymakers and staff from the agencies met in monthly workshops to cogenerate a specific methodology for the process. Using this methodology, agencies contacted all industrial firms with between 10 and 100 employees in Gipuzkoa. They offered SMEs the possibility to collaborate with their contact person in the county development agency to make an Industry 4.0 diagnosis, and 400 firms accepted. Once the results were consolidated into a territorial diagnosis, it took the council and agencies one workshop to agree on what kind of programme the council should support, and based on these dialogues, the agencies enrolled 40 SMEs willing to participate in that programme within a few weeks. Steps were accelerating, and participation (through collaboration between the council, agencies, and SMEs) made the process unusually efficient (see Figure 3.19).

Figure 3.19. **Efficiency through collaboration between the council, agencies, and SMEs**
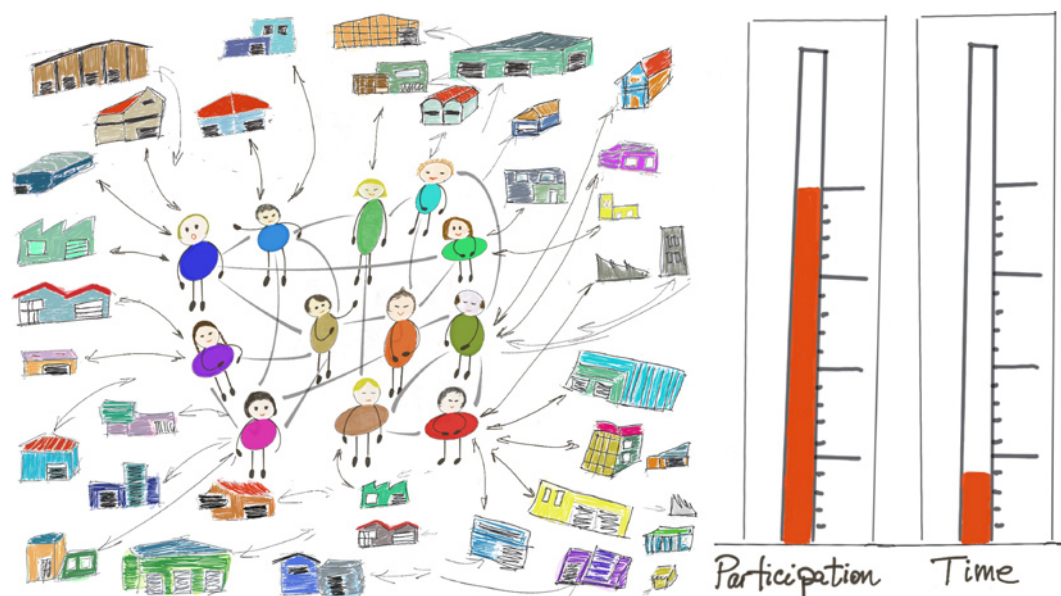
Two modes of participation overlapped in this process. On the one hand, the multilevel governance between the council and the county development agencies, through which new methodologies and programmes were cogenerated that transformed the power relationships between these organisations. On the other hand, there was the participation of SMEs. Through their dialogue with agency staff, SMEs participated in the cogeneration of the programmes meant for them. These two modes of participation initially required considerable time investment and triggered tensions among stakeholders who demanded efficiency. But in the long run, both modes of participation have proved efficient.

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There is a widespread discourse on the inefficiency of participation (it takes too long). However, it can be very efficient when participants in action research invest in articulating the right spaces.

4. **Third experience: facilitating agreement in the TDLab**

In June 2017, the action research processes we had initiated in 2013 in the TDLab resulted in the signing of a formal agreement between the provincial council and eleven county development agencies (see Chapter 1, Section 3). The agreement focused on economic development and set a yearly procedure for the council and agencies to agree on the main challenges of the territory, decide how to address them together, adapt their budgets, and initiate collaborative projects. These projects are evaluated yearly, and new goals are agreed upon.

The agreement document was not a desideratum for the future, but rather, it reflected how the council and the agencies were already working together in the TDLab. Nonetheless, its signing was important because it required that everyone agreed on a narrative of what they were already doing in practice and formally established how things would be done in the future. It was a new rule and a transformation in the political sphere. This is an example of how second-person action research can evolve to impact the political sphere of transformation through third-person action research processes.

I illustrate the process of reaching this agreement in Figure 3.20, which shows two different stages, one when the council and the agencies had their own understanding and narrative of the TDLab, and another when they had a shared understanding and narrative.

Figure 3.20. **A transition from parallel narratives to a shared one**
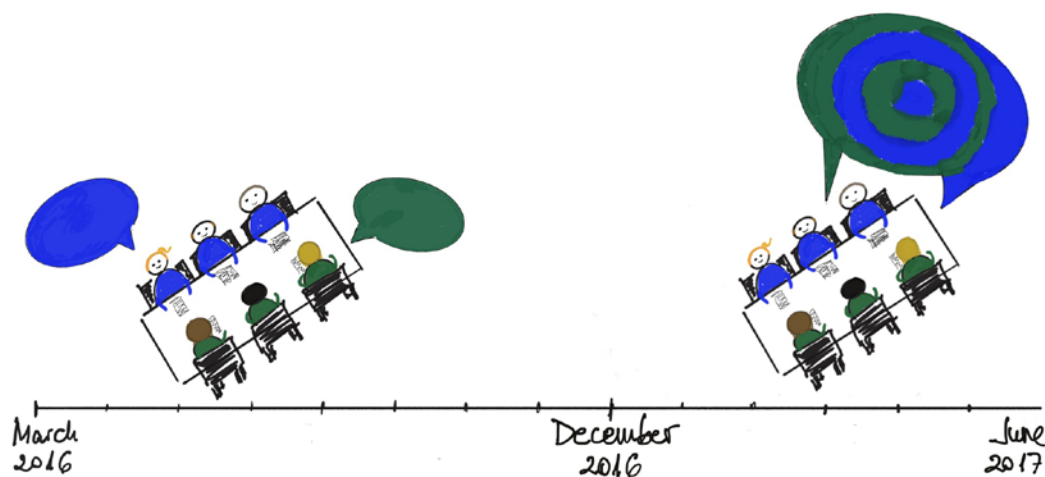
In the following subsections, I revisit this process to discuss how practical, personal, and political spheres interacted. This story is divided into three stages: (1) I start by addressing how emotions influenced the initial stage, (2) I describe how we diagnosed disagreements, and (3) I delve into the personal dimension of transformation in the public space. In each stage, I explore one dichotomy: reason and emotion, objective and subjective, and public and private.

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## 4.1. *Emotions in the practical sphere of transformation*

Between March 2016 and June 2017, we held monthly workshops as part of the action research process to reach a formal agreement between the council and the agencies. The participants in the process were three policymakers from the provincial council (one politician and two civil servants), managers of county development agencies and political representatives from these agencies (mayors or councillors), and two action researchers.

We, the two action researchers, were aware of how negative past experiences had shaped the council and agencies' defensive positions; the first goal of facilitation was thus to create the right conditions for constructive dialogue. The two initial workshops were introductory, and policymakers from the council proposed to reach a formal agreement on how to collaborate. The atmosphere in the meetings was cordial, and the conversation was politically correct.

For the third workshop, we (action researchers) were invited to propose a method to reach this agreement. In the discussion after our proposal, the politically correct tone disappeared, and one of the agency representatives with more experience made a particularly sour speech. He shared his feeling that they had been at that point before and that this kind of process raised their expectations, but time and again, those expectations were left unfulfilled because the council went on doing things their own way. Though few spoke, our research team had the impression that many agency directors agreed with what he had said.

From a rational perspective, nobody doubted that it was good for the territory that the council and agencies worked collaboratively. However, what agency representatives had expressed were emotions, the clearest of which was anger. The whole room seemed flooded with emotions that had been contained. Figure 3.21 depicts those emotions.

Figure 3.21. **Acknowledging emotions as part of the process**
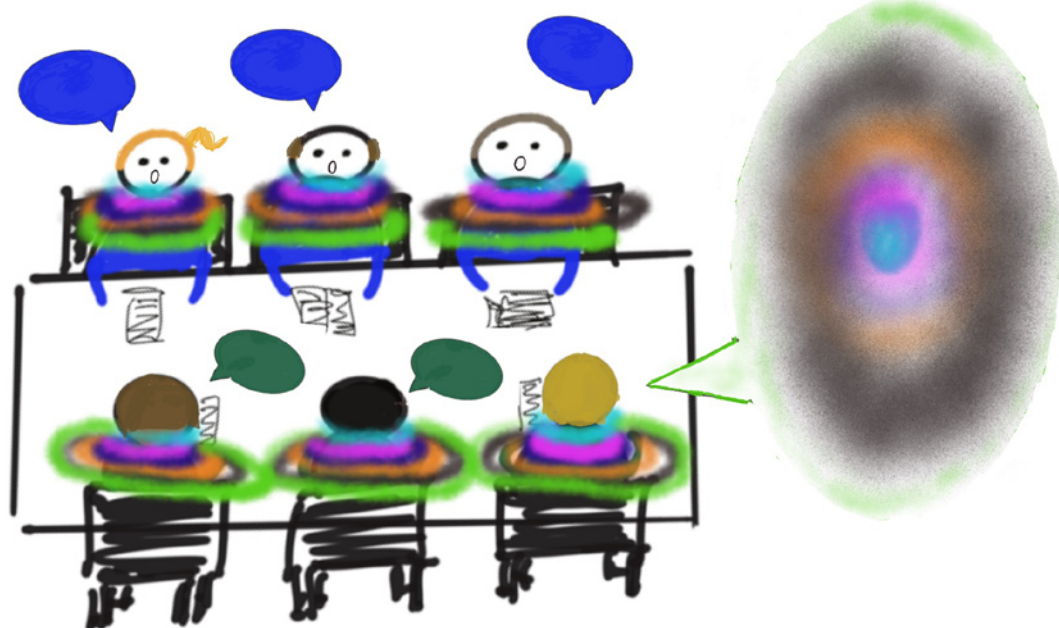
Members of the provincial council listened. There was a sense of catharsis in the room. When I talked about this session with other participants in the following years, I realised that many refer to it as the moment when change began. Despite this being a session designed with rational goals, we generated an atmosphere that favoured making emotions explicit. The next dichotomy I add is the one between reason and emotion.

Reason and emotion

When an action research process focuses too much on what is happening in the rational dimension without making space for emotions to emerge, the process might be more polite and apparently constructive, but it might stagnate and not reach a transformative stage.

4.2. *Diagnosing disagreements*

We, the two action researchers facilitating this process, had been hired by the council and regularly met council policymakers. Although we never met agency members without the policymakers from the council being present, I had worked in a county development agency for six years and had informal relationships that gave me access not only to their politically correct version of the process but also to informal conversations which we named as the "coffee break chat".

After the workshop I described in the previous subsection, one of the main conclusions drawn was that we needed to know what "the real situation" was in the relationship between the council and the agencies. There was a feeling that one of the problematic issues would be funding (although agencies belong to municipalities, the council funds some of their activities). The group decided to make a diagnosis report with data from agencies and the council to have a clear view of how agencies were funded, from whom they received funds, what part of that money came from the provincial council, and how it was used. This work was subcontracted.

In parallel, our action research team volunteered to prepare another document. Our argument was that although a quantitative report like the one described in the previous paragraph, informally named the "objective diagnosis", would help understand certain dimensions of the relationship between the council and the agencies, a "subjective diagnosis" might be needed to complement it. We also said that we could make a list of phrases about this relationship that we had heard in coffee-break chats but that had not been explicit in the formal dialogue. We knew that these could be opinionated, biased, interested, etc., and that they were subjective interpretations and thus could be influenced by the participants' feelings, tastes, or opinions. Nevertheless, we contended that it was important to know about these subjective interpretations, to which policymakers agreed. We wrote down ten of these phrases, and everybody in the process responded to an anonymous questionnaire sharing their level of disagreement or agreement using a Likert scale. Some of these phrases were:

a) Agencies are oversized.
b) Agencies have efficiency problems.
c) What agencies need from the council is mostly money.
d) The Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa does not know the agencies and their capabilities.
e) If there is willingness on the part of council members, formal procedures will not be a problem.

We grouped the responses by profile to see how council members and agency representatives positioned themselves around each of the phrases.

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The objective diagnosis showed that, on average, agencies received 10% of their funds from the council, while 48% came from municipalities and 17% from the Basque Government. My impression was that participants expected a higher percentage from the council, and funding stopped being at the core of the dialogue process.

Meanwhile, the subjective diagnosis helped us observe how each group had built a narrative of why the collaboration was not working that focused on the negative behaviour of the others: "We cannot collaborate with them because they are inefficient" or "We cannot collaborate with them because they are unwilling to do so".

Consequently, as depicted in Figure 3.22, despite all sharing the same objective data, each participant had a different subjective interpretation of the relationship between the council and the agencies.

Figure 3.22. **Subjective interpretations beyond objective data**
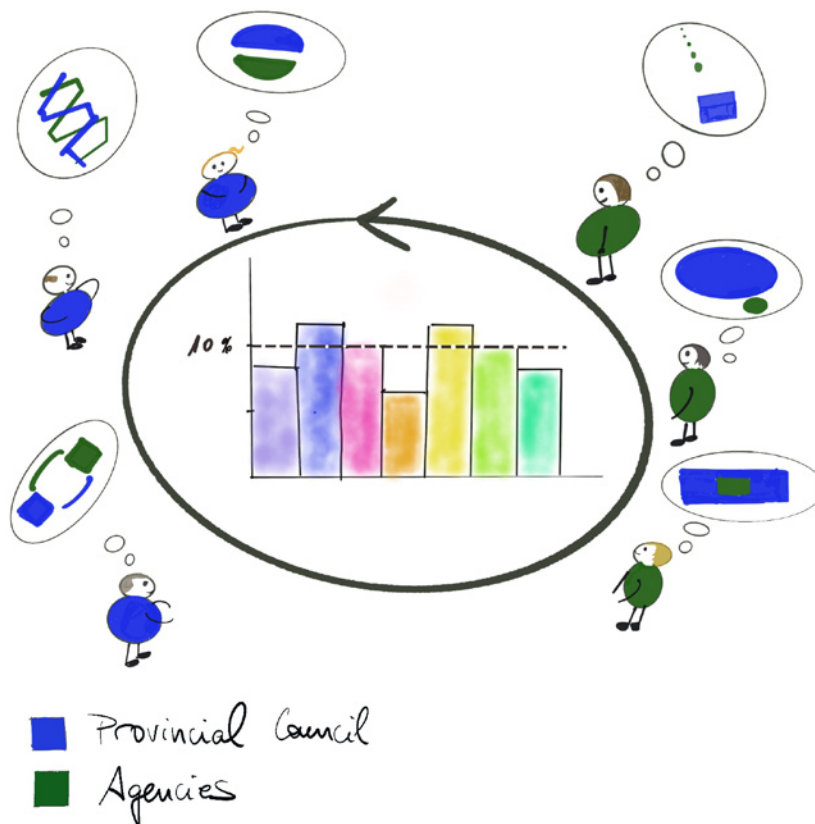
The goal of the action research process was not to determine what the "truth" was or to decide who was right. The goal was to move past the politically correct conversation. When we shared the subjective diagnosis, we crossed this threshold. The subjective interpretations expressed by participants unveiled various assumptions that were hindering collaboration. The result of acknowledging these subjective discourses was that tensions eased. Another relevant dichotomy is thus the one between the objective and the subjective dimensions of action research.

Objectivity is relevant in an action research process. Quantitative data, usually interpreted as objective, can help understand certain dimensions of the problem at stake. Nevertheless, subjectivity is also part of the process, whether we make it explicit or not. Keeping it tacit might hinder transformation as the objective data alone cannot help to understand the assumptions that foster or hinder collaboration among participants.

4.3. *The personal sphere of transformation in the public space*

In this section, I share a dichotomy that, in my experience, underlies the previous two (rational/emotional and objective/subjective), which is the dichotomy between public and private.

In the process I have described, policymakers expected reason and objectivity. Emotion and subjectivity either emerged spontaneously or were proposed by action researchers. Emotions and subjectivity are often considered to be part of one's private life and, thus, not something we share in a professional public space. That does not mean we do not share emotions and subjective interpretations with colleagues, but we do so in informal, private spaces, and usually with those we know share our perspective. Therefore, when we agreed with participants to anonymously share the coffee-break chats, we agreed to make private content public.

Connecting the personal sphere with the practical and the political requires spaces where the emotional and subjective can be considered part of the public dialogue process alongside the rational and objective. Figure 3.23 reinterprets Figure 3.22, this time making emotions and subjectivity explicit.

Figure 3.23. **Subjectivity and emotions in the public spaces**

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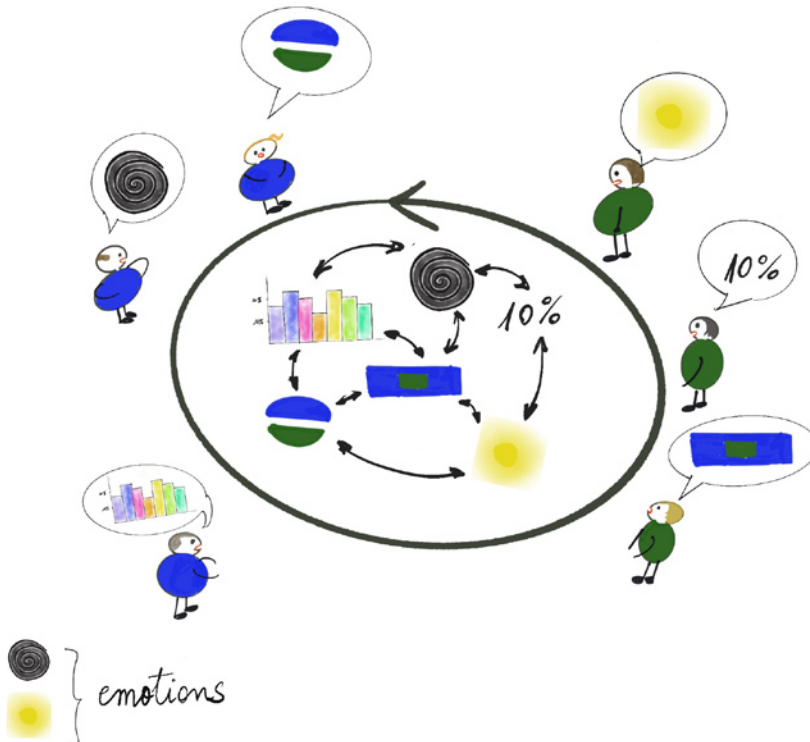
The next dichotomy addressed in this chapter is consequently the one between public and private.

Public and private
When, in an action research process, most participants feel that their emotions and subjective interpretations pertain to the private space and do not share them in the public spaces, they have no access to very relevant insights into the process.

5. Fourth experience: awareness of gender bias in facilitation

I now address an incipient but probably the most relevant transformation of my perspective of action research during the last few years, and the one that I feel strongest in the memory of my body. I refer to understanding how gender crosses action research, specifically facilitation, in much more profound ways than I was aware of.

The experience I have chosen to revisit is how, together with my colleague Pablo Costamagna, I conceptualised facilitation and facilitative actors in 2017[12]. Since then, both of us, as well as other colleagues in our research team, have used the framework we proposed. In the following sections, I revisit it with the *Three Spheres of Transformation* in mind and introduce two new dichotomies: one between actors and facilitators and another between masculine and feminine.

The goal when using the terms masculine and feminine is to critically share my experience to show how dichotomic thinking affects our practice. I have been inspired by the words of Pablo Freire, whom I cite now to explain that my use of these terms is not normative, and they do not represent how the world should be. On the contrary, naming some positions and behaviours as feminine and others as masculine is my way to "pronounce the world" to transform it, as the world that I pronounce returns to me problematized, asking me for a new pronouncement (Freire, 1992, p.104).
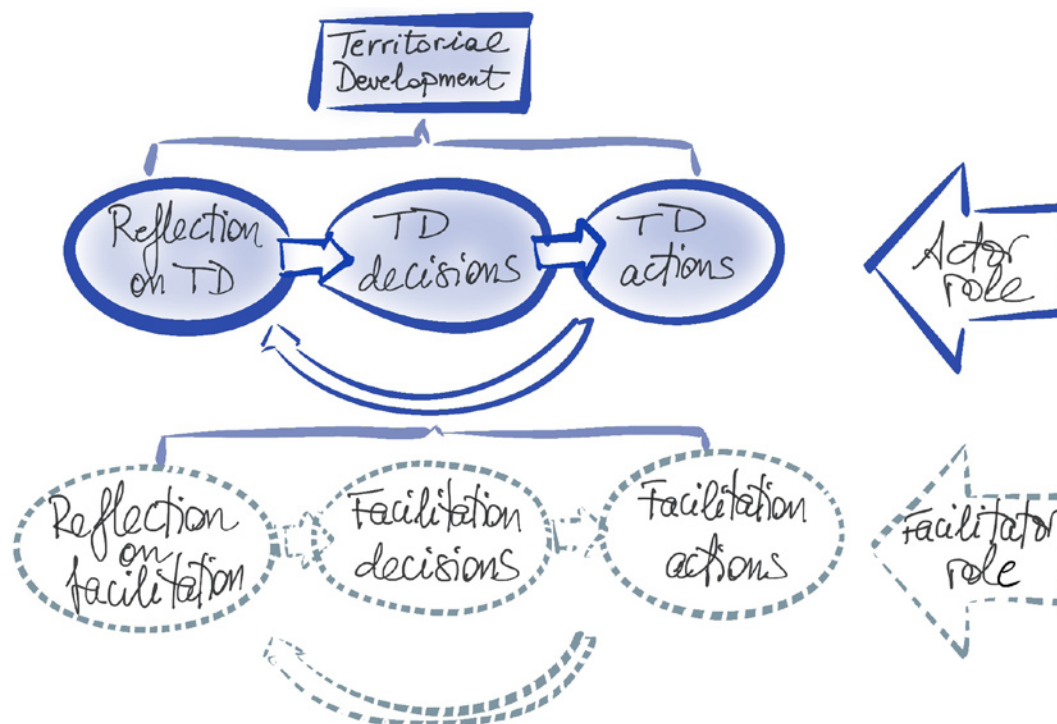
5.1. *Facilitation in the practical sphere*

When Pablo and I published the book on facilitation, we focused on the practical sphere. We represented our practice in Figure 3.24, where we clearly distinguished the roles of territorial actors (those with a stake in territorial problems and the competences to decide on them) and facilitators (the ones that generate favourable conditions for actors to reflect, decide, and act). We went on to argue that action researchers (and research organisations) are not only facilitators but also territorial actors with a stake in the territory's problems. That is why we defined action researchers as *facilitative actors*, namely, facilitative action researchers.

However, we did not create a figure that represented facilitative actors. It is most likely for this reason that Figure 3.24 has become one of the main instruments for presenting our role to stakeholders, even though in the book it represented the separation of the roles of actors and facilitators, the very same separation that we had argued against by proposing the concept of facilitative actor. Consequently, the most usual interpretation of the framework that we shared with stakeholders was that they played the role of territorial actors, and we (action researchers) were the facilitators. My question, now, is whether this figure might have contributed to consolidating the status quo that we wanted to change with the definition of facilitative actors.

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[12] See English version of the book at https://www.orkestra.deusto.es/images/investigacion/publicaciones/libros/colecciones-especiales/Facilitative-Actors.pdf

Figure 3.24. **Facilitation in action research for territorial development**

Source: Costamagna and Larrea, 2018.

When I revisit this experience with the three spheres in mind, I feel that using Figure 3.24 might have reinforced the dichotomic thinking between actors and facilitators we wanted to overcome by defining facilitative actors. I add this dichotomy to the list.

Actors and facilitators

In an action research process between policymakers and action researchers, the role of researchers can be reduced to facilitating the work of policymakers. In these situations, policy becomes the main contribution of the process to territorial development, while research creates the conditions for policy to happen. This can hinder the transformative potential of action research.


5.2. *The personal and political spheres, invisibility, and gender*

I use Figure 3.25 to explore the personal sphere underneath the practical one shown in Figure 3.24. I have deleted all the words because I think the positions, shapes, and colours we instinctively used reveal more about our personal spheres than the words we added.

According to the position of the figures, facilitation makes no direct contribution to territorial development, only adding value through the work of territorial actors. This position also says there is a hierarchy between the reflections, decisions, and actions (top) of policymakers and those of facilitators (bottom). Concerning the use of colours, this expresses visibility; while the role of territorial actors is represented with colour (we chose

blue), the facilitative role is colourless. Finally, this idea of visibility/invisibility is reinforced because all the shapes depicting territorial development and actors are drawn with continued lines, whereas those that represent facilitators are drawn with discontinued ones. Gaining awareness that our figure represented the invisibility of facilitation was disturbing for me since we had not used it only to illustrate our past practice but also to initiate new processes.

Figure 3.25. **Exploring positions, shapes, and colours to discover what we took for granted**
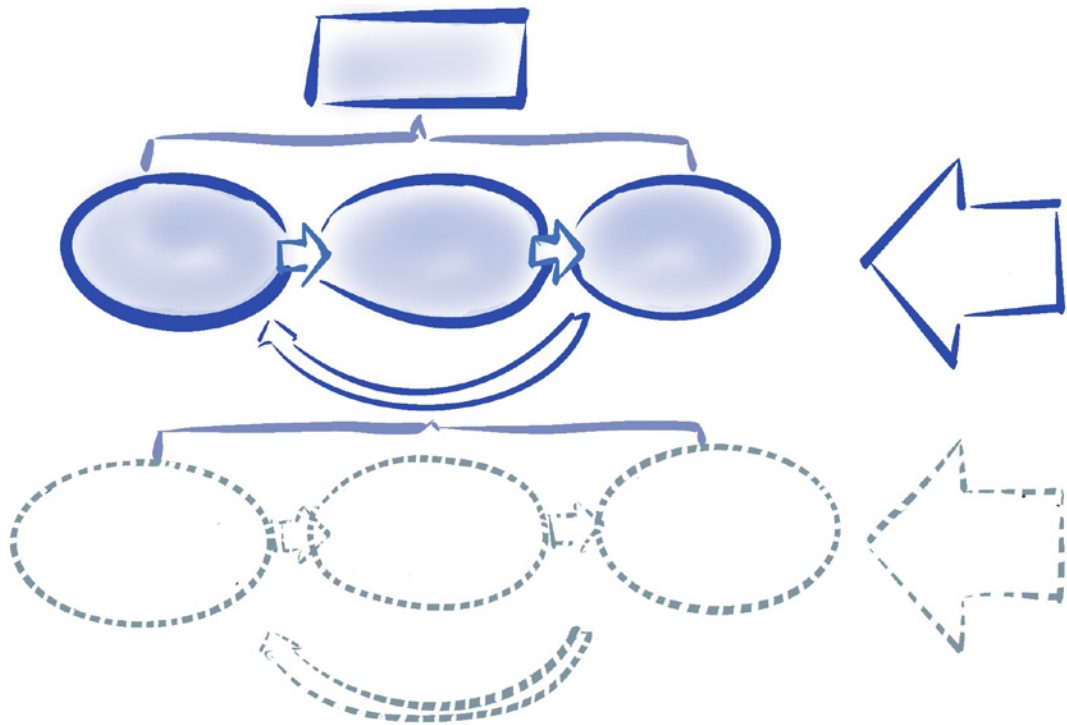
Figures 3.24 and 3.25 helped to gain awareness of our practice and to problematise it. However, once problematised, it was hard for me to continue sharing these figures in our processes, and I started using Figure 3.24bis, that still differentiates the roles of territorial actors and facilitators, but without the hierarchy and invisibility of Figures 3.24 and 3.25.

Figure 3.24bis. **Increasing status and visibility of facilitation**
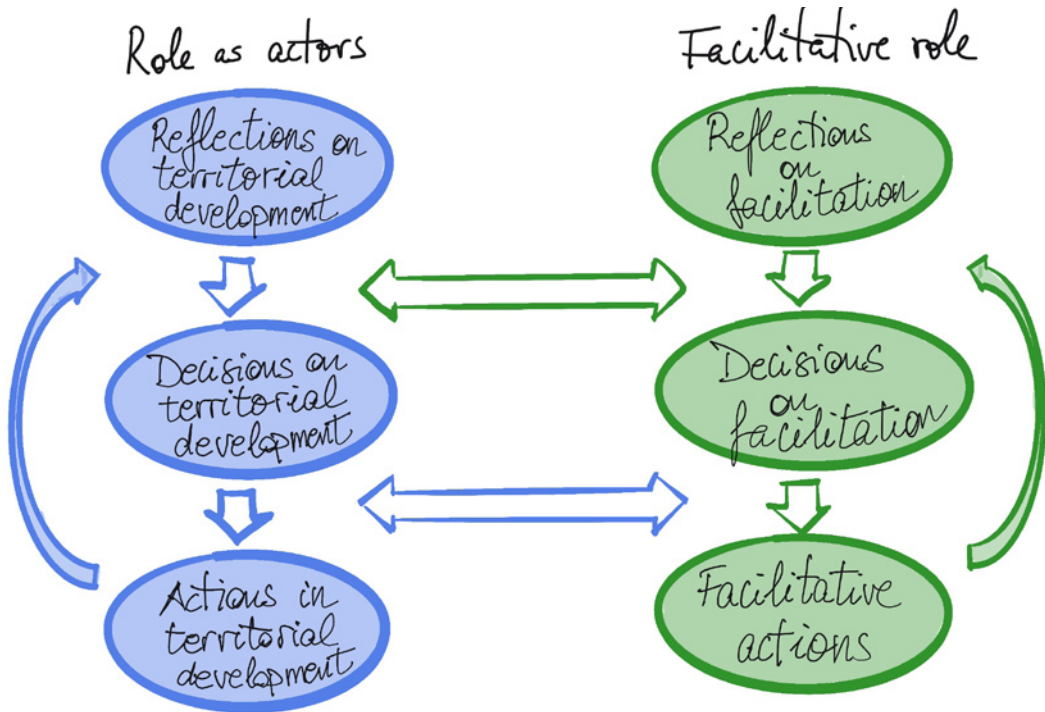

Figure 3.24, when used exclusively, can reinforce the status quo; however, Figure 3.24bis can be used naively, to represent a more generative situation that is not real, as hierarchy and invisibility remain in the practical, personal and political spheres of a process. What helps transform the relationship between the roles of territorial actors and facilitators is the dialogue between what these two figures represent.

I next present the connection between the invisibility of facilitators and gender in the political sphere. Soon after proposing Figure 3.24, I developed a first-person action research process where I started to pay attention to the roles played by men and women in our action research:

> "AR has been part of the laboratory since its inception in 2009 when we were two women undertaking facilitation in the day-to-day interaction with policymakers. Today, this team is composed of eight members, five of whom directly facilitate the policymakers' processes. All five are women. Since 2009, the leading stakeholders in the AR processes with the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa have been thirteen policymakers from the general deputy's cabinet and economic development department. All of them are men. I could summarise all this by stating that the TDLab is an environment where ARTD has taken place as a dialogical process between male policymakers and female facilitative action researchers".

Source: Larrea (2020), p. 235.

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At this stage, the literature helped me connect this practical sphere with the political through the understanding that there were strong political forces at play in the academic and policy environments that influenced how I struggled with facilitation. The following extract from one of the books reflects my growing awareness:

> "This is a book about relational work and the disappearing acts that render it invisible in today's workplace. It is written for the many people who find that the off-line, backstage, or collaborative work they do, and the relational skills this kind of work requires, are not recognised, or rewarded at work". […] "that is only part of the story because, at its heart, this is a book about why this kind of work […] is "women's work' and why that makes the story of this disappearance so much more interesting". (Fletcher, 2001, p. ix)

Therefore, in the intersection of the three spheres, I discovered the connection between facilitation, invisibility, and gender. I became aware that the way in which the roles were distributed in the practical sphere of the TDLab, where the role of actors was masculine[13] and the facilitator's role feminine, was influenced by strong forces in the political and personal spheres. That is what I depict in Figure 3.26.

Figure 3.26. **The invisibility of "women's work' and its political dimension**

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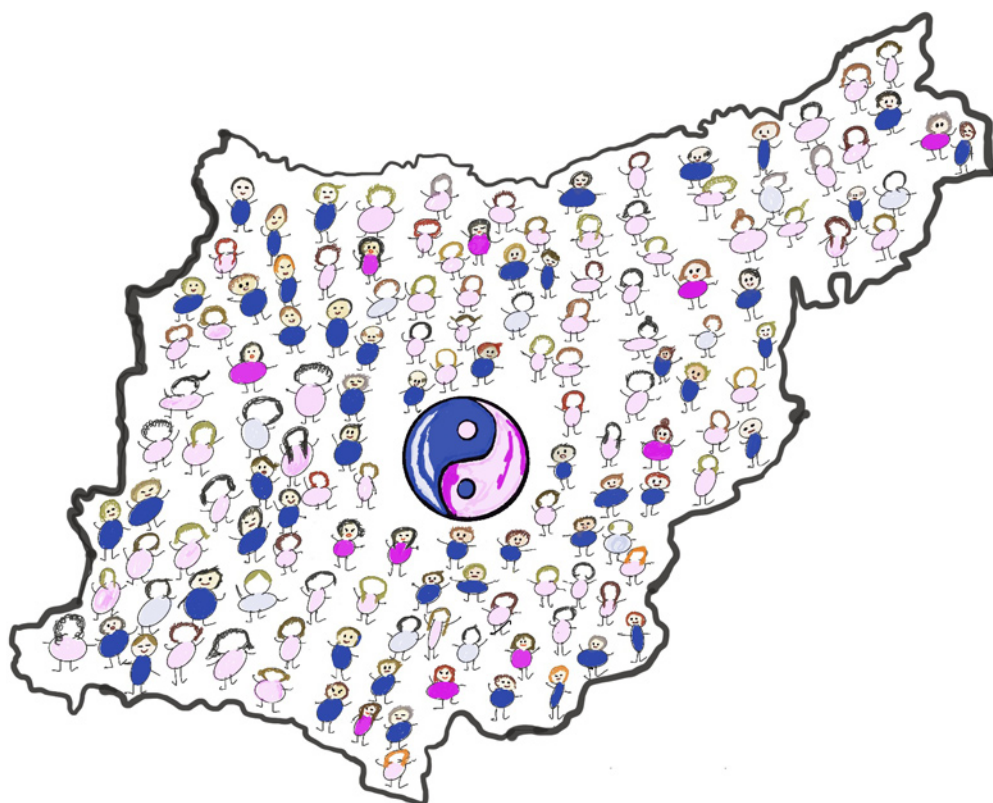
[13] Masculine refers to the qualities traditionally associated with boys or men, and feminine to the traits related to girls or women. A behaviour is considered to be masculine after observing that it is enacted more by men than women, and a behaviour is considered to be feminine when it is enacted more by women than men.

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The next dichotomy is thus the one between masculine and feminine.

Masculine and feminine

There are forces that drive more women into facilitative roles than men. If facilitation becomes invisible, there is a risk of a bias that makes women more invisible in action research.

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6. **Rethinking facilitation**

I have already presented the ten dichotomies that I referred to in the introduction. However, this chapter cannot be complete without a new framework that complements Figure 3.24 and focuses on the nature of facilitative actors. I first share some inspiring literature and then present the new framework in Figure 3.28.

6.1. *A contribution from literature*

Fletcher (2001) defines the feminine as a belief system about how growth and effectiveness occur. In this belief system, growth and effectiveness happen through mutuality and connection, while in the masculine belief system, growth is achieved through a process of separation and individuation. Figure 3.27 represents this idea, which is at the core of how I interpret the roles of facilitative actors.

Figure 3.27. **Masculine and feminine belief systems on growth and effectiveness**

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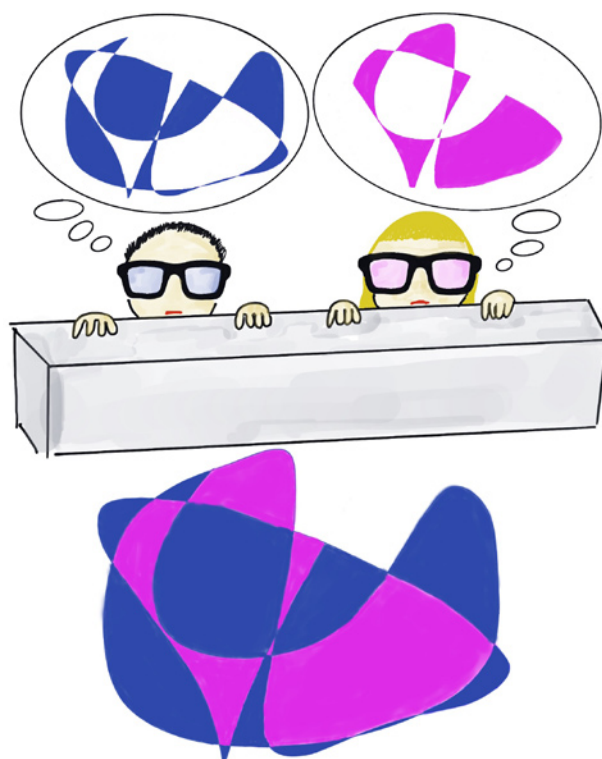
In my personal experience, there were two forces pushing women to undertake facilitative roles. On the one hand, we felt the pressure of others' expectations. On the other hand, facilitation was part of our belief system in that we understood that territorial development could not be effective if nobody facilitated it. And so, we did.

Territorial development requires separation and individuation to achieve growth and effectiveness. Nonetheless, it also needs mutuality and connection. Territorial development thus benefits from both the feminine and masculine belief systems. Processes that establish a non-egalitarian relationship between these two belief systems by subordinating one to the other are unfair and have a negative impact on the effectiveness of territorial development. Figure 3.24, which illustrated our practice, is an example of the subordination of the feminine belief system to the masculine.

6.2. *A framework for facilitative actors of territorial development*

Figure 3.24 was based on the definition of facilitators, i.e., the people who, individually or as part of a team, create the conditions that enable territorial development actors to reflect, decide, and act. This role is defined in terms of the feminine (mutuality and connection), subordinated to the masculine (separation and individuation).

Figure 3.28 is based on the definition of facilitative actors, referring to individuals with an explicit function as an actor, such as politicians or researchers. In this role, they reflect, decide, and act on their area of influence and simultaneously create the conditions that enable other actors to do the same. This role combines features that respond to what evidence shows that is masculine (separation and individuation) and feminine (mutuality and connection).

Figure 3.28. **Facilitation by facilitative actors of territorial development**
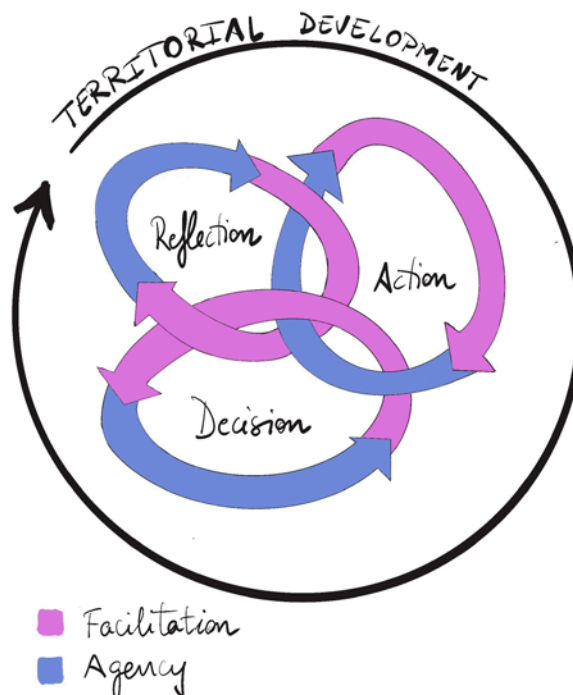

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Figure 3.28 is the conceptual framework that depicts territorial development as a process where facilitation is enacted not by facilitators but by facilitative actors.

Figure 3.28 illustrates that reflection, decision, and action in territorial development result from the simultaneous fruition of territorial actors' agency and facilitation. Action researchers are one type of territorial actor and, thus, in the same way as the other types, they contribute with their agency and facilitation. This figure differs from Figure 3.24 in four features:

a) *A direct contribution of facilitative work to territorial development*

In Figure 3.24, facilitative work generated mutuality and connection (trust, shared vision, and shared agendas) that only contributed to territorial development through the reflections, decisions, and actions of territorial actors participating in the process. In Figure 3.28, trust, shared vision, and shared agendas are part of the collective capability of territorial communities to solve future challenges together. As such, they are a direct and valuable contribution of facilitative work to territorial development.

b) *No separation between the reflections, decisions, and actions of facilitators and actors*

Figure 3.24 distinguished the reflections, decisions, and actions of actors from those of facilitators. Figure 3.28 shows that ARTD is developed by facilitative actors, including facilitative action researchers and facilitative policymakers. The circular arrows represent their shared processes, where they all contribute agency and facilitation.

c) *A non-hierarchical relationship between agency and facilitation*

In Figure 3.24, there was a hierarchical relationship between the contribution of actors (their reflections, decisions, and actions) and those of facilitators. Figure 3.28 avoids suggesting a hierarchical relationship between facilitation and agency and instead represents circularity and the mutual nurturing of facilitation and agency.

d) *Equal visibility of agency and facilitation*

While Figure 3.24 presents facilitation in discontinued lines and colourless, making it invisible, Figure 3.28 uses different colours and continued lines to claim the visibility of both agency and facilitation.

I do not consider this new version of the framework to be finished or definite. I hope that in the coming years, our action research team will continue learning about the connections between the practical, personal, and political spheres and providing new conceptualisations of the facilitative role in ARTD.

7. **Closing comments**

In this chapter, I have revisited my experience facilitating action research to look at it through the lenses of the *Three Spheres of Transformation*. ARTD has often focused on the practical sphere, and this revisit has helped me delve into the political and personal dimensions beneath.

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When revisiting my experience, I have found ten types of dichotomic thinking that have hindered transformation in our action research. Table 3.1 shows these ten dichotomies.

Table 3.1. **Dichotomies that influence the transformation capacity of action research**

Dichotomy	Connections with action research
Expert knowledge and experiential knowledge	When the paradigms at the personal level and the institutions at the political level prioritise expert knowledge over experiential knowledge, the agreements on the practical level to do action research can be jeopardised.
Planning and emergence	When planning is ingrained in a government's policymaking habits, it is not easy for participants in an action research process to feel comfortable with emergent processes.
Theory and practice	When core stakeholders in an action research process believe they must find the right theoretical answer before acting, praxis can be jeopardised. In such a situation, it can be useful to undertake a linear process together (even though it does not respond to action research principles) and raise shared awareness regarding the limitations of that approach.
Power and love	When facilitation of action research is understood exclusively as love (the drive to the unity of the separated) and the role of stakeholders exclusively as power (the drive to realisation), degenerative dynamics can emerge.
Efficiency and democratisation	There is a widespread discourse on the inefficiency of participation (it takes too long). However, it can be very efficient when participants in action research invest in articulating the right spaces.
Reason and emotion	When an action research process focuses too much on what is happening in the rational dimension without making space for emotions to emerge, the process might be more polite and apparently constructive, but it might stagnate and not reach a transformative stage.
Objective and subjective	Objectivity is relevant in an action research process. Quantitative data, usually interpreted as objective, can help understand certain dimensions of the problem at stake. Nevertheless, subjectivity is also part of the process, whether we make it explicit or not. Keeping it tacit might hinder transformation as the objective data alone cannot help to understand the assumptions that foster or hinder collaboration among participants.
Public and private	When, in an action research process, most participants feel that their emotions and subjective interpretations pertain to the private space and do not share them in the public spaces, they have no access to very relevant insights into the process.
Actors and facilitators	In an action research process between policymakers and action researchers, the role of researchers can be reduced to facilitating the work of policymakers. In these situations, policy becomes the main contribution of the process to territorial development, while research creates the conditions for policy to happen. This can hinder the transformative potential of action research.
Masculine and feminine	There are forces that drive more women into facilitative roles than men. If facilitation becomes invisible, there is a risk of a bias that makes women more invisible in action research.

I have depicted these dichotomies in Figure 3.29.

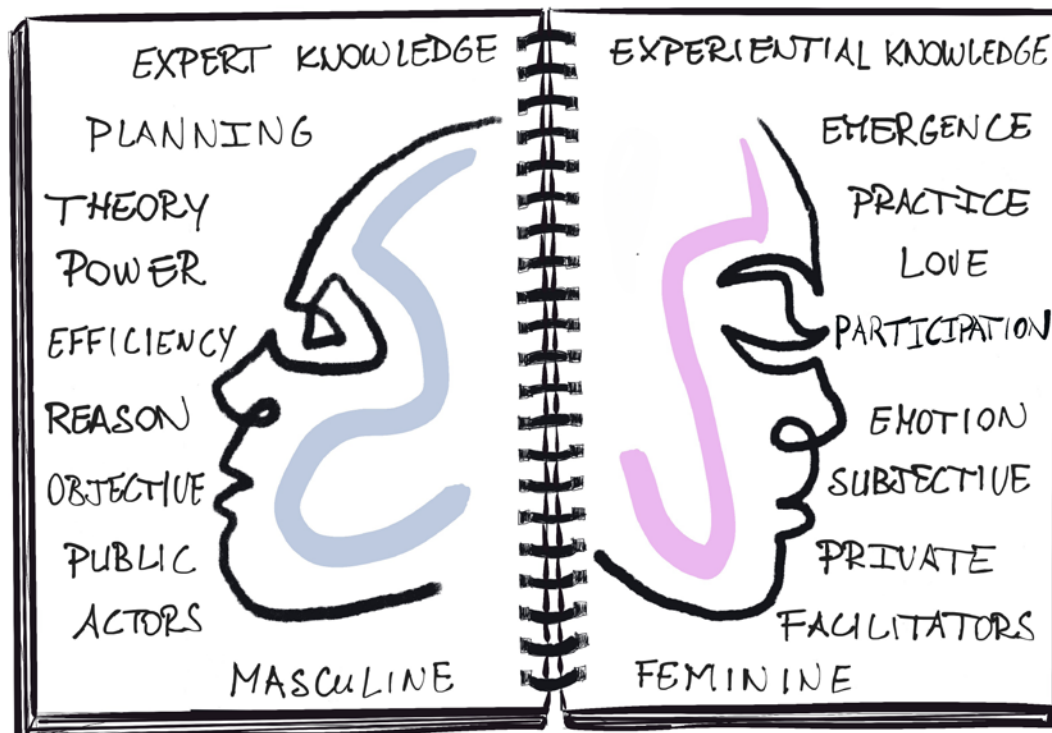Figure 3.29. **Dichotomic thinking**

Figure 3.29 can be interpreted in two ways. When read horizontally, the figure depicts ten forms of dichotomic thinking that invite us to choose which side is "right" because both sides are looking in opposite directions. We usually choose what our beliefs and the institutionalised norms say is "right", which is why our beliefs and these norms remain unchanged, reinforcing the status quo and avoiding transformation.

Alternatively, Figure 3.29 can be read vertically. In this case, the location of each term on the left or the right becomes significant as, in my interpretation of my experience, the two sides configure two different belief systems. I emphasise that placing specific categories on one side or the other responds to my subjective experience of action research. My experience is that those who prioritised expert knowledge had the tendency to ask for planning and theory, and aimed at the project's realisation over the group's unity (thus power over love). They were also usually the ones who expressed their concern about the efficiency of the process, argued for reason and objectivity, and occupied the public space of the project. They enacted their agency rather than their facilitation and were more often men than women.

On the other hand, those prioritising experiential knowledge felt more comfortable in emergent processes and in practice. These participants valued the group's unity, which they even saw as a result of the process, and considered that intangible results like trust or shared vision were also indicators of efficiency. They felt comfortable with emotions and subjectiv-

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ity and often had a low profile in the public space. They tended to undertake facilitative roles and were more often women than men.

Finally, my main conclusion, illustrated in Figure 3.28, is that we do not need to choose one side over the other, and that, despite deeply ingrained habits, the two faces do not need to look in opposite directions. Moreover, processes become more transformative when we do not choose but try to find a generative relationship between both sides. That is why the next chapter focuses on facilitation and how it can help overcome dichotomic thinking, avoiding "either or" positions and finding ways to make each side of the previous categories nurture one another.
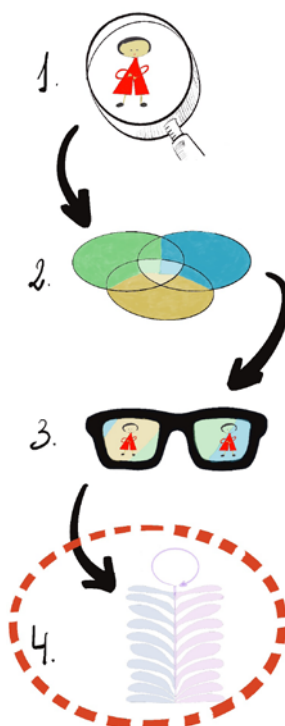
Chapter 4

Transformative facilitation

1. **Introduction**

1.1. *This chapter in the context of the book*

In the previous chapter, I revisited my experience through the lenses of the Three Spheres of Transformation to describe ten types of dichotomic thinking that have affected my trajectory. In this chapter, I address each of these dichotomies from the perspective of facilitation. This is the last step in the book's process and is represented by Figure 4.1.
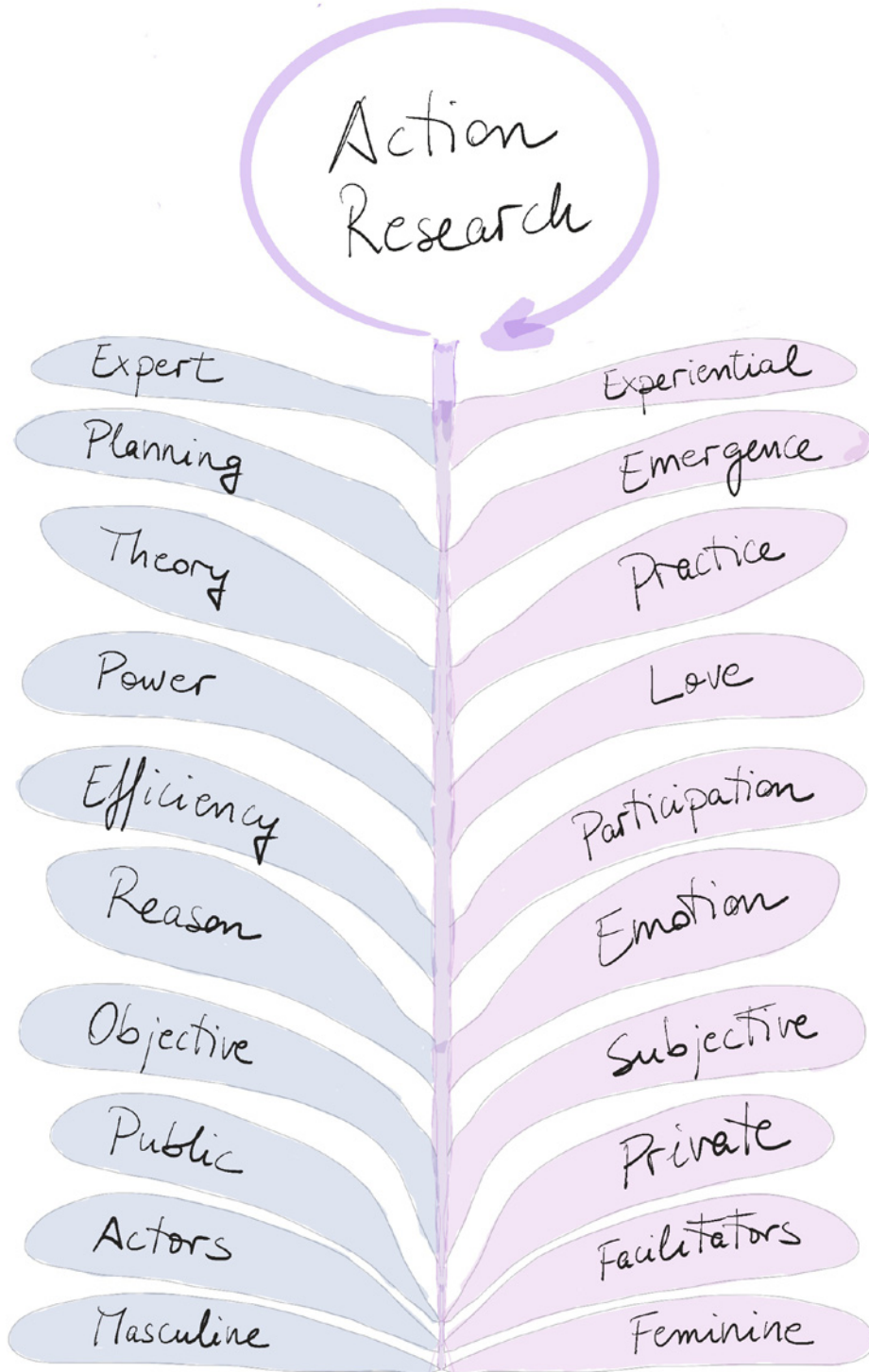
Figure 4.1. **The last step in the book's process**

1.2. *Transformative facilitation*

This chapter about transformative facilitation aims to make some of its features —that often remain tacit— explicit and visible.

To be transformative, facilitation must help overcome the ten types of dichotomic thinking I have previously described. Dichotomic thinking emerges in the practical sphere in the form of concrete attitudes and behaviours, but it has deep roots in the political and personal spheres that are much less visible. Therefore, overcoming this type of thinking requires connecting the personal, practical, and political spheres in the search for mutuality between both sides. I represent mutuality in Figure 4.2, where each side is a leaf connected to the same trunk, representing their mutual need to pursue survival. This contrasts with Figure 3.29 where each face looks in one direction, representing the need to choose.

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Figure 4.2. **Facilitation of action research that seeks to overcome dichotomic thinking**

Action Research

|	
Expert	Experiential
Planning	Emergence
Theory	Practice
Power	Love
Efficiency	Participation
Reason	Emotion
Objective	Subjective
Public	Private
Actors	Facilitators
Masculine	Feminine

1.3. *Transformative facilitation as simultaneously experiential and normative*

The political sphere of action research and the personal sphere of each participant (either researcher or stakeholder) are closer to one of the sides of each dichotomy than the other, meaning that participants are not neutral regarding that dichotomy. Therefore, I will say each participant has a certain identity in the process and that it is important to acknowledge these multiple identities for the process to be constructive. However, recognising our identity does not mean that we facilitate without considering the other side of the dichotomy. The challenge is to help generate mutuality between the two sides even when our identity is closer to one of them.

> The goal is thus to help overcome dichotomic thinking through a facilitation that we acknowledge is not neutral.

That is why, through this chapter, I will use two drawings that have a very specific connection between them. The first is the one I have used to represent me (in red in Figure 4.3). It depicts my identity in the processes with one hand up, holding the side of the dichotomy I wanted to reinforce and another down, being critical of the side I considered too strong. The second is an idealised facilitative actor who holds both hands up, representing mutuality between both sides of the dichotomy. The first figure represents my concrete experience, and the second normatively proposes mutuality between both sides.

Figure 4.3. **The experiential and normative dimensions of facilitation**
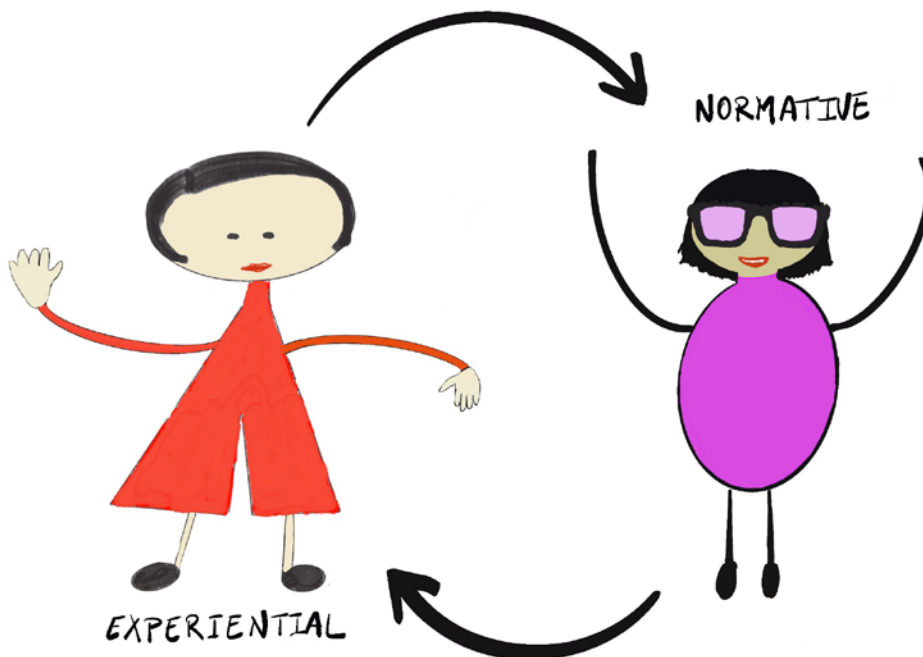
After these fifteen years facilitating action research, I have learnt that the normative principle of mutuality depicted in the figure in fuchsia is not "applicable" in a straightforward manner because (a) the two sides of the dichotomy are never perfectly balanced in the political sphere and (b) the diversity of personal spheres generates multiple interpretations of these unbalances. In this context, the facilitative actor, influenced by their identity, will reinforce one side, even when their goal is to reach mutuality.

Moreover, participants have varied degrees of awareness of the political and personal spheres operating in a process and often resist their explicit discussion, letting the positions of researchers, as well as stakeholders, remain tacit. Sometimes, a tacit position is misinterpreted as neutral, which is risky because tacit positions influence a process as much as explicit ones. Therefore, the facilitative actor in fuchsia represents mutuality in a normative way, but it is important not to interpret this mutuality as neutral, nor to interpret seeking mutuality as keeping personal positions and interpretations of the political dimension tacit.

> Following the institutions and paradigms that propose neutrality of facilitation as desirable, the facilitator in red in Figure 4.3 would be a "bad" facilitator due to her declared non-neutrality. We have also been led to believe that the ideal facilitation depicted in the figure in fuchsia can be "applied". However, the normative idea proposed by the figure on the right can only be materialised through the type of practice represented by the figure on the left.

1.4. *This chapter is a mirror*

In the following sections, I will elaborate on three dimensions of each of the dichotomies. First, I will share my experience of dichotomic thinking through vignettes that represent the patterns I have found when facilitating action research with policymakers. There are no recipes, but awareness of recurrent patterns can be helpful. Soft resistance has been a helpful concept (see Chapter 1, Section 6) to explain these patterns by contrasting the two roles it unfolds through: the relational role, where we accepted the side of the dichotomy prioritised by policymakers and accordingly generated the conditions for their enactment to be effective; and the critical role, where we fostered reflection concerning stakeholders' dichotomic thinking. When describing the patterns, I will refer to these roles.

After sharing the patterns, I will present two figures that depict the second and third dimensions. One will represent my experience of non-neutral facilitation, reinforcing one side of the dichotomy based on my personal sphere and the political sphere of action research. The other will represent the normative idea of mutuality and the relevance of looking for a constructive relationship between both sides.

I close this introduction with a final reflection. It is not usual in academic writing to share the author's personal sphere, as the non-neutrality and subjectivity it relies on are interpreted as non-rigorous in most research paradigms. I have decided to share my position and subjective experience first because I am inspired by research paradigms that recognise their value and second because the testimonies of other researchers have been relevant in guiding my path. These were like mirrors that helped me see myself, and I would like this book to be for you, the reader of this book, the mirror I have depicted in Figure 4.4. While reading, please bear in mind that the goal is not for you to get to know my experience, but your own.

Figure 4.4. **First-person testimonies as mirrors for self-reflection**

2. **Expert knowledge and experiential knowledge**

2.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

In Chapter 3, I described how, despite action research building on participants' experiential knowledge, participants themselves can value expert knowledge over the experiential kind. Policymakers often argued in our projects that we (participants in action research) *did not know*, and we had to find the right experts who could help us decide on what should be done, even if we had previously discussed action research and its principles and accepted them as the methodology for the process. The fact is, despite us choosing action research in the practical sphere, it coexisted with deeply rooted beliefs, paradigms, and institutions in the personal and political spheres that valued expert knowledge over the experiential kind.

In this context, the role of action researchers was to facilitate cogeneration among participants, and we often had to do so after experts had made their policy recommendations (e.g., having a systemic vision of the projects or employing mixed methods to evaluate them). Therefore, when we embarked on the dialogue process to cogenerate the solutions to the problem, there were already recommendations by experts in the agenda. Occasionally, participants could relate their experiential knowledge to these recommendations, and in these cases, as depicted in Figure 4.5, the recommendations proved to be good inputs for cogeneration. However, even then, the cogeneration process typically revealed that each participant had a different interpretation of what the recommendations from experts (dressed in dark blue) meant for their practice.

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Figure 4.5. **Interpretations of what experts' recommendations mean in practice**
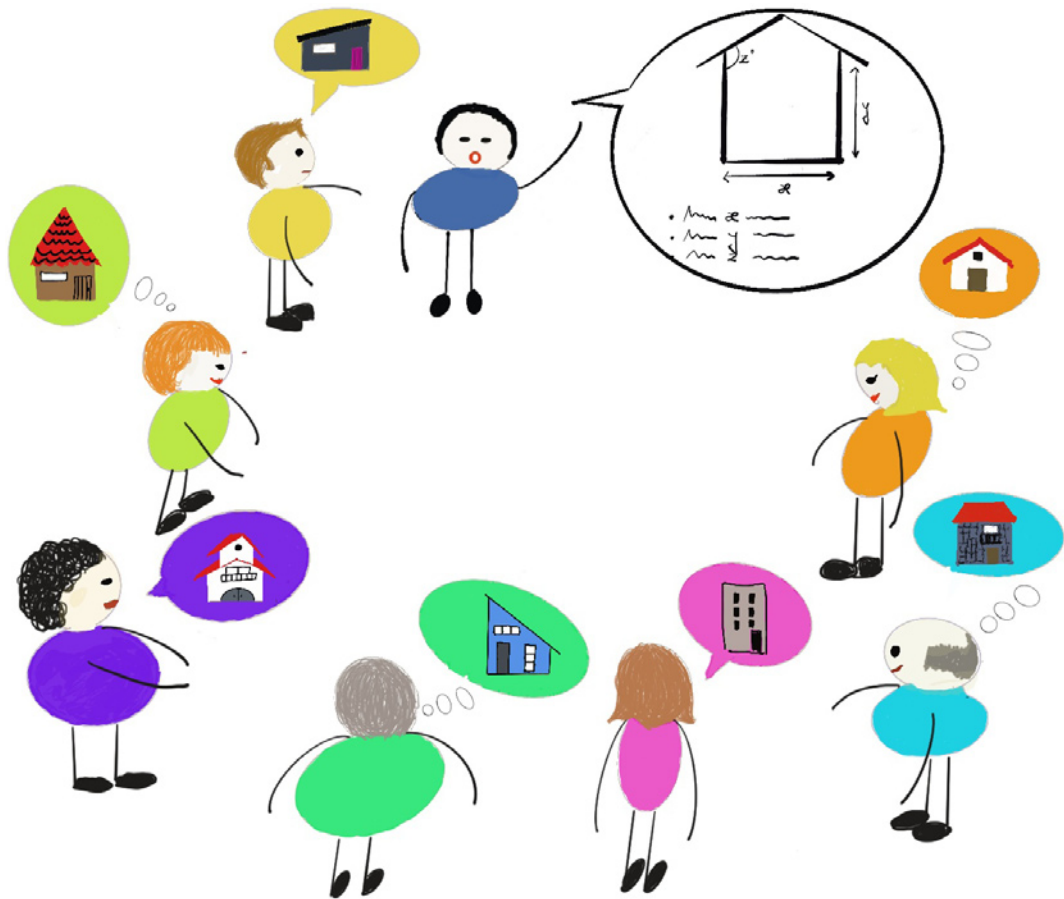
Integrating these recommendations in the cogeneration process does not mean that our facilitative role was to help "implement" what experts had recommended. Our task was to question the linear assumption that experts' recommendations could be "implemented". Simultaneously, we aimed to create the conditions for stakeholders to cogenerate solutions mainly based on their experiential knowledge, which was at the core of their different interpretations of expert knowledge.

Figure 4.6. shows this cogeneration process, where participants shared experiential knowledge on the issue at hand, and facilitative researchers systematised the different contributions to see the possible agreements for action. Although we documented these contributions and agreements, the core of the cogenerated knowledge was embodied in the participants and expressed through their actions. That is to say, while participants were not always capable of making this knowledge explicit, they could use it to solve problems. Figure 4.4 illustrates cogeneration when what participants build together is not an application of what the expert said but rather the result of joint learning and negotiating. Facilitative researchers (depicted in red in Figure 4.6.) represent what is built in an emergent manner in their documents and narratives. The story they tell differs from expert knowledge because facilitative researchers do not share their own perspective but their interpretation of the shared narrative that participants have agreed on and enacted.

Figure 4.6. **Cogeneration of experiential knowing (knowledge in action)**

The challenge in our processes was often to connect the expert knowledge that stakeholders required with stakeholders' experiential one in ways that would be mutually nurturing. This was not easy as policymakers themselves often valued expert knowledge over their own experiential knowledge. Thus, experts had a higher status than participants in knowledge production, which is understandable if we consider that there is an institutionalised (political sphere) interpretation that academics are the ones who create knowledge and then transfer it to society. They are, consequently, the ones who *know* about their field of expertise. This rationale underestimates the potential of experiential knowledge and, therefore, of action research.

2.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

Although action research prioritises experiential knowledge, action researchers can find themselves in the middle of dichotomic thinking when it comes to expert knowledge and experiential knowledge.

As a facilitative action researcher, not only did I value other participants' experiential knowledge, but my own contribution to the process was this type of knowledge, namely,

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p*rocess knowledge,* which is not transferred through speeches but materialised in the act of facilitation. Dichotomic thinking emerged, for instance, when some stakeholders appreciated facilitation but attributed it to our personality (humbleness, patience, or engagement) and not to the fact that we were using a specific and valuable type of knowledge. This knowledge was not considered expertise, and even though process knowledge is my main contribution as a university researcher, it was not regarded as academic knowledge either.

Figure 4.7. **My identity in the dichotomy between expert and experiential knowledge**
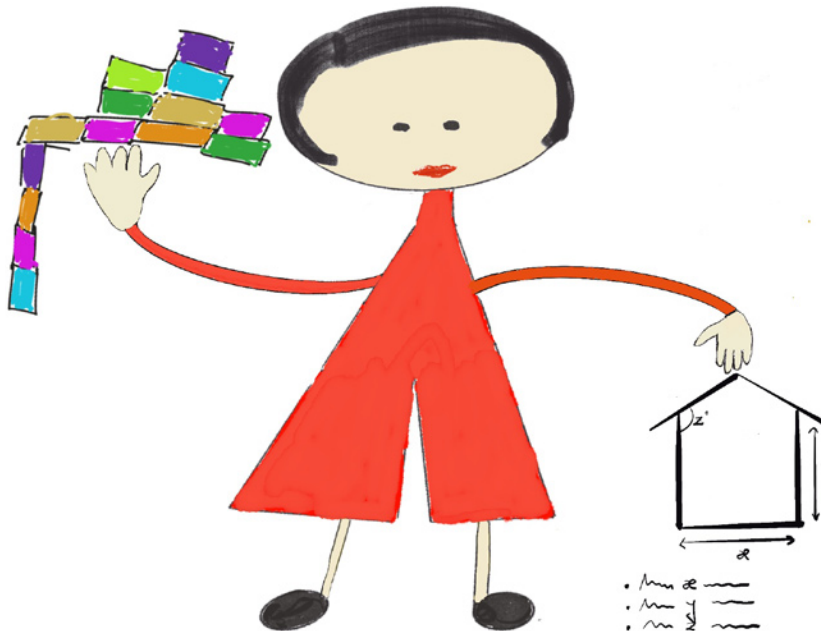
In such situations, and following the principles of soft resistance, I played a relational role and helped policymakers reach their goals, some of which involved working with experts. Nevertheless, I also played a critical role in two ways: (a) fostering critical reflections on the limitations of "implementing" expert knowledge and (b) cogenerating solutions based on experiential knowledge. When doing this, I was not neutral, and I have shown my position in Figure 4.7.

My critique of this dichotomic thinking and the extended bias that favours expert knowledge is that it makes experiential knowledge, and thus facilitation, invisible. Good facilitation of action research is not the result of researchers having the right personality (being humble, patient, and engaged); it is the result of developing a series of capabilities that we could call *facilitative expertise*. This expertise relies on experiential knowledge developed through years of practice. Overcoming dichotomic thinking in this regard requires that experiential knowledge is considered a type of expertise as well so that it can be valued and recognised. Only this way will universities, governments, and other organisations invest in developing this expertise, consciously providing organisations and territories with good facilitation.

Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy

Not being neutral with respect to this dichotomy is compatible with arguing that the goal of facilitation is to overcome dichotomic thinking and establish a mutually nurturing relationship between both sides. Figure 4.8. represents facilitation that generates this type of relationship between expert knowledge (often in the form of policy recommendations) and the experiential knowledge of stakeholders and action researchers. A constructive relationship requires transforming institutions (political) and paradigms (personal) that frequently deem experiential knowledge less valuable than expert knowledge.

I have drawn the facilitative action researcher in the middle of both sides of the dichotomy, surrounded by a circular arrow representing facilitation as a process. The figures in her hands are on the opposite side of the drawing from which they were taken, thereby illustrating her efforts to overcome dichotomic thinking by (a) acknowledging expert knowledge and incorporating it into the cogeneration process and (b) acknowledging experiential knowledge and sharing the results of cogeneration with both participating stakeholders and experts, to assert that these are also results of research.

Figure 4.8. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between expert and experiential knowledge**
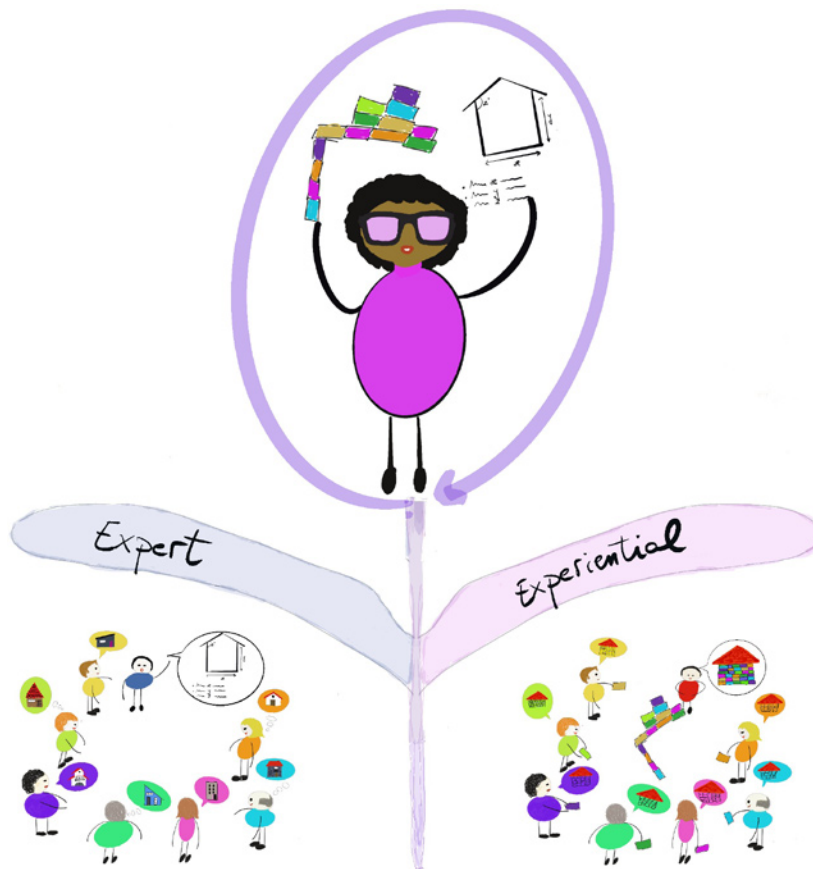
3. **Planning and emergence**

3.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

Praxis, and thus action research, is emergent. That is, the solution emerges through cyclical processes of reflection and action; consequently, we do not know the solution until the process unfolds. Conversely, planning is considered linear because it requires deciding on a solution before starting to act (see the example in Chapter 3, Section 2).

Reducing the prevalence of planning to create space for emergence is one of the main challenges I have experienced as a facilitative action researcher. Planning was ingrained in most policy processes I have been involved in and was institutionalised as the main approach, representing "the way policy is made" for many participants. Plans can be used combined with other emergent approaches to strategy formation, such as learning and negotiation. However, my experience has been that in contexts where the planning perspective was predominant, emergent processes were met with suspicion and even fear.

When we dialogued with policymakers to start an action research process, they usually had a plan that framed what we were meant to achieve together, as shown in Figure 4.9.

Figure 4.9. **A plan at the starting point for action research**

Our action research team would typically enter the process during the plan's implementation stage, and some policymakers saw our shared processes as a way to "implement" it. In practice, this was not a problem when the plan was vague enough or policymakers were ready to open a new dialogue on the issues that the plan addressed. On a few occasions,

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nonetheless, the plan was not open to new dialogues, leading to tensions within the action research process.

In the cases when new dialogue processes were opened, new solutions slowly emerged through praxis. Although some policymakers still framed the problem in terms of the plan, as represented in Figure 4.10, those who participated in the emergent dialogue process usually integrated the results of praxis into their policies.

Figure 4.10. **Praxis generates solutions that were not in the plan**

However, at times, tensions arose with policymakers who were involved with the plan but had not participated in the emergent dialogue process. They often felt the emergent process was chaotic or they did not appreciate the cogenerated nature of the results, which hindered the action research process.

To overcome dichotomic thinking between the plan and emergent processes, action researchers needed to facilitate the emergent processes by incorporating the plan as one more input in the dialogue and involving those in charge of the plan as participants. This helped

integrate the results of cogeneration into new versions of the plan without regarding its evolution as a *failure or inefficiency*. Figure 4.11 represents this situation.

Figure 4.11. **Synergies between plans and emergent results**
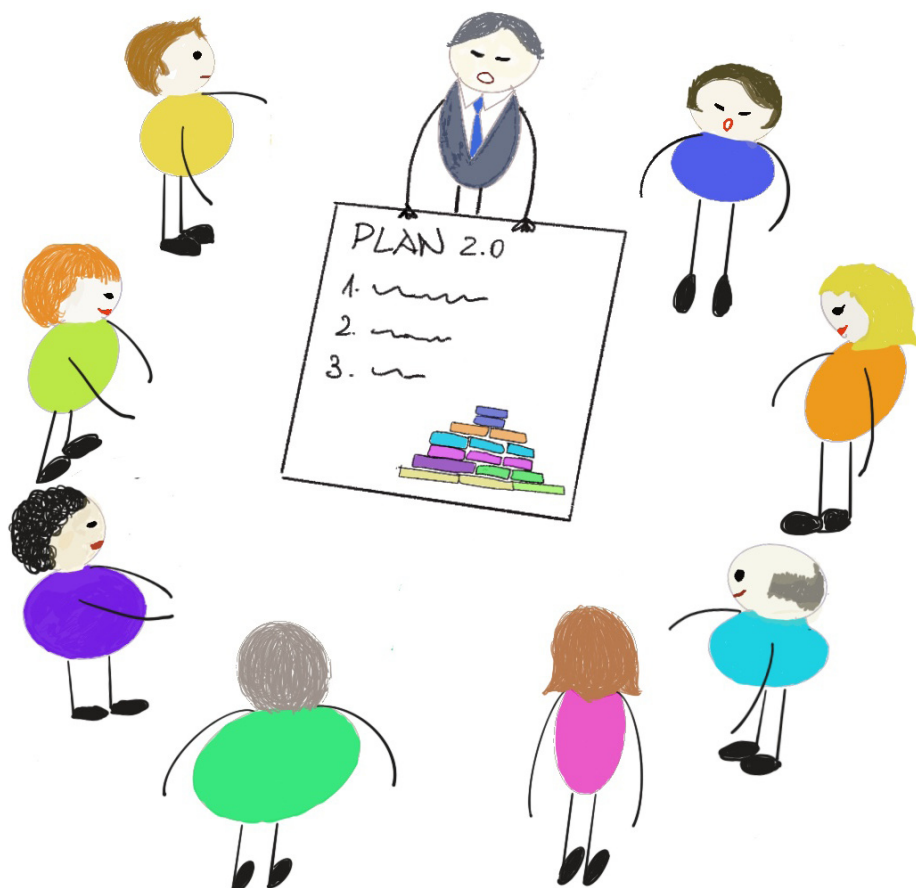
3.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

In the context of the tensions between planning and emergence I have just described, my position was defined by my belief that transformation requires praxis and, thus, emergent processes. I think that plans can be a useful tool if they are applied flexibly as one more input in emergent learning and negotiation processes.

This belief determined my identity in the process, and consequently, my position was on one side of the dichotomy. I considered that most of the contexts in which we worked were biased towards planning, and I helped others understand and experience emergent processes and their potential to transform policy. Again, I was not neutral.

In my relational role of facilitation, I helped integrate plans into the reflection process while seeking connections between them and the emergent results so that these results

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could also be presented as part of the plan. In my critical role, I helped participants reflect on the limitations of plans to solve complex problems. Although they can generate a lot of action on their own, we need multiple simultaneous approaches, including emergent ones, to bring about the transformations necessary for complex problems. This is what Figure 4.12 depicts.

Figure 4.12. **My identity in the dichotomy between planning and emergent processes**

Given that planning is a very extended approach to policymaking, and emergent processes might feel too chaotic, the strategy to overcome dichotomic thinking, in this case, involves actively promoting a better understanding of emergent processes. This will help alleviate the insecurity of the participating policymakers and action researchers during the process. That is why, in Figure 4.12, my role is depicted as favouring emergent processes and generating a critical reflection on planning.

3.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

In this subsection, I go beyond my own experience to represent facilitation working towards overcoming dichotomic thinking. Figure 4.13 illustrates facilitation where both planning and emergent processes are integrated. Even when researchers and stakeholders agree to do action research in the practical sphere, strong forces in the personal and political spheres can lead participants to feel safe if they have a plan to follow, whereas an emergent process makes them feel they are taking a bigger risk.

The purple circle that represents the facilitation of action research surrounds a facilitative action researcher who integrates plans as one more input into emergent processes, enriching them but letting them evolve through new learnings and negotiations. She also incorporates the results of praxis as one more input into plans, making them more flexible and adaptive.

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Figure 4.13. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between planning and emergent processes**
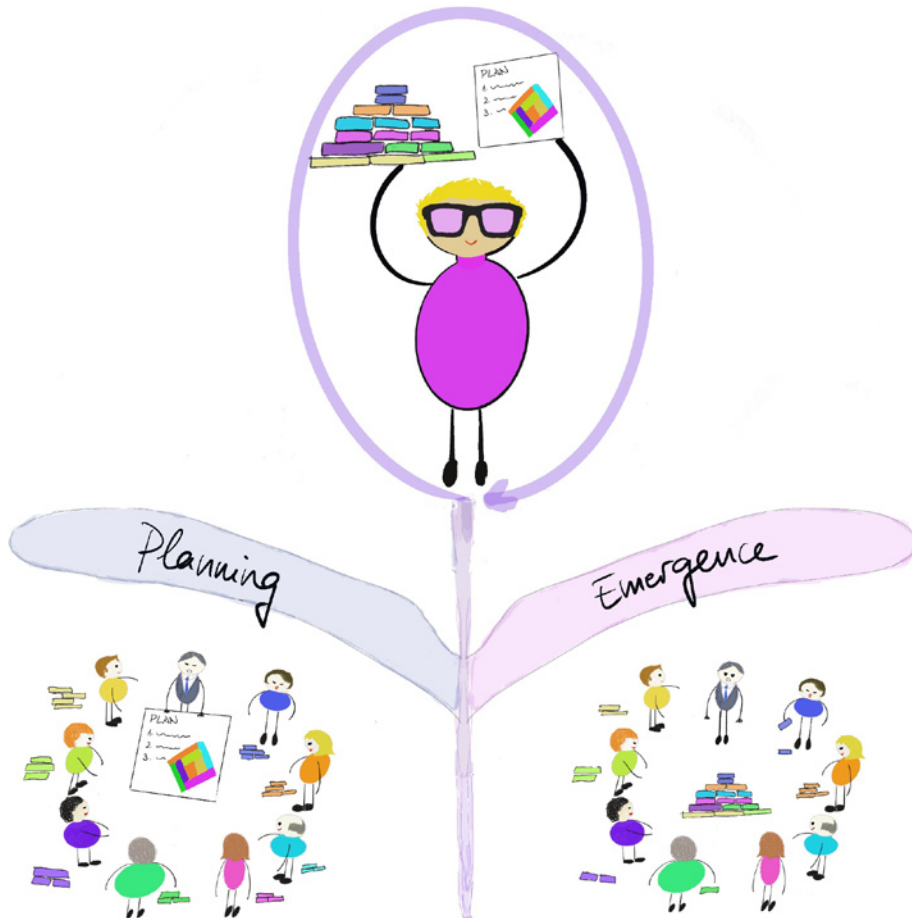
4. **Theory and practice**

4.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

This section is connected with section 2.1, which discusses expert and experiential knowledge. I have decided to keep both because in 2.1, the focus was on how we used knowledge, and here, I want to focus on how we generated knowledge.

The connection between theory and practice in academia depends on the research paradigm within which researchers frame their work. Some years ago, when sharing how our research team was addressing a concrete policy problem through action research, a colleague told me, "But that problem was solved long ago in the paper by…" and gave me a reference. I was shocked by the fact that he meant that no more research was needed because there was already a theoretical solution to the problem.

The starting point in action research is a practical problem, and even when a theoretical solution might already exist, if the problem prevails in a specific community, new situ-

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ated knowledge is needed to solve it. However, this situated knowledge is seldom shared in academic contexts, and when it is, it is done so through case descriptions, not theoretical or conceptual discussions. In this section, I want to focus on how facilitative action researchers can include generating conceptual frameworks as part of their roles and how they can bridge theory and practice to overcome dichotomic thinking.

As we did with the recommendations from experts invited by policymakers, our action research team sometimes shared theoretical contributions (usually from books and academic articles) with policymakers to try to approach the problem we were tackling from a different angle. This typically produced a positive initial reaction and a feeling that we could better understand what was happening in the policy process. Yet, when we moved from the initial reflection towards action, participants struggled to find answers to their more concrete questions in the shared theories (see Figure 4.14). Even though we sometimes believe that practice is simpler than theory, any policy problem we faced was more complex than any theories explained.

Figure 4.14. **Using theory to understand our practice**

Recognising that theory did not have all the answers usually created momentum to focus on practice, and it prompted learning and negotiating to find our contextual answers to the questions that had emerged and make decisions that did not solve the theoretical questions but made practice evolve.

A valuable approach for helping to overcome dichotomic thinking between theory and practice in these situations was the use of conceptual frameworks, which resulted from the

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systematisation of experiences. They represented practice in that they were based on the practical experience of cogenerating a concrete solution to a problem and did not represent general principles applicable in every case in the way that theory does. Nevertheless, they provided interesting insights into how to address the specific practical questions that had emerged in that particular case. Figure 4.15 illustrates how we cogenerated conceptual frameworks.

Figure 4.15. **Conceptual frameworks resulting from practice**
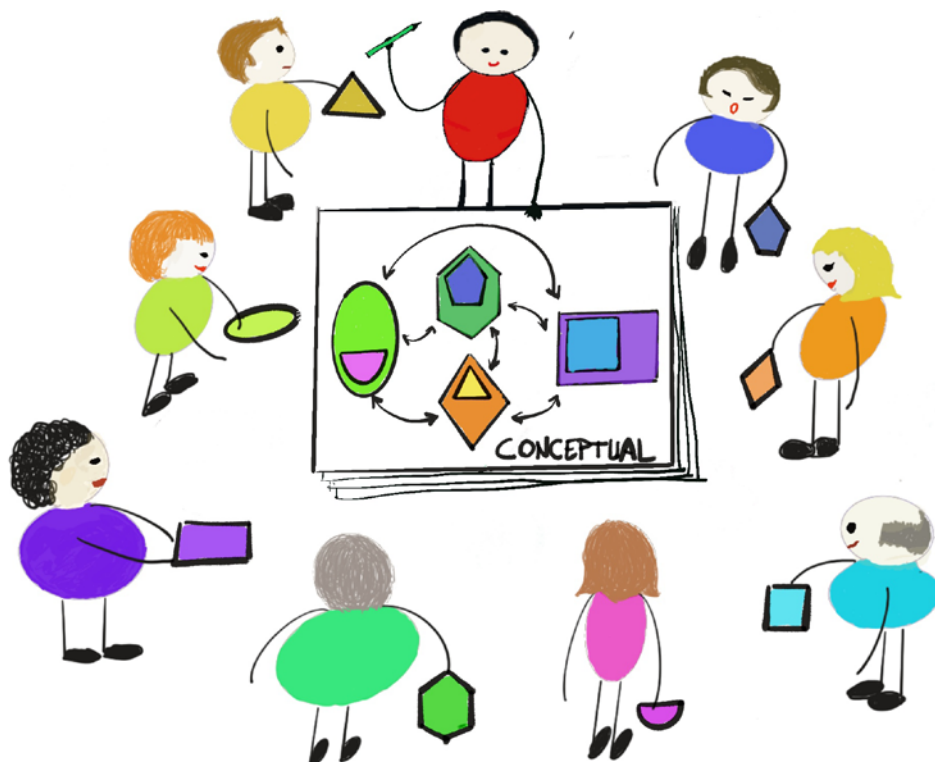
While these conceptual frameworks cannot "be applied" in other contexts, they did serve as a helpful input for reflection in later stages of the same process as well as in other action research or policy processes in Gipuzkoa and outside this territory.

4.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

Soft resistance meant that even though we used theory, we also built and used conceptual frameworks based on our shared experience in the action research process. We questioned the expectation that theory would show us the solution to our problems and grew confident in our own conceptual frameworks to help make sense of practice.

One of my challenges in these processes was that some participants (theory-oriented) considered the conceptual frameworks that represented our practical solutions as non-rigorous. However, those frameworks helped others (practice-oriented) feel proud of their ex-

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periential knowledge, which was empowering. I believed, in my personal sphere, that there was a bias in policy towards excessive reliance on theory, and I used conceptual frameworks based on our practice to make practice-oriented participants more visible. This belief shaped my identity as a facilitative action researcher, as shown in Figure 4.16.

Figure 4.16. **My identity in the dichotomy between theory and practice**
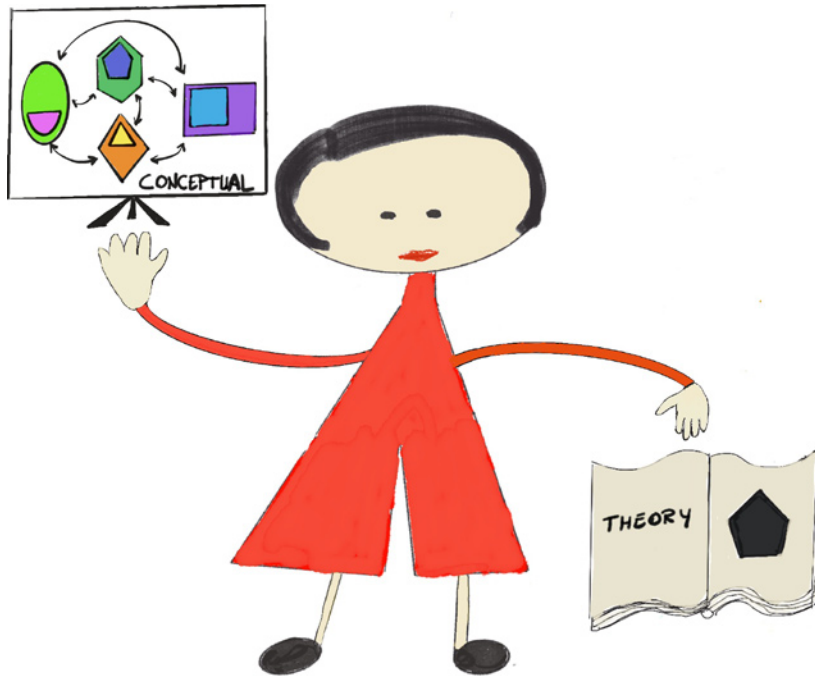
My non-neutral facilitation relied on finding solutions in practice, with a critical perspective on the assumption that theory would tell us what to do. My facilitative work counteracted those stakeholders, usually relevant decision makers in the action research process, who had high expectations of theory to guide the process.

4.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Not being neutral does not mean that our thinking is dichotomic but rather that we have a position regarding theory and practice. Figure 4.17 shows facilitation that establishes a mutually nurturing relationship between them. Theory is an effective tool to trigger reflection, even among practice-oriented participants. In action research, practice is a necessary space for knowledge generation, and good systematisations can help construct rigorous conceptual frameworks that can be discussed with theory-oriented participants.

The facilitative action researcher in Figure 4.17 integrates theory into the processes to co-generate practical solutions and their systematisations. Additionally, they introduce the conceptual frameworks from practice into the theoretical discussions so as to gain awareness of the different potential relationships between theory and practice. These processes help overcome dichotomic thinking.

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Figure 4.17. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between theory and practice**
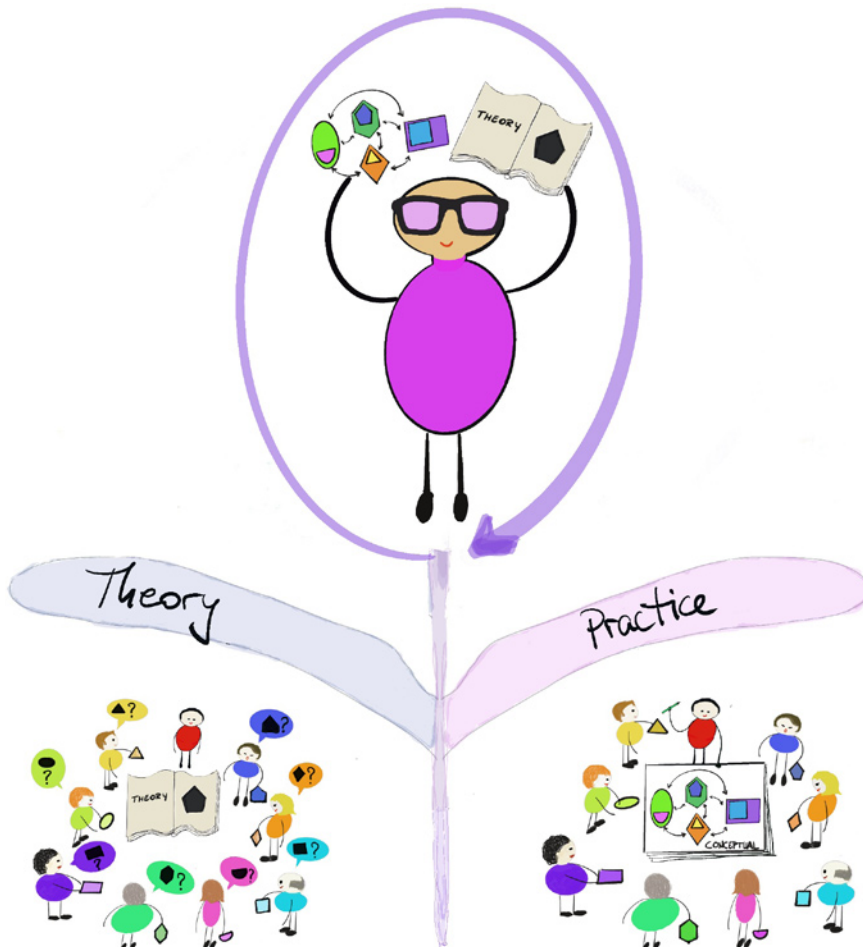

5. **Power and love**

5.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

In Chapter 3, I argued that power is often discussed in policy and action research, whereas love is seldom mentioned. This avoidance stems from the beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms (personal sphere) that regard love as part of our private lives. It is a subtle mechanism that contributes to making facilitative work invisible in the public space.

To develop this rationale, I first acknowledge that when facilitative action researchers work in a policy process to generate trust, a shared vision, and shared agendas, we are enacting love (the drive towards the unity of the separated) in the public space. That is what Figure 4.18 depicts.

Figure 4.18. **Facilitation as enactment of love**
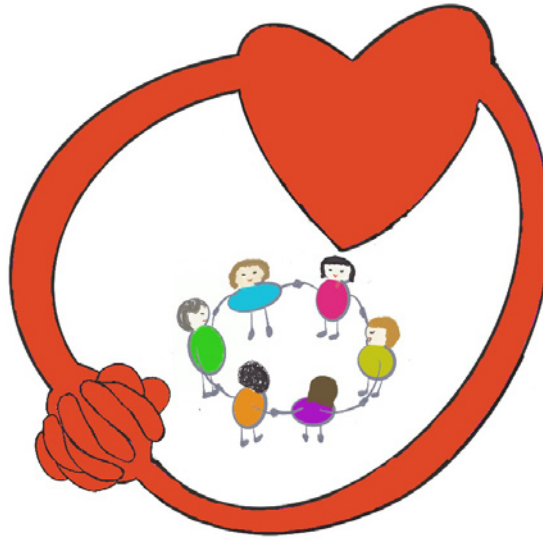
When I say I have experienced facilitation becoming invisible in the public space, I do not mean that participants did not notice we were working with them. I am referring to how they interpreted that our facilitative work was our way to help policymakers do *their* policy (love) rather than recognising it as *our* research strategy or our enactment of leadership (power). Therefore, policy was visible, and research became invisible. Figure 4.19 illustrates how I see facilitation as an enactment of power.

Figure 4.19. **Facilitation as enactment of power**

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Throughout these years, I have often pictured facilitation as love taking place in the back garden of the public space, so to speak, where things related to public issues can occur without happening in the actual public space. In this back garden that few see, facilitation has typically been perceived as niceness or humbleness on our part.

I believe it is positive for territorial development if the facilitation of action research in policy processes happens in the public space. A public space where dichotomic thinking is overcome to consider facilitation not only as an enactment of love but also of power, as demonstrated in Figure 4.20.

Figure 4.20. **Facilitation as an enactment of love and power**
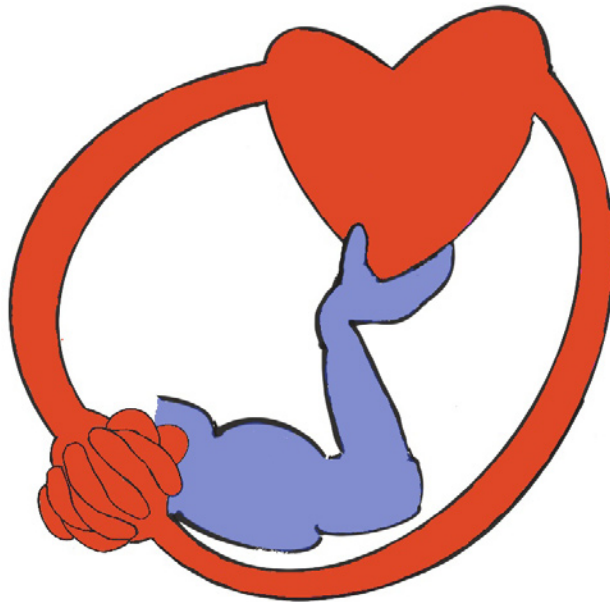
5.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

My experience with this love and power dichotomy is that, for years, I practised facilitating second-person action research as *love without power*. Its degenerative nature became evident to me when I explored self-inquiry and first-person action research and faced my emotional exhaustion.

My identity as a facilitative action researcher since then has been forged by my attempts to overcome this degenerative feature of my facilitation. On the one hand, my critical reflection and transformative efforts have focused on creating a space for love within the public sphere. On the other hand, I have also argued that as facilitative action researchers, we also enact power, and it is crucial to recognise the relational nature of our power as power and as a drive toward realisation.

In the other figures of this chapter where I have illustrated my position, I held up one side of the dichotomy that I thought should be reinforced and held down the other that I felt was too powerful in the process. In this case, in Figure 4.21, I hold up both love and power as dimensions of facilitation since both are underrepresented in the public spaces of our action research.

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Figure 4.21. **My identity in the dichotomy between power and love**

Finally, I am aware that power and love can operate very differently in diverse contexts. My experience in action research has been with policymakers as stakeholders. I felt they were more powerful actors than action researchers in the process, and that situation shaped my facilitative identity. I can easily imagine that action researchers working, for instance, with vulnerable groups will have very different experiences of love and power and will develop identities as facilitative action researchers that are quite distinct from mine. The goal of sharing my experience is not to suggest that love and power relate in one specific way in action research but rather to invite you to experiment with self-inquiry to learn how love and power interplay in your experience.

5.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.22 depicts facilitation as a mutually nurturing relationship between love and power. This type of relationship requires that both love and power are regarded as relevant sources of transformation in the public space. It also illustrates that love without power is degenerative, in the same way as power without love.

The facilitative actor in the middle helps those enacting love to use their power and those using power to enact love.

Figure 4.22. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between love and power**
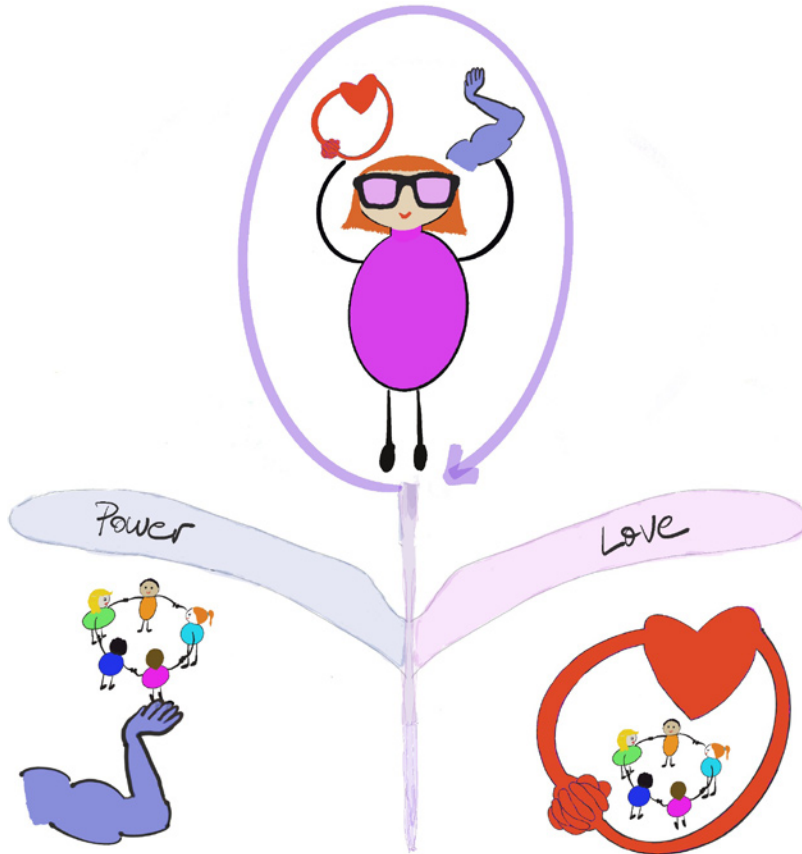
6. **Efficiency and participation**

6.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

Action research democratises policy through participation, which in turn requires certain conditions such as trust, a shared vision, and shared agendas. Our action research team continuously evaluated these conditions in the projects so as to maximise participation in the process. When conditions were in place, we facilitated collective decisions, but when conditions were absent, we had to reduce participation and work with individual policymakers who had the hierarchical position to decide to take the process to the next stage. The pattern was that, although the discourse supporting participation was widespread, we regularly integrated hierarchical decisions into the process.

Unavoidably, when the decision was made by one or a few policymakers, the process was biased towards their vision, as symbolised by the blue colour of the circles in Figure 4.23, though we also influenced the decision through our facilitation, symbolised by the fuchsia colour in between.

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Figure 4.23. **Efficiency through hierarchy**
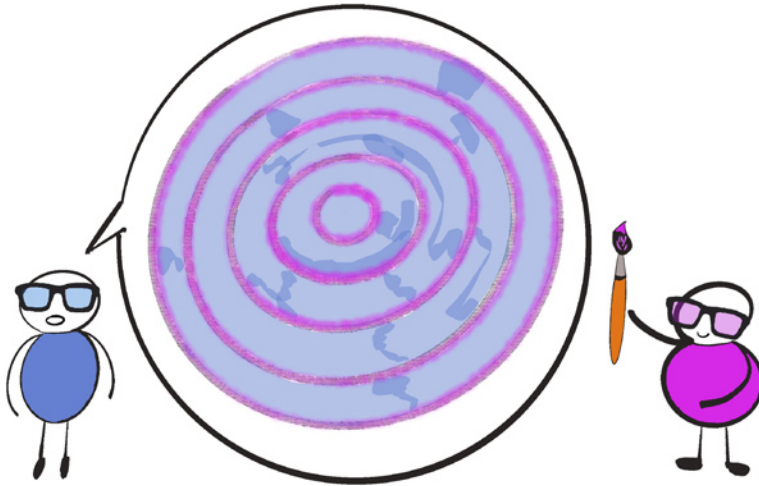
Occasionally, the rest of the participants in the policy process owned these decisions, and facilitative action researchers helped integrate them as one more input into the participatory process. But other times, the group resisted those decisions. We then focused our facilitation on making these differing perspectives explicit to try to reach new agreements. Paradoxically, participants in the process used the time gained by the hierarchical decisions of policymakers to articulate their critical positions regarding that decision. Figure 4.24 illustrates these situations when the group discussed the decisions.

Figure 4.24. **Participatory reframing of hierarchical decisions**
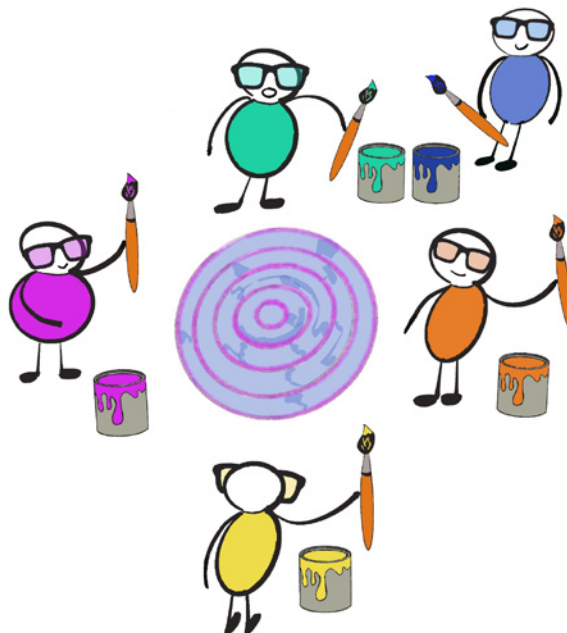
This process ended when all participants (including the policymaker(s) who had made the initial decision) established a shared interpretation of the problem and its solutions (Figure 4.25) before agreeing to act together to tackle the issue at hand.

Figure 4.25. **Investment in trust, a shared vision, and a shared agenda**
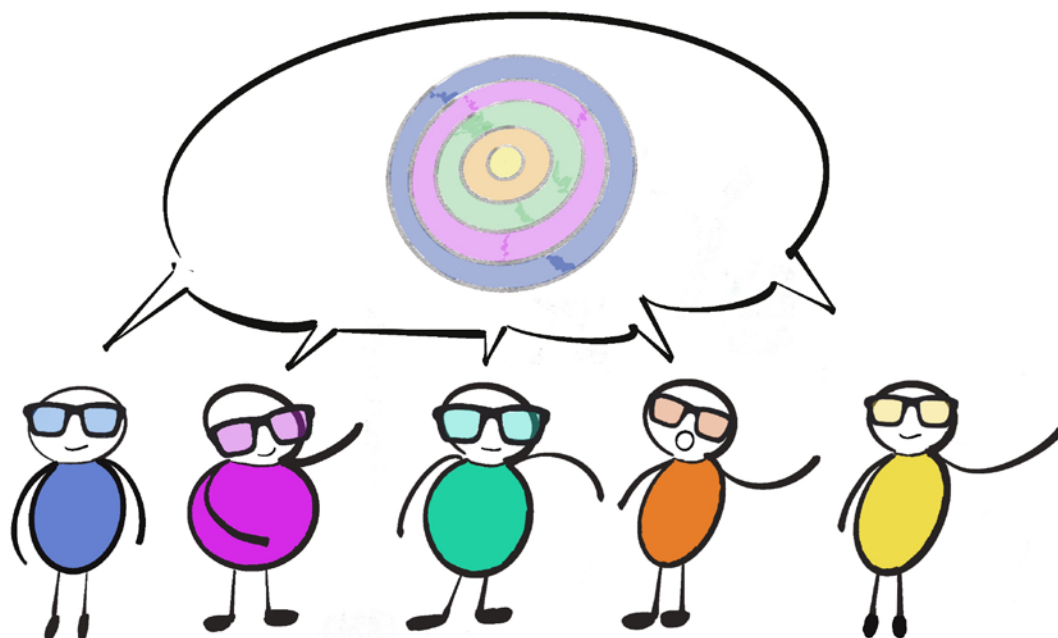
Even when contested, the decisions made by individual policymakers continued to be crucial, as they helped adapt the action research process to policy timeframes, making it more sustainable. Figure 4.26 depicts the twofold scenario of our facilitation, which involved facilitating dialogue both in participatory spaces and face-to-face with specific policymakers.

Figure 4.26. **The twofold scenario of facilitation**

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6.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

There is no action research without participation. My identity as a facilitative action researcher has been shaped by the pressure to keep the process as participatory as possible, knowing that there would be moments when it would rely on the hierarchical decisions of certain participants.

Determining in every moment whether trust and a shared vision are mature enough to sustain a participatory decision is no easy task. When playing our relational role, I simultaneously helped the group of stakeholders and individual policymakers make their decisions. However, in my critical role, I had to resist hierarchical decisions when I thought the conditions were in place to make them collectively. Although I knew that individual decisions were sometimes required, I was also aware of the widespread narrative regarding the inefficiency of participatory processes, which was occasionally used as an excuse to avoid participation. I developed as a facilitative action researcher by contesting this narrative and trying to prove the efficiency of participatory processes in practice. I illustrate this in Figure 4.27.

Figure 4.27. **My identity in the dichotomy between efficiency and participation**
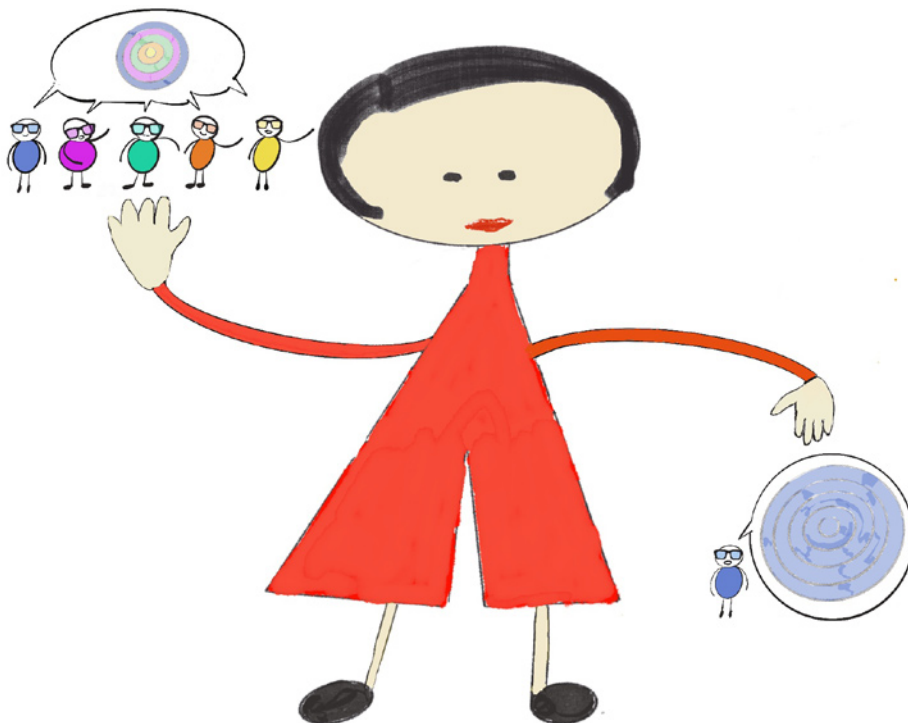

6.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.28 represents facilitation that generates a mutually nurturing relationship between efficiency and participation, knitting together individual and participatory decision-making.

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The facilitative action researcher in Figure 4.28 dialogues with policymakers in hierarchical positions who feel the pressure of efficiency and short-term results and argues for the need to invest in long-term trust and a shared vision. At the same time, she facilitates dialogue in the spaces for participation and integrates the hierarchical decisions made by individual policymakers into the participatory process as one more input. Moreover, when doing so, she discusses with the groups invited to the participatory process why certain decisions are made in the hierarchy.

Figure 4.28. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between efficiency and participation**
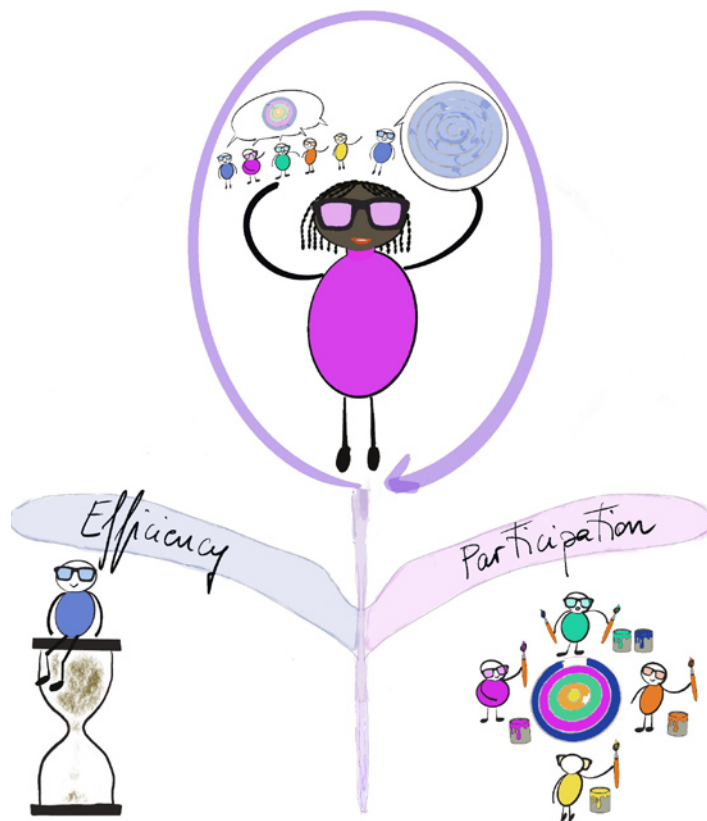
7. **Reason and emotion**

### 7.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

Among all the research approaches I have worked with during my career, action research, especially first-person action research, is the one that most clearly acknowledges emotions. Yet, my action research experience has evolved in contexts where we (action researchers) recognised they existed and affected our processes, but when writing about our cases, we referred to what had happened in rational terms: (a) what participants had said (through words), (b) what decisions they had made (and whether these were consistent with their discourse), and (c) how they acted on those decisions (checking if actions where coherent with decisions).

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Participants (including action researchers) were affected by their emotions when speaking, deciding, and acting. However, our explanation of the process was almost exclusively rational. Letting emotions like fear, anger, or love affect policy, politics, and research is considered unacceptable. We assume that we must deal with them in private. These are, of course, all assumptions derived from specific worldviews and institutions in personal and political spheres.

Moreover, when working with different governments, I have often heard discourses that connected emotions to populism and manipulation, even though my experience is that gaining awareness of emotions and learning to handle them makes us less vulnerable to manipulation.

In my self-inquiry processes, I have also come to understand that rationalisation is a mechanism we often use to handle emotions we cannot or do not want to share. Figure 4.29 depicts how, in our action research, we have accepted that emotions affect our processes and rationally discussed them, but seldom have we made our concrete emotions explicit or embraced them as part of the process.

Figure 4.29. **Using reason to think about emotions**
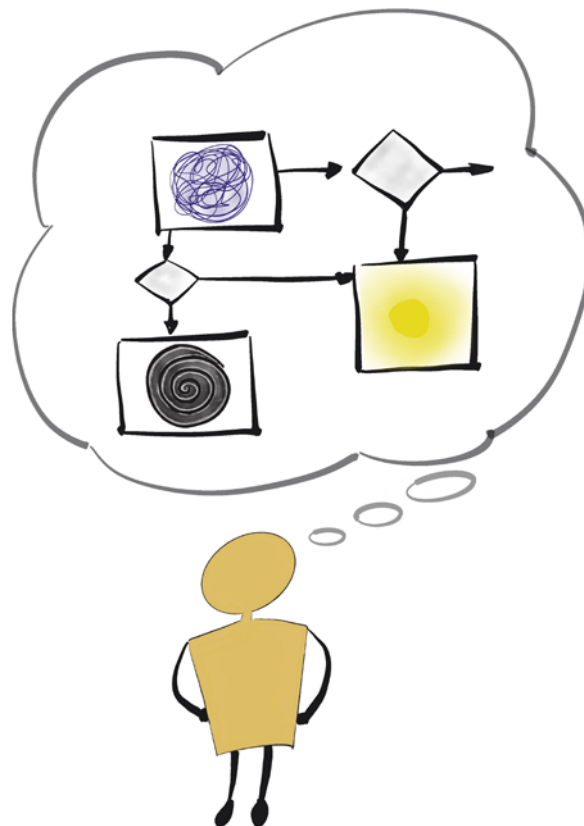
For instance, our action research team has explicitly described our facilitation as soft resistance when talking to policymakers. In my case, I *fear* that if we are too critical, policymakers will get *angry* and even stop the project. While I can now rationally describe this emotion, I know that it has not explicitly been part of the process, and I have dealt with my fear in private.

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Finally, another pattern is that if emotions are addressed in action research, the focus is often on those of stakeholders. Emotions of facilitative action researchers are rarely dealt with. Facilitators are pictured as cheerful individuals who create a good atmosphere among the other participants, whereas emotions like sadness, fear, and especially anger would be deemed inappropriate for someone in that role. Figure 4.30 represents a facilitative actor who feels sadness, fear and anger besides happyness and love.

Figure 4.30. **Emotions in facilitation**
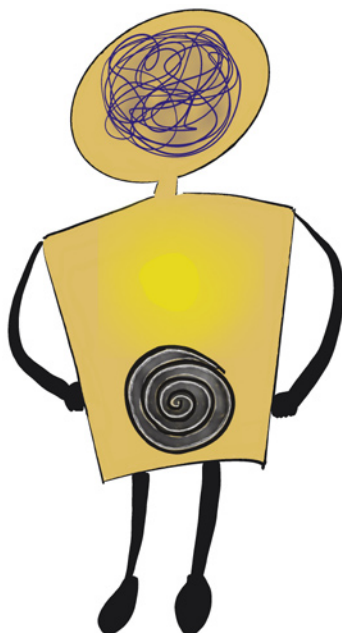
Nevertheless, when we facilitate, all emotions are part of facilitation, and not having the right capabilities, tools, and spaces to deal with them is emotionally exhausting.

7.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

I have often suppressed my fear, sadness, and anger when facilitating action research. I have done so to respond to a normative definition of facilitators as individuals who focus on others' emotions to generate a constructive process.

During the period when I was writing this book, I worked on connecting with my emotions. One of the exercises was to explore how I get angry, and I asked two colleagues who have seen me facilitate. These are their answers:

> "As far as I remember, I've never seen you angry. If someone hurts you […] I can see the tension in your face as if you are controlling the situation […]. Then you talk and think a lot about what happened. […] You don't speak angrily, but you try to understand the pain they inflicted on you using reason […]. Typically, after you've elaborated on the answers to those that hurt you, you respond to them or do something. The situation doesn't end the day it happened; it takes hard work for you to close that cycle." (Colleague 1)

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I rationalise my emotions to handle them, but I do not embrace them. Somehow, I swallow them so they will not affect the process. Playing a critical role would mean explicitly sharing my emotions of sadness, fear, or anger as part of the problem at hand and part of the process to solve it, together with the rational solution everyone expects from me.

Figure 4.31. **My goal regarding my position in the dichotomy between reason and emotion**
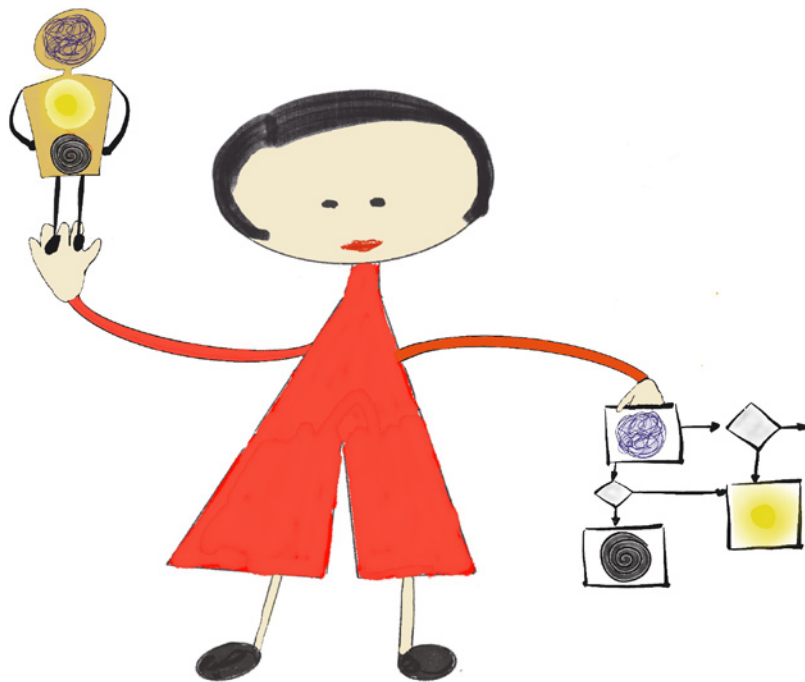

Drawing Figure 4.31 was not easy. The figure has to represent my non-neutral position throughout these fifteen years. If I observe my behaviour regarding my own emotions, I should draw myself holding up *rational thinking* and pushing down *acknowledging emotions*. Despite articulating a discourse that favours embracing emotions, I must recognise that my actual beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms have prioritised reason over emotion because, beyond my discourse, that is how I have acted. However, after learning from my emotional exhaustion, I am transforming these features of my personal sphere. Figure 4.31 does not illustrate who I have been these last fifteen years but who I am now working to become.

7.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.32 represents a mutually nurturing relationship between reason and emotion, which requires both to be explicit in the process.

Figure 4.32. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between reason and emotion**
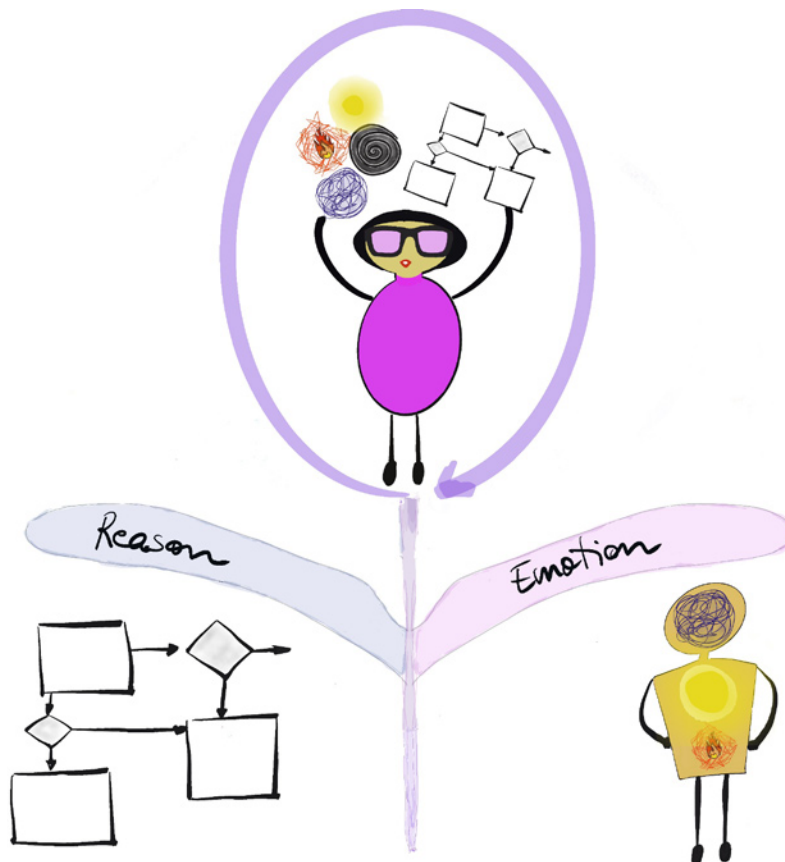
The facilitative action researcher at the centre of the figure brings explicit emotions closer to the dialogue spaces where only rational thinking takes place, thus humanising them. She also brings reason to spaces where emotions (explicit or not) dominate a process, helping understand how emotions affect the process and avoid the potential risk of manipulation.

8. **Objective and subjective**

8.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

Objectivity refers to what is not influenced by personal feelings or opinions when considering and presenting facts, while subjectivity relates to what is influenced by such feelings or opinions. In my action research experience, tensions between objectivity and subjectivity did not emerge around objective facts, which usually all participants welcomed. Tensions emerged because some participants resisted accepting subjective perspectives as relevant to the process. One of the phrases I have often heard participants use to reject the knowledge we are cogenerating in action research is "Yes, but that is subjective." What I share here is not a philosophical or methodological discussion but rather a description of a pattern of dichotomic thinking I have observed when facilitating.

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My first question is, why did they resist? In the political and personal spheres, institutionalised understanding and paradigms interpret that good research and good policy decisions can only be based on objective facts. Subjective is thus untrustworthy.

Consequently, one of the core ideas our research team has struggled with when facilitating is that "we do not know until we have the objective data." When working with goals such as transforming the political culture, generating collaborative governance, or transforming the policy ecosystem, objective measurement is challenging. We can measure certain things, but not all the relevant ones. In these cases, thinking "we do not know until we have the objective data" can stagnate the process.

To avoid stagnation, we had to move from reflection to action and back to reflection (praxis). We usually started by analysing the objective data we could gather, as shown in Figure 4.33.

Figure 4.33. **Objective data as the first step**
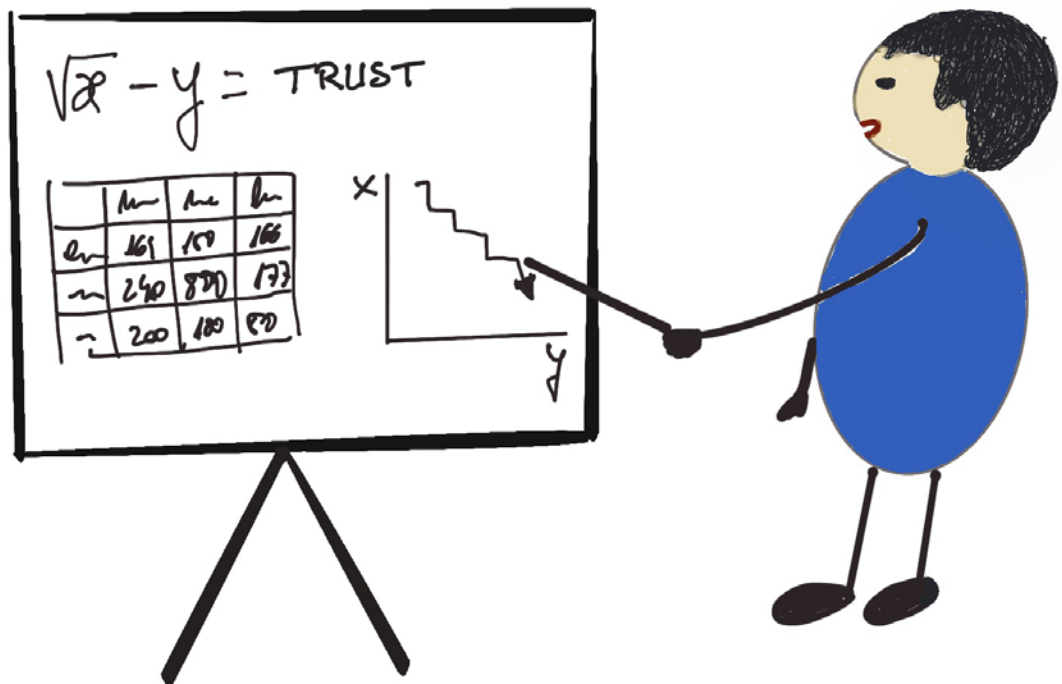
The first obstacle was that objective data could not give us the whole picture. Nonetheless, another challenge emerged when participants (in groups of ten, twenty, or thirty people) expressed their opinions on the meaning of the objective data, demonstrating that it is also subject to interpretation, as in Figure 4.34. Coloured glasses represent the personal sphere's beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms, and I have also depicted emotions.

Figure 4.34. **Subjective interpretations of the objective data**

In such situations, our research team worked on developing a shared vision with a map of subjective interpretations, agreements and disagreements. The discussion of subjective interpretations often generated more agreements to act than the objective data on its own.

The concern of some participants that subjectivity lessened the robustness of the process diminished when intersubjectivity was developed, as represented in Figure 4.35. When we confronted different subjective perspectives to build new shared interpretations, the results were considered more robust.

Figure 4.35. **The role of the facilitative actor to construct intersubjectivity**

I have previously said that some policymakers felt our processes were chaotic. Figure 4.35 depicts the construction of intersubjectivity; however, I also think it represents what, for these policymakers, felt like chaos.

8.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

I have developed my facilitative capabilities in contexts where there was often a dissociation between the normative discourse on objectivity and subjectivity and actual action. The normative discourse was that decisions were made based on objective data. In practice, decisions and actions were closely connected to participants' subjective interpretations of the objective data at hand and to the shared interpretations that participants built through dialogue despite these not being considered desirable.

I worked to integrate all the objective data available into the reflection processes but also played a critical role in trying to raise awareness of the limitations of objective data and the value of subjectivity. This critical role shaped my identity as a facilitative action researcher, which I depict in Figure 4.36.

Figure 4.36. **My position in the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity**

8.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.37 represents a type of facilitation that seeks a mutually nurturing relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in the action research process.

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Figure 4.37. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between objectivity
and subjectivity**
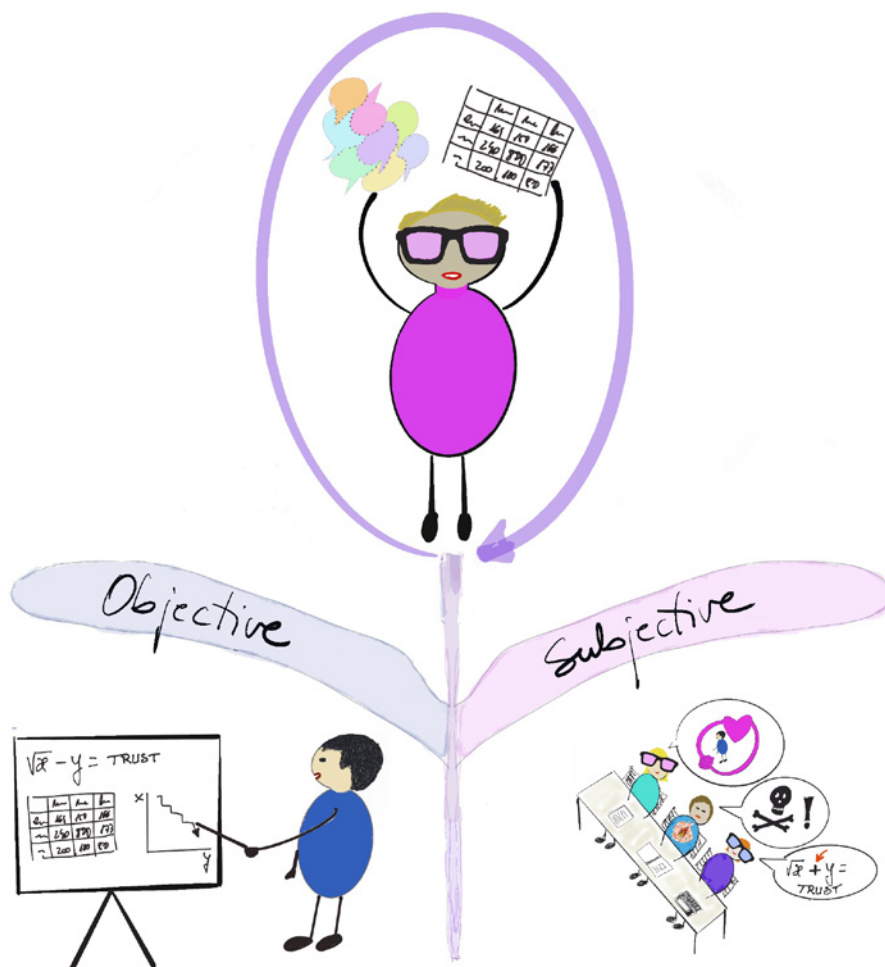
On the one hand, this facilitative action researcher brings narratives constructed through intersubjectivity (dialogical discussion where different subjective interpretations interact to generate new intersubjective interpretations) to spaces where participants work with the expectation of making decisions solely based on objective data. On the other hand, the facilitative action researcher brings the objective data available to those spaces where dialogue develops based on the subjective interpretations of the process.

9. **Public and private**

9.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

This dichotomy is closely connected to the previous two: reason and emotion, and objectivity and subjectivity. I address it explicitly because it will be difficult to accept emotions and

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subjectivity in the public spaces of action research and policymaking unless we devise imaginative ways to overcome the dichotomy between public and private.

Throughout this book, I have often referred to the personal sphere (beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms). One common definition of *personal* is belonging to a particular person and no one else. However, it can also mean concerning one's private life, relationships, and emotions rather than one's career or public life. When we connect both meanings, which we often do, our beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms pertain exclusively to our private life and not, for instance, to the public space of policy and action research. As I have argued, this is problematic given that there can be no transformation unless the three spheres of transformation are involved. The question is, therefore, if the political dimension is essentially public and the personal dimension essentially private, where do they interact?

I start my narrative of a recurrent pattern with Figure 4.38, depicting how we express ourselves (our beliefs, values, and emotions) in the private spaces of our lives yet become self-less (without subjectivity or emotion) in the public spaces.

Figure 4.38. **Self in the private and the public spaces**

Action research claims that action researchers and stakeholders participate in the research process as whole individuals, i.e., their bodies, beliefs, and emotions. However, in practice, the interpretation of the personal sphere as private is strongly rooted in policy, politics, and academia. Figure 4.39 represents an action research process where the personal sphere is missing.

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Figure 4.39. **Action research participants in the public spaces**
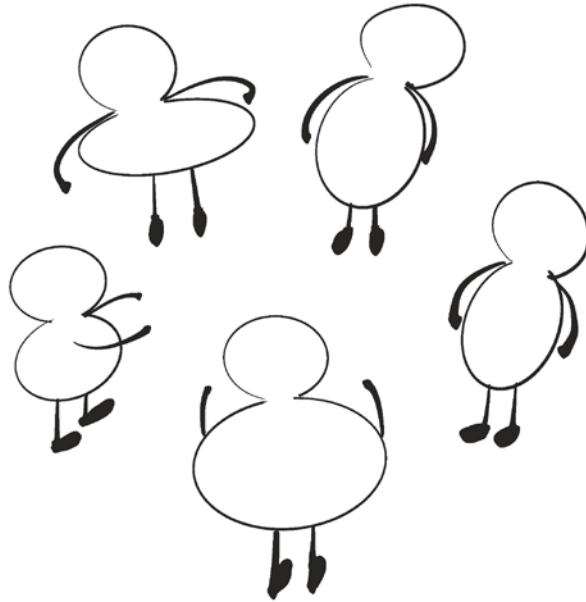
Participants in action research must have the possibility to freely choose what they share. I believe that due to strong forces in the political and personal spheres, we have avoided our emotional (embodied) and subjective selves in our processes, relegating them to the private spaces. Figure 4.40 is thus another perspective of the action research process shown in Figure 4.39.

Figure 4.40. **Barriers between private and public spaces**

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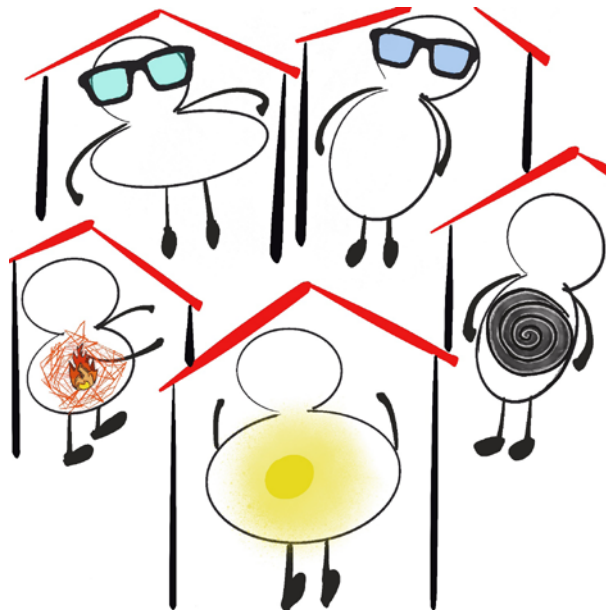
We have tried to overcome these situations in the last year by inviting participants to share their beliefs, values, and emotions in the process. While the dialogue flowed when these were addressed as abstract concepts (for instance, the values of young citizens), it became challenging when we had to talk about *my values* or *my emotions* in the first person. However, when we managed to do so, we realised that sharing the personal dimension not only changed the group but also heightened our awareness that the territory is also made up of citizens with beliefs, values, and emotions. I have represented this in Figure 4.41.

Figure 4.41. **Action research participants and territorial actors as whole individuals**
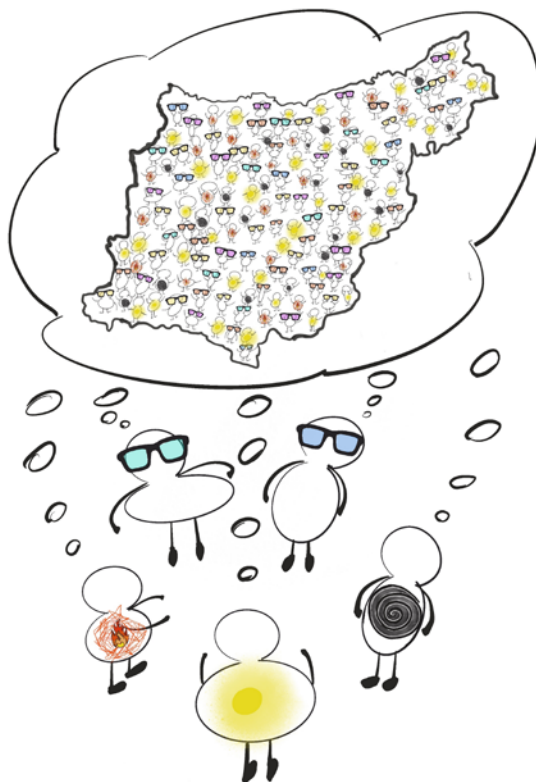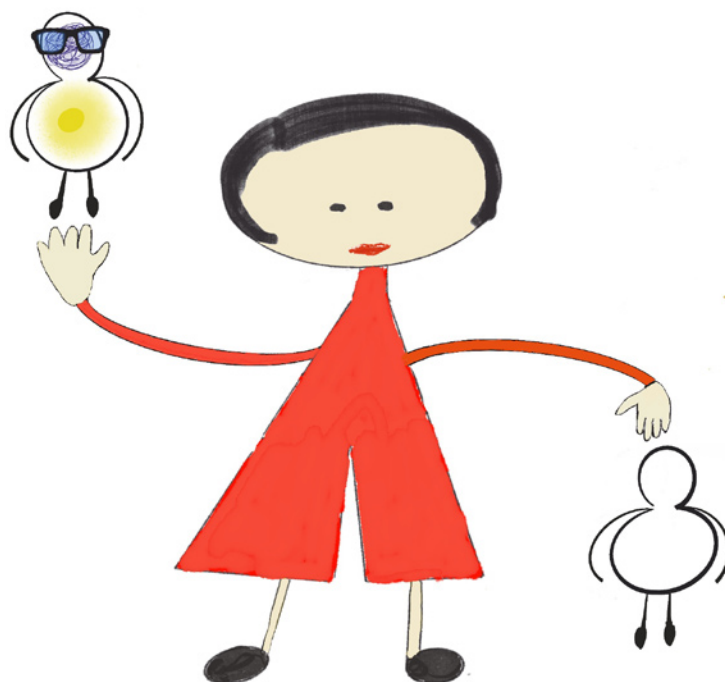

9.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

I have grown as a facilitative actor in an environment where we did not openly deal with emotions, beliefs, or values. Regardless, I could often tell if participants were happy, afraid, angry, or sad, and I worried whether these emotions were related to the process and the decisions we were making. I felt it would have been too aggressive to ask them directly, and consequently, when playing our relational role, I chose not to prompt participants to share emotions, beliefs, and values.

I have been changing this pattern lately to play a more critical role. I have explicitly addressed the limitations of action research when it does not integrate the personal sphere and even co-facilitated a short experiment with policymakers and other territorial actors who volunteered to share this sphere. The following is an extract from one of the participants after the experiment:

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[PARTICIPANT 3]: "In my opinion, we often give *macro* or *objective* reasons for not talking about *me*: *we will distance ourselves from the collective*, *it is not important*, or *it is not objective*... But in fact, it is often our fear of talking about ourselves and the subjective dimensions. Transformations are made by concrete people: each of us. I think this experiment captures the heart of transformation. Reading the contributions of the other participants *humanised* my perspective of the group. I liked it very much".

Figure 4.42. **My position in the dichotomy between considering the personal sphere only in private spaces or also in public ones**

I believe my identity as a facilitative action researcher has forged in this struggle to transition from the relational role (avoiding the personal sphere because it was uncomfortable) to the more critical role (including it as part of the process), always working exclusively with stakeholders who willingly volunteered. That is what Figure 4.42 represents.

9.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.43 represents facilitation that generates a mutually nurturing relationship between the public and private spaces of action research participants.

To nurture this connection, the facilitative actor in the figure brings the idea of whole selves (with reason and objectivity as well as emotions and subjectivity) to the public space of action research, helping those who want to share emotions and subjectivity to do so. Simultaneously, she is extremely sensitive and respectful towards participants who feel uncomfort-

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able sharing what they believe is their private life. That is why the facilitator gives up making the personal sphere explicit in spaces where she senses discomfort. Nonetheless, she is able to establish informal, trustworthy spaces that feel almost private to participants, which helps them constructively deal with the emotions and subjective interpretations generated by the action research process.

Figure 4.43. **Facilitation as nurturing the personal sphere both in public and private spaces**
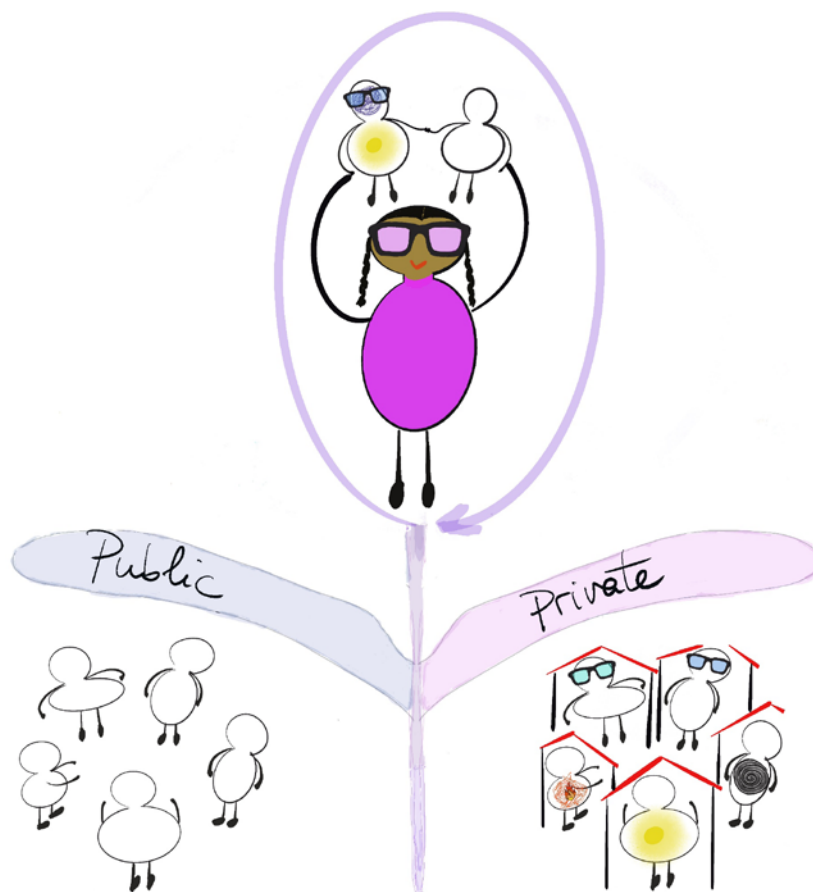
10. **Masculine and feminine**

10.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

My search for patterns related to this dichotomy takes me back to my early years in action research when a colleague introduced me to his students by saying, "Miren is a woman doing action research in a world of men". Figure 4.44 is a drawing that replicates a photograph of a meeting in one of my early action research processes.

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Figure 4.44. **A meeting in my early action research**

Some years later, when I started to look at my action research trajectory through the lenses of gender, I found that the patterns I was discovering in my experience were socially institutionalised (Larrea, 2020):

> "[There are] commonly accepted stereotypes of women's thinking as emotional, intuitive, and personalised. These stereotypes are said to devalue women's minds and contributions, particularly in Western technologically oriented cultures, which value rationalism and objectivity. We have been educated to assume that "intuitive knowledge is more primitive, therefore less valuable, than so-called objective modes of knowing." (Sampson 1978, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 6)".
>
> "Furthermore, women have been described as operating within a morality of responsibility and care more often than men do (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). The feminine personality is presumed to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than the masculine personality does, something that is seen as a deficit and not as something positive. Additionally, girls experience the needs or feelings of another as their own more often than boys do (Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982), and again this value is not celebrated in a context in which rationality and distance are considered to be important".
>
> "Belenky *et al.* (1986) say that when masculine values prevail, which happens quite often in institutional and social life, women, lacking role models, question the normality of their feelings and alter their judgments in deference to the conventional male-coded opinions of others, be they male or female. In a situation where masculine frameworks are therefore taken for granted, the argument that the "masculine and feminine views of morality are complementary (rather than sequential or opposed)" is difficult to understand (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p. 6-7)".

The first pattern I have observed in my action research experience is that women tend to facilitate more than men (see Chapter 3, Subsection 5.2). The second is that when women and men facilitate, women tend to do so with stronger feminine characteristics (emotional, intuitive, personalised, based on responsibility, care, and connection)[14], while men have a more masculine style (rational and objective). The feminine style of facilitation is more prone to becoming invisible than the masculine because it is deemed more primitive. Therefore, it is not only perceived as less valuable but also as a deficit and as something not to be celebrated and of questionable normality.

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[14] This is redundant, as the feminine is defined as such because women enact it more than men.

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I now expand on this pattern following the thread of visibility. During these years, participants in action research (action researchers, policymakers, invited experts, and other territorial actors) have often elaborated theoretical and rational arguments about gender. Paradoxically, these theoretical and rationalised discourses on the feminine were most successfully presented by those with a masculine style. I have observed many women who conveyed the feminine brilliantly by enacting it but did not feel at ease when speaking or writing about *it*. Considering the focus of many projects was on the masculine theoretical and rational dimension, what shone under those lights was the masculine rationalisation of the feminine, while the enacted, experienced, practical, and subjective feminine remained in the shadow. These lights and shadows are illustrated in Figure 4.45.

Figure 4.45. **Lights on the masculine rationalisation of the feminine**
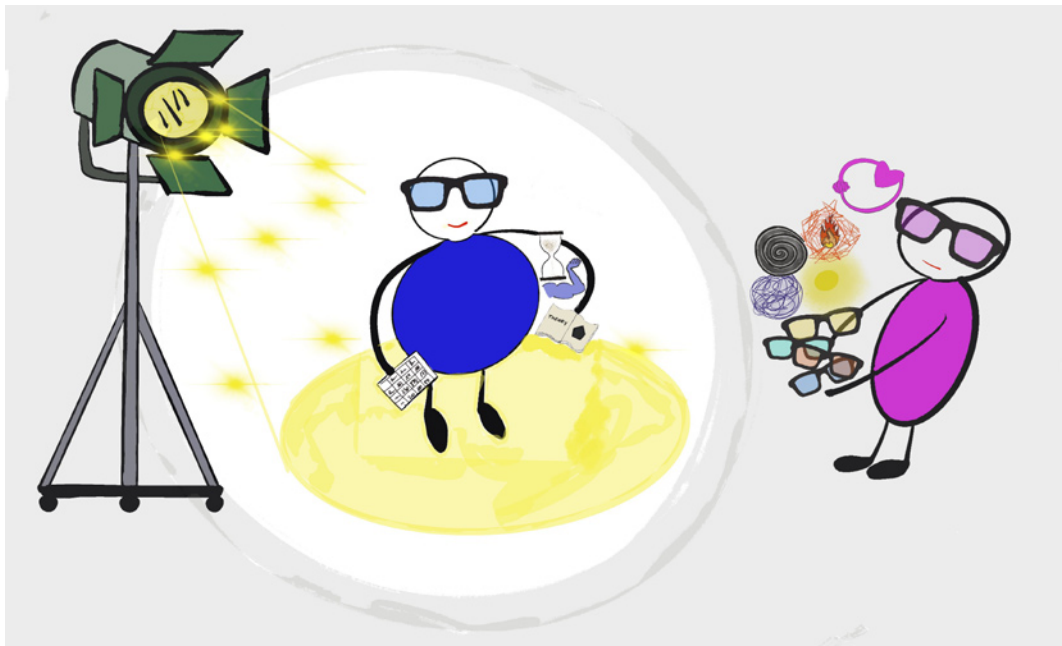
What is behind these lights and shadows I observed in the practical dimension? Deeply rooted institutions (political sphere) and beliefs (personal sphere) persist behind the politically correct discourse on gender.

Another pattern is that nobody explicitly undervalued the feminine. Nobody openly rejected a view or action on account of it being feminine. Yet I have seen the feminine exiled in action research processes because the mainstream institutions in academia and policy related rigour to expert knowledge, ethics to objectivity, science to reason, soundness to planning, and power to public political spaces. The feminine worldview and its enactment were disregarded because they were considered non-rigorous, non-sound or non-scientific (thus irrelevant), non-ethical, and non-adequate. Which essentially means they were disregarded for being experiential, subjective, emotional, emergent, and loving. In a word, they were rejected because they were feminine.

I believe that overcoming dichotomic thinking between feminine and masculine first requires that feminine work be visible, recognised, considered, and appreciated. That is what I represent in Figure 4.46.

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Figure 4.46. **Making the feminine visible in the public spaces**

Only then will we be able to approach mutuality, reciprocity, and complementarity between these two perspectives, which is the final goal, as depicted in Figure 4.47.

Figure 4.47. **Imagining shared visibility of the feminine and the masculine in the public spaces**
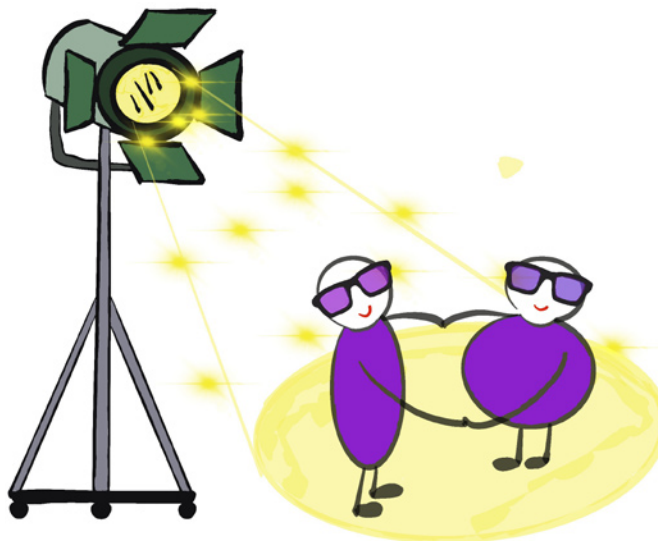
In Figure 4.47 both persons have the same colour, to represent the moment when women and men might equally relate to the features addressed in Figure 4.2 and this book.

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10.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

I have evolved as a facilitative action researcher in environments where participants who theoretically and rationally defended the feminine often felt that the project and themselves were jeopardised by the *enacted feminine*[15]. Making facilitation *invisible* was the most recurrent response by those who felt their position was at stake.

In this context, I underline two features of my facilitation. The first is that by playing the relational role, I have helped stakeholders to materialise their masculine (rational, objective, power-driven) perspective. Though it seems paradoxical, I was facilitating based on feminine characteristics when doing this. The second is that when playing a critical role, I discussed the limitations of reason, objectivity, and power to argue for the value of practice, subjectivity, and emotions. My critical position was often sustained by my status in academia as I spoke as a researcher and, thus, a territorial actor. This time, I was facilitating based on masculine characteristics to argue for the value of the feminine.

Given the relevance of this struggle to my identity as a facilitator, the non-neutral position illustrated in Figure 4.48 works to make the feminine visible so that it can be valued and recognised. Simultaneously, I have tried to generate critical reflexivity regarding the prevailing bias towards the masculine perspective in mainstream policy and research.

Figure 4.48. **My position in the dichotomy between feminine and masculine**

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[15] Again, masculine and feminine refer to the empirical distribution of roles and behaviours in our projects.

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I have often written and published about the action research processes in which I have participated, usually with other colleagues. However, I have sometimes written alone to shed light on features of the process that had remained in the shadow, finding my own voice, and using it to speak my mind about our action research. By individuating to seek realisation, I was enacting my masculine side, which I found liberating and constructive.

10.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.49 shows facilitation that generates mutually nurturing connections between the feminine and masculine approaches in action research. As I have already argued, in my experience, this mutually nurturing relationship first requires making the feminine visible.

The facilitative actor in the figure creates spaces where this is possible, and where both feminine and masculine approaches are under the lights, at the core of the process.

Figure 4.49. **Facilitation as mutual nurturing between the feminine and the masculine**
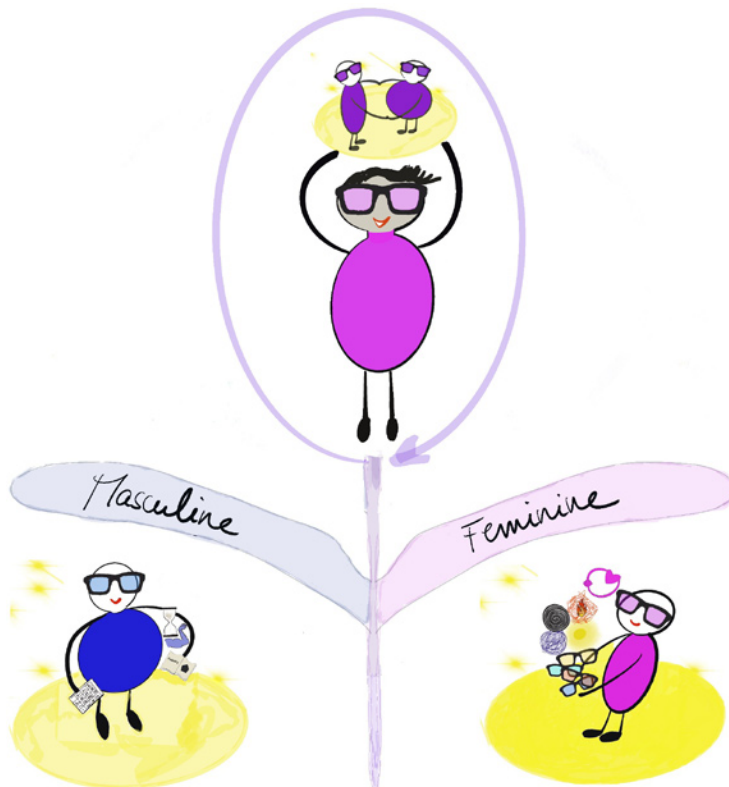
For both approaches to be at the heart of the process, mutuality is required, which is why this facilitative actor helps those with a feminine worldview develop an appreciation and even an enactment of the masculine and those with a masculine worldview to develop an appreciation and an enactment of the feminine.

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11. Actor and facilitator

11.1. *Patterns found in my facilitative experience*

In Chapter 3, I differentiated between facilitators and facilitative actors and described myself as a facilitative actor—more specifically, a facilitative action researcher.

One pattern I have witnessed regarding this dichotomy is that policymakers are often used to working with consultants or researchers who claim neutrality on the issues at stake. My experience is that if we are neutral, we can play a relational role, helping policymakers achieve their goals. However, we cannot play a critical role, as we lack a position to identify what elements in policymakers' proposals require scrutiny.

I consider that action research is non-neutral by nature, as it has inherent principles that are highly political, such as:

a) The answers to the problem must be cogenerated.
b) Experiential knowledge is at the core of the process.
c) Knowledge is generated in action while solving the problem.
d) The process must increase democratic quality.
e) There must be conditions to speak the truth to power.

These positions give action researchers the standpoint to be critical of the process.

Figure 4.50. **The facilitation of a process by a neutral facilitator**
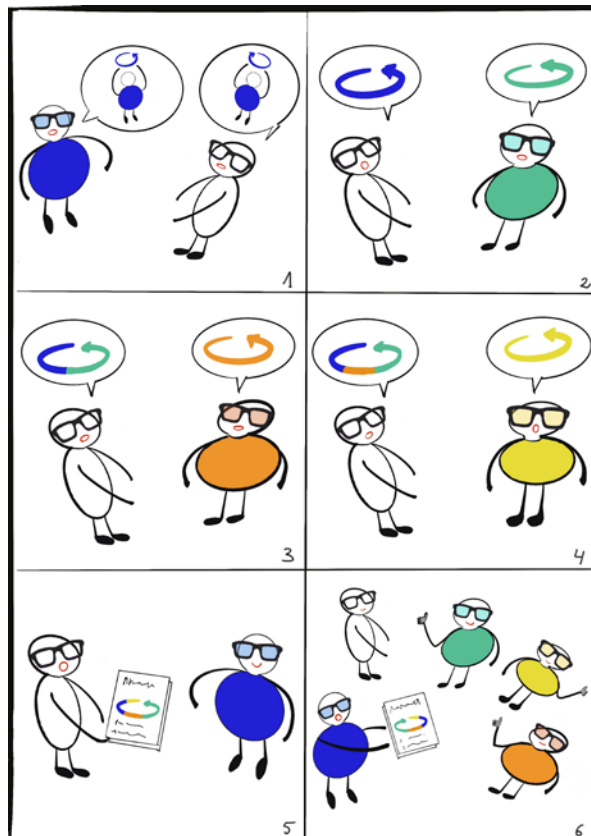
Figure 4.50 shows how a facilitator who is not simultaneously an actor in a process participates in dialogue. The facilitator has no specific colour so as to represent neutrality, while the policymakers initiating the process are blue, and the rest of the territorial actors have different colours. All wear glasses with colours representing their beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms. Circular arrows represent processes.

Figure 4.51, on the other hand, depicts how we have worked as facilitative action researchers.

Figure 4.51. **The facilitation of a process by a facilitative actor**
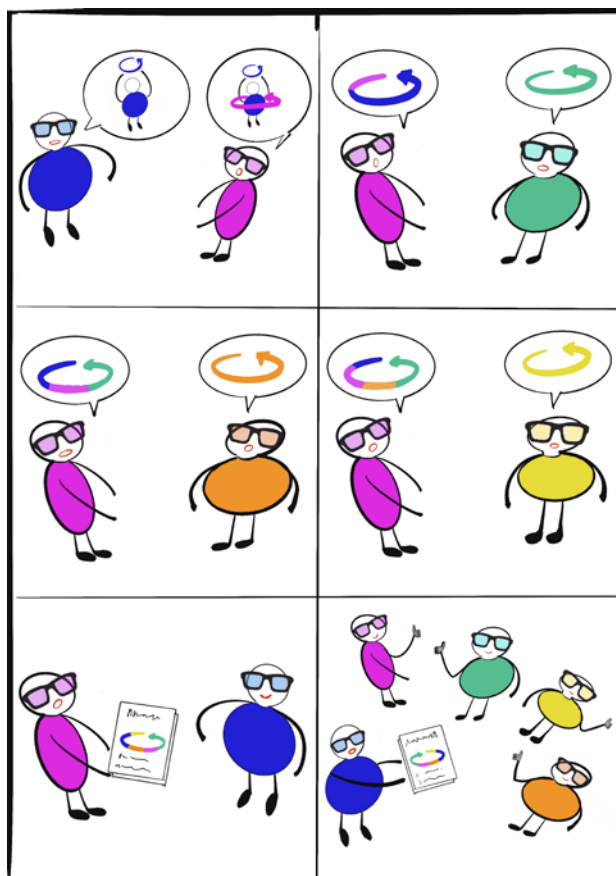
When we compare the two vignettes and think about the practical dimension of the roles of facilitators and facilitative actors in a process, they might seem quite similar. However, the two situations change drastically when we look at the political and personal dimensions.

By assuming the role of a neutral facilitator, we affirm that we do not hold particular stances regarding the transformation action research pursues. By assuming the role of a facilitative action researcher, we acknowledge the political nature of action research and our own facilitation.

11.2. *My position as a facilitative actor*

My identity as an action researcher has emerged in the continuous discussion on our team's and my non-neutrality. Tensions often emerged when policymakers and other territorial

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actors realised that our paradigms also impacted policy. As I argued in the previous subsection, non-neutrality nourishes the critical role, and critique is how we have offered resistance.

My efforts to raise awareness about our non-neutrality (within our research team and research organisation as well as among stakeholders) define me as a facilitative actor. That is what Figure 4.52 represents.

Figure 4.52. **My position in the dichotomy between facilitative action researcher and neutral facilitator**


11.3. *Facilitating to overcome the dichotomy*

Figure 4.53 represents a facilitative actor (in this case, a facilitative action researcher) combining the roles of a facilitator (neutral) and an actor (non-neutral). Although facilitative action researchers are not neutral, they are facilitators and play most of the roles played by neutral facilitators. Simultaneously, they are territorial actors making their own reflections, decisions, and actions based on their non-neutral positions. The mutually nurturing relationship between these roles is complex.

In contexts where most participants assume the neutrality of facilitators and generate pressure for neutral facilitation, this facilitative actor reinforces her actor role and helps participants see that facilitation of action research cannot be neutral and must be critical.

On the other hand, in situations when action researchers are more powerful than stakeholders, and their strong position in specific issues can overshadow or even debilitate the position of stakeholders, this facilitative action researcher focuses more on her facilitative role, nuancing her role as an actor.

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Figure 4.53. **A mutually nurturing relationship between the roles of actor and facilitator**
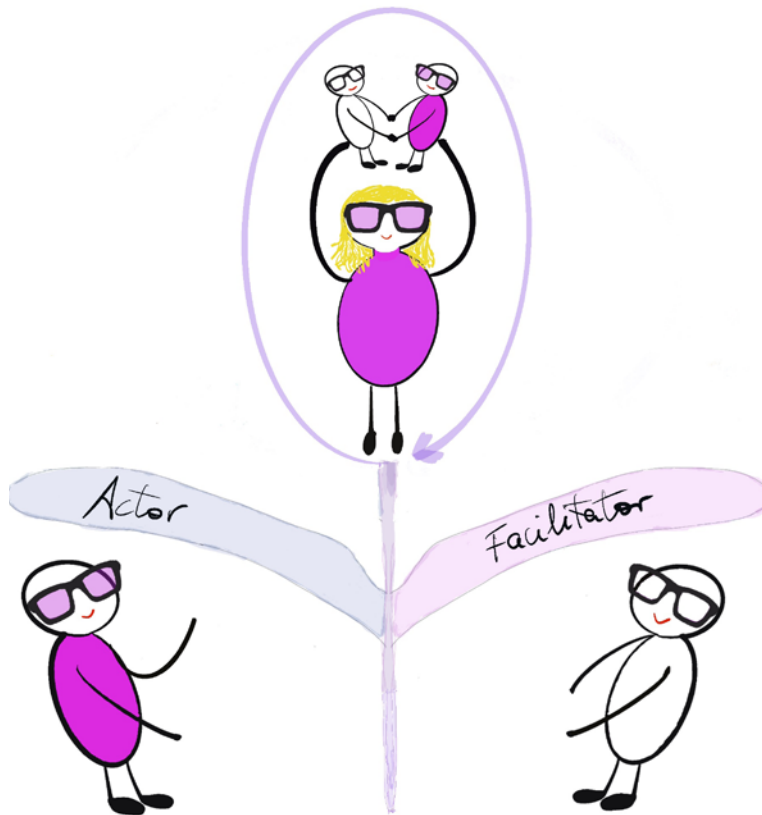

Beyond this self-regulation undertaken by facilitative actors, action research processes involve regulatory mechanisms at both the team and project levels. They operate, for instance, in debriefing sessions, where colleague action researchers point out when the facilitative action researcher in Figure 4.53 is jeopardising facilitation by focusing too much on her actor role. They also operate at the project level when this critique and resistance come from stakeholders.

12. **Closing comments**

In this chapter, I have presented the recurrent patterns I observed when facilitating action research in contexts of dichotomic thinking. The ten dichotomies I have explored emerged in the previous chapter by connecting the practical sphere of action research (what we say, what we do not say, and how we act and react) with the underlying personal and political spheres. I have also shared how I have positioned myself within my practice regarding each of the dichotomies and what facilitation that overcomes dichotomic thinking could look like.

Figure 4.54 shows my ten personal positions in the dichotomies. It represents facilitation as a struggle where I nurture and empower what I consider too weak, misrepresented, or silenced and resist what I deem too powerful, overrepresented, and dominant. When observing Figure 4.54, my first conclusion is that the emotional exhaustion of facilitation is understudied and undertreated.

Figure 4.54. **My position in the ten dichotomies**
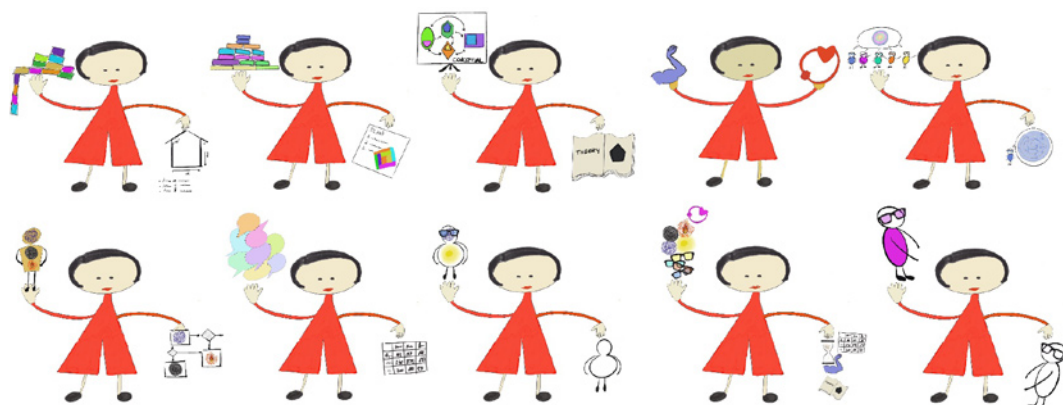
I am aware that each facilitation experience is unique and, as highlighted earlier, that different facilitative actors in other contexts will have differing positions. That is why I have also tried to move beyond my own experience to imagine what facilitation that overcomes dichotomic thinking could be.

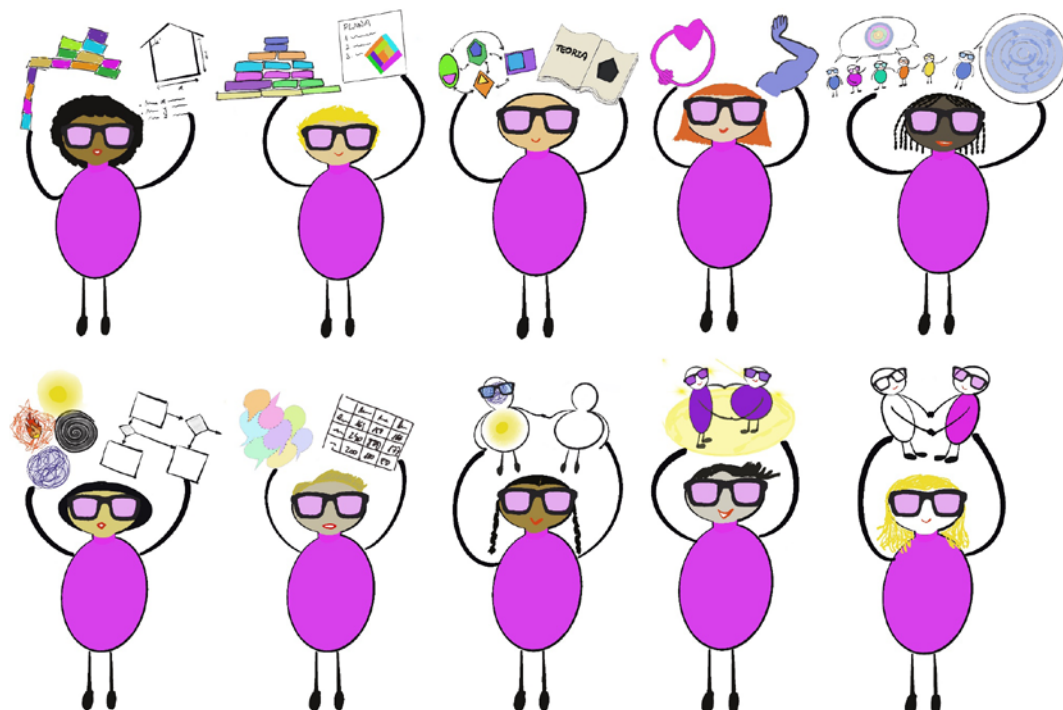Figure 4.55. **Facilitating processes to overcome the ten dichotomies**

Figure 4.55 looks positive, cheerful, and more naïve than Figure 4.54. Its naivety invites us to imagine what action research and policy could look like if we overcome these dichotomies one day. I have done so by drawing Figure 4.2bis. It depicts the overcoming of dichotomic thinking by fusing the blue and fuchsia in Figure 4.2 into purple, and by mixing all concepts in a circular figure, I have represented that there is no longer a need to choose one side. Maybe this is what a post-dichotomic, mutually nurturing relationship would look like. I have left the leaves that previously represented masculine and feminine empty, meaning that none of the other concepts is masculine or feminine anymore.

Figure 4.2bis. **Imagining facilitation of non-dichotomic action research**

However, as long as dichotomic thinking persists, mutually nurturing relationships are not exempt from tensions and conflicts. Beneath the surface of each of the facilitative actors in Figure 4.55 lies one version of the facilitative actor portrayed in 4.54, and I hope this book contributes to generating a more conscious appreciation of their art of facilitation.

Consequently, I finish this chapter with Figure 4.56, which honours the work of all the facilitators and facilitative actors around the world. You well deserve it!

Figure 4.56. **The art of being a facilitative actor**

Chapter 5

Concluding reflections

To close this book, I go back to my very first sentence: "The ecological, social, and political challenges of our time demand transformation, and action research has the potential to respond to this demand, but only if we transform it." This book is my humble contribution to this endeavour.

We may live in different territories, but we all share one planet. If we forget this, territorial development and action research lose their relevance.

Figure 5.1. **We all share one planet**
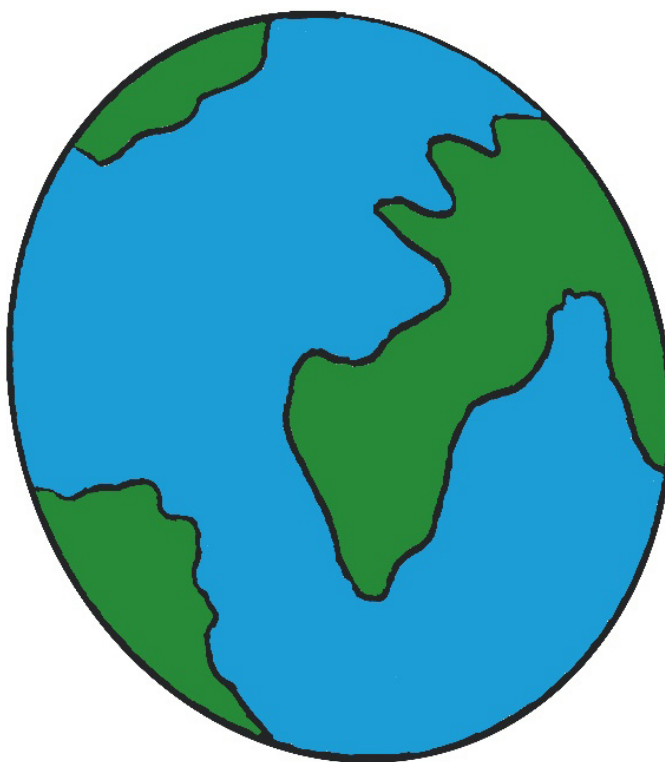
Facing the challenges will require expert knowledge, plans, theory, power, efficiency, reason, and objectivity. We are the actors in this transformation.

Figure 5.2. **We are the actors in this transformation**

Hopefully, we will not forget that we also need to let processes emerge along with experiential knowledge, practice, love, democratisation, emotion, and subjectivity. We can be the facilitators of this process.

Figure 5.3. **We can be the facilitators of this process**
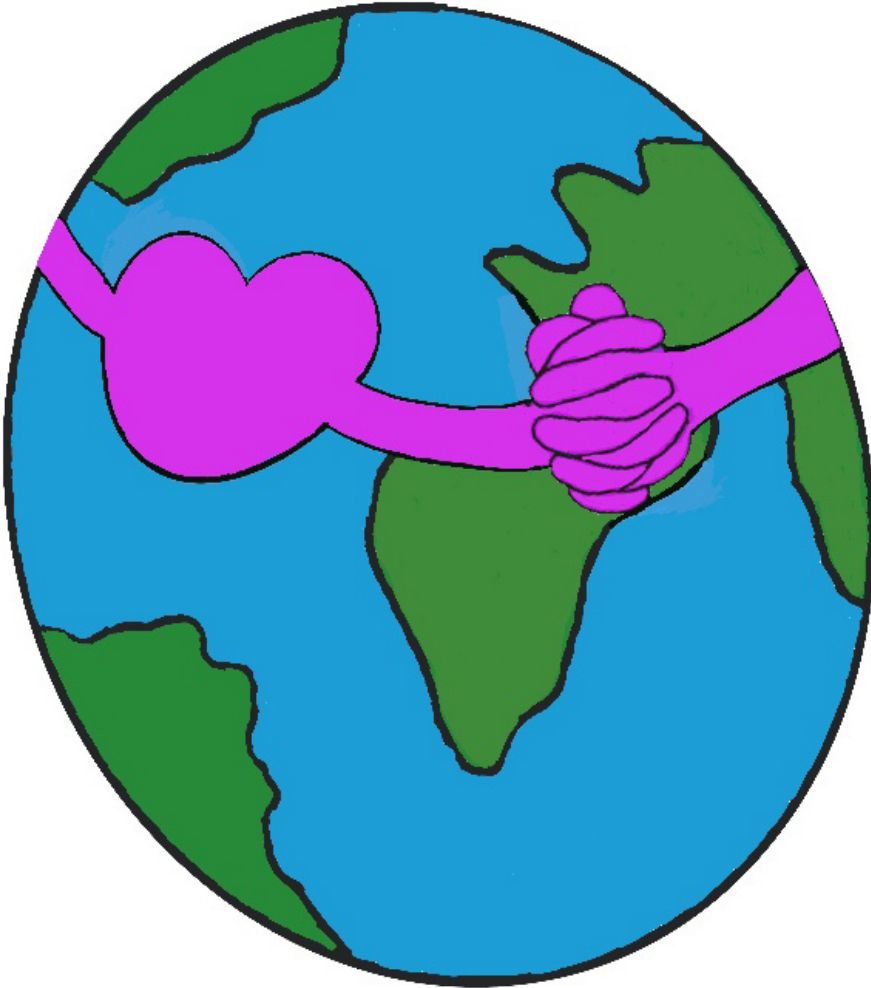
We can start by using action research to mobilise the different communities closest to us. This will help us understand how what is happening to our planet affects us and how we can affect what is happening to our planet.

Figure 5.4. **Action research is an approach to local mobilisation**
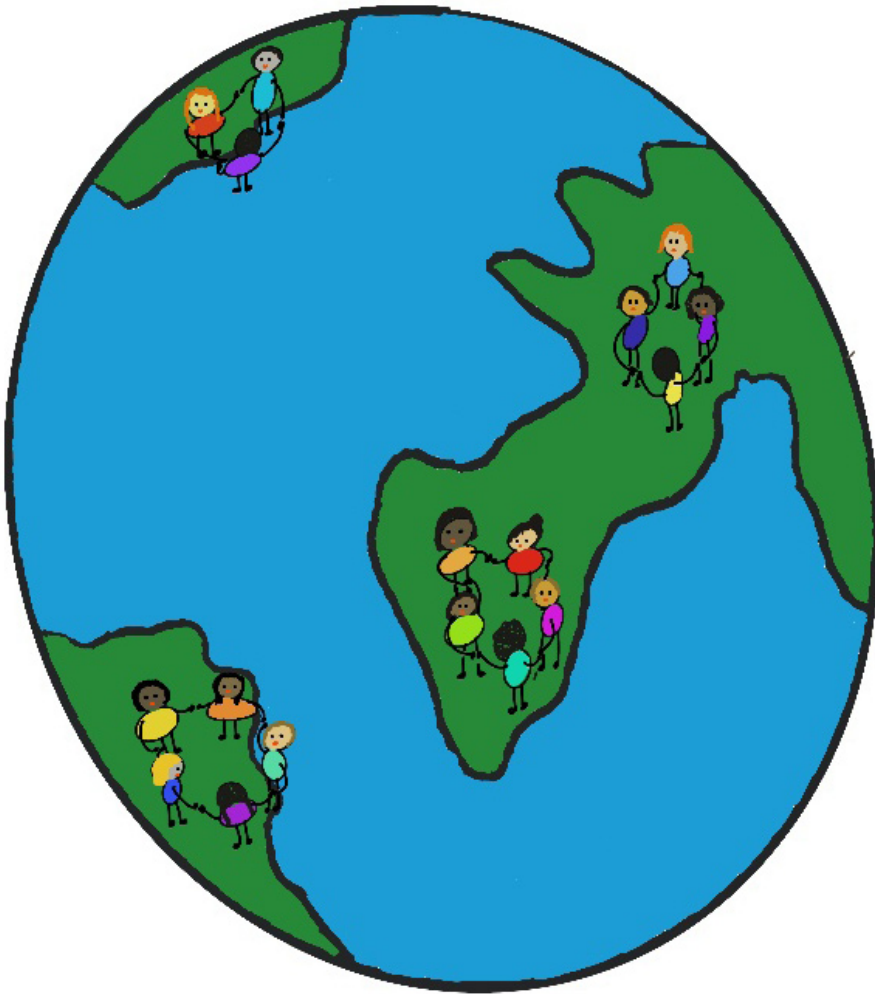
For its part, the community of action researchers can help connect practitioners worldwide who are facing these challenges. But to achieve this, action researchers in different *families*, approaches, and disciplines must first connect.

Figure 5.5. **Global communities of action researchers**
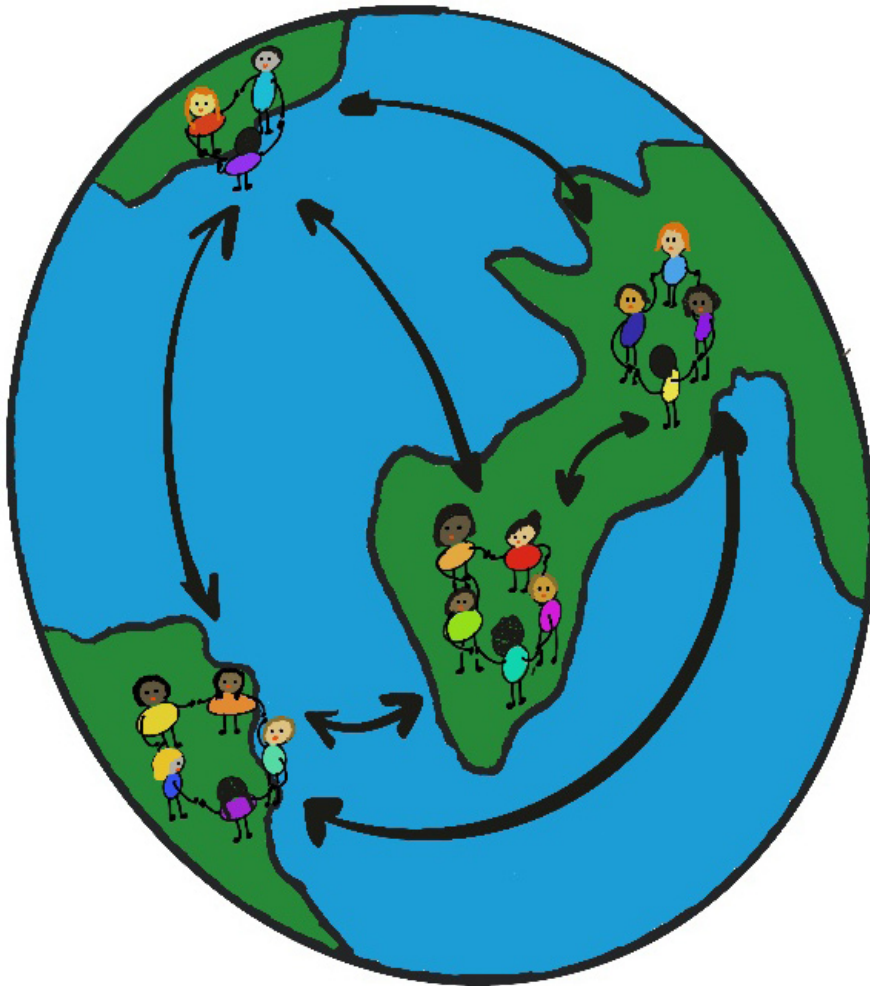
If we follow that path, we may be able to materialise the potentiality of action research to bring people worldwide together in this endeavour.

Figure 5.6. **The potentiality of action research to bring people together**
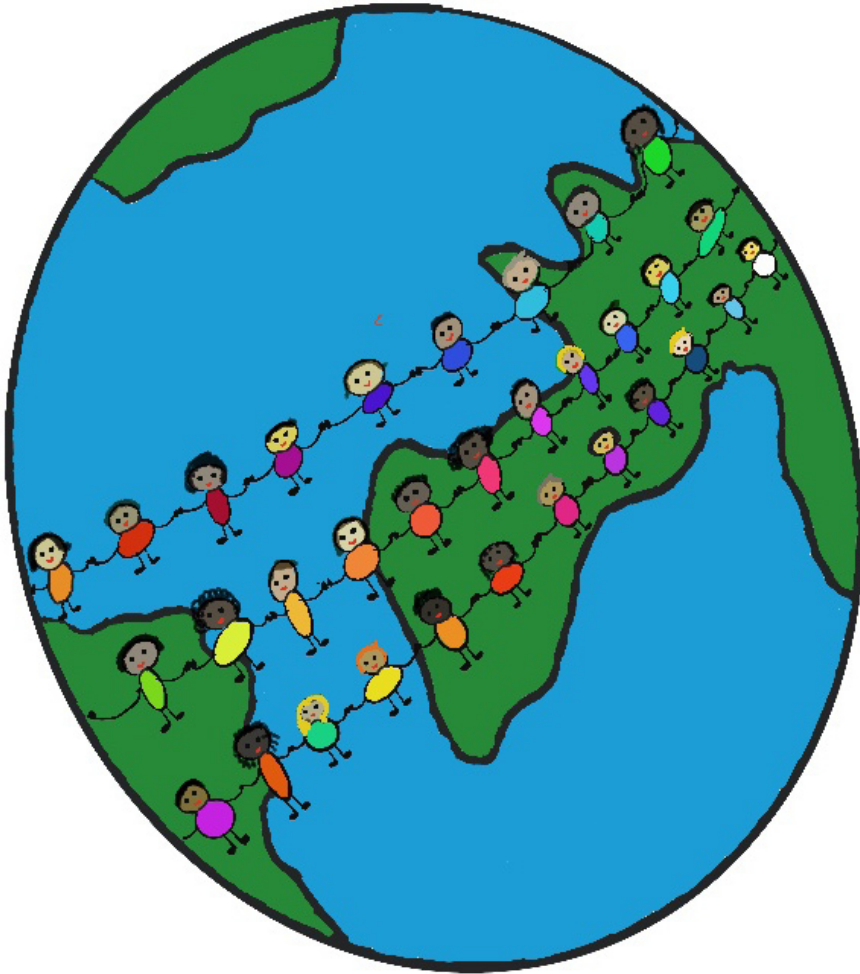
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In this book Miren Larrea leads us through the meanders of her journey with Action Research for Territorial Development. It is a strong and beautiful testimony of how action research is all about change. Action research changes organizations and relationships; it also changes us, as researchers, when we allow ourselves to become part of the process with our entire being, reason and emotions, aware of the way power and love are intertwined in the coproduction of transformative knowledge. It is not a conventional book on action research. Written in first person, Miren holds in front of us a mirror where we see reflected our relationship with action research, as researchers, community and organization leaders or public office holders. It is a generous invitation to tell our own stories.

Danilo R. Streck

Miren Larrea presents a framework that represents dichotomic thinking in action research processes and brings to light dimensions that many of us might have deeply embeded, thus reaching some conclusions to make facilitation more transformative.

Naiara Goia Imaz