

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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