BUILDING COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

PRACADEMIC LESSONS FROM THE BASQUE GIPUZKOA PROVINCE

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Building Collaborative Governance in Times of Uncertainty

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Chapter 5
Active experimentation through action research: The experience of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* Think Tank

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1.   Introduction

It has often been said by the political leadership of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* that *how* things are done is as important as *what* is done. This stress on the *how* has raised the need to further explore the methodological dimension of the way in which a new political culture is constructed through collaborative governance. To meet this need, active experimentation has been included as a central part of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. This is evidenced not only in *Gipuzkoa Lab*, within which the experimental projects of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* are framed, but in the initiative more widely.

The concept of active experimentation was popularised by Kolb (2015), who defined it as part of the experiential learning process. Kolb views experiential learning in terms of four-phase cycles that gradually overcome two dualities: 1) the action/reflection duality and 2) the duality of the experience and abstraction of that experience. In this approach, the process of apprehending an experience begins with living a phase linked to the experience itself. This is followed by the construction of its abstract conceptualisation. At the same time, in order to transform the experience, a reflective observation is first made, followed by active experimentation. Like a spiral, learning occurs when these four phases are repeated successively.

Etorkizuna Eraikiz has integrated active experimentation in different ways. One of these is action research, which Kolb (2015, p. 10) calls "a useful approach to planned-change interventions in small groups and large complex organisations and community systems".

Action research should be viewed not as a single methodology, but rather as an umbrella encompassing different approaches. Of these, *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* has used two. For the internal transformation of the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa (PGG), it has applied action learning methodologies (Murphy & Canel, 2020), which are described in this book in relation to the *Ekinez Ikasi* ('Learning by Doing') initiative with staff from the PGG. In order to develop collaborative governance with other provincial stakeholders in Gipuzkoa, in 2009 the Provincial Government opted for *action research for territorial development* (ARTD). The term, coined by Karlsen & Larrea (2014), refers to a specific approach to action research that emerged between 2008 and 2011 through international collaboration on action research projects developed simultaneously in the Basque Country, Agder (Norway) and Rafaela (Santa Fe, Argentina). ARTD is one of the methodologies used to develop *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. It is currently being applied in the Territorial Development Laboratory of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* (TDLab), in the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* Think Tank (EETT) and in the recently created Collaborative Governance Laboratory. This chapter begins by describing how the PGG has been integrating action research into its processes of constructing collaborative governance. It then goes on to present a series of lessons learned from the application of this methodology in EETT.

To this end, the second section of the chapter shares a series of initial definitions and basic principles of action research, a timeline describing how it has been integrated into *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* and a brief description of the context in which it is currently being applied in EETT. The third section shares three key lessons learned in EETT and the fourth and last section offers some closing reflections.

2.   Action research in the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa

This second section describes the context in which the three lessons shared in the third section took place. In it, we set out: 1) a series of definitions and principles that will help explain what action research is; 2) the antecedents of action research at the PGG, to explain how it is currently being applied in EETT; and 3) the initial design of EETT, which enabled the methodology to be used in its workings.

2.1.   Initial definitions and basic principles

Action research is "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1). Within this framework, action research for territorial development is a specific approach aimed at generating collaborative relationships between different actors within a territory, in this case, the province or territory of Gipuzkoa. Since 2009, the PGG has been working with the multi-local action research team that initially proposed and developed ARTD. This team is referred to throughout this chapter in abbreviated form as the *action research team*. It comprises researchers from Orkestra (the Basque Institute of Competitiveness) in the Basque Country; from Praxis (the Institute of Technological and Social Studies) in Rafaela, Santa Fe and the University of Tierra del Fuego, both in Argentina; and from the University of Agder in Norway. The PGG's ongoing partnership with this team dates from 2009.

ARTD consists of real-time processes of co-generation occurring at the intersection between research and territorial development and with participants who are immersed in processes of change. The research is developed through micro processes (involving a relatively small number of people), usually representing specific organisations, but the overall aim is to have a long-term structural impact on the territory (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014). Within this framework, 'territory' is defined as the set of actors living in a place, with their social, economic and political organisation, culture and institutions, as well as the physical environment of which they form part. 'Territorial development' is the process of mobilization and participation of different actors (public and private), whereby they discuss and agree on strategies to guide individual and collective behaviour (Alburquerque, 2012, pp. 3–4). ARTD is developed in spaces of dialogue in which researchers and local stakeholders address the problems of the territory in cycles of reflection and action.

In their analysis of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* case as a context for the application of ARTD, Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea & Streck (2022) argue that action research, as implemented by the action research team and the PGG, is based on three basic principles: 1) the development by a territory of its collective capabilities augments its possibilities of dealing with global challenges; 2) politics and policies can be the vehicle for developing such collective capabilities; and 3) action research can be the methodology for building collective capabilities through policy and politics.

To develop collective capabilities in the territory, ARTD proposes a series of processes of knowledge co-generation to be carried out by the territorial development actors (in the case of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, these are members of the ecosystems of PGG policies) and action research teams. The ecosystem of a given policy comprises stakeholders (organisations and individuals) linked to that policy at any of its phases (design, implementation, evaluation, etc.). One concrete example of an ecosystem is the one that has been developed in EETT between the PGG, companies, local *comarcal* development agencies, vocational training centres, business associations and the chamber of commerce in order, through PGG programmes, to help companies improve the quality of the work of the future.

Co-generation processes in ecosystems require a continuous dialogue, encompassing three types of knowledge: disciplinary knowledge (provided by the participants and invited experts), experiential knowledge (based on the experience of the participants), and process knowledge (methodological knowledge provided by the facilitators) (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014). This dialogue forms the basis for combining the action research team's relational role (through which it accompanies territorial actors in their efforts to achieve their established goals) and its critical role (through which it helps make the territorial stakeholders aware of habits embedded in their day-to-day operations that are hindering the desired transformations) (Arrona & Larrea, 2018).

2.2.   Background on action research in the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa

In order to understand how action research is currently being integrated into *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, it is important to consider the process of methodological development initiated in 2009 in the project currently known as the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* TDLab.

Table 5-1 shows the principal milestones in integrating ARTD at TDLab, from where, since 2017, it has been extended to *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. For each period in the process, the table shows: 1) the aim of the action research process; 2) the concepts on which the reflection centred, in order both to discuss their significance and decide how to intervene in the territory in relation to these concepts; 3) the results in terms of the *what*s (i.e. results aimed at responding directly to the problem posed); and 4) the results in terms of the *how*s or methodological results (i.e. transformations linked to the ways of working). The lessons learned with regard to the *how*s were conceptualised to become part of the principles of ARTD. The last column shows some of the publications in which this conceptualisation is discussed.

Table 5-1: Implementation of action research at the PGG

Period	Aim	Main concepts	Results in terms of the *whats*	Results in terms of the hows integrated into the ARTD methodology
2009–2011	Increase social capital to improve competitive-ness	Social capital, Competitive-ness, Values, Community	Analysis and measure-ment of social capital, the implications of which were discussed with representatives from organised society in each area	Dialogic forms of relationship were established between politicians and the action research team (Karlsen & Larrea, 2014)
2011–2013	Propose a new territorial development model for Gipuzkoa	Territorial development, Strategy, Complexity, Participation	Proposal for a new territorial development model; the Directorate for Territorial Develop-ment was created within the Office of the Deputy Gen-eral (Provincial First Minister)	Emerging strategies of learning, negotiation and ideological debate were generated (Aranguren & Larrea, 2015)
2013–2015	Implement a new model for relations between the government and other territorial actors	Governance, Strategy, Capabilities, Shared vision, Trust	Stable spaces for dialogue with regional agencies; two govern-ment programmes defined through participation	Facilitation was explicitly included as a relevant axis of transformation (Costamagna & Larrea, 2018)
2015–2017	Institutionalise collaborative governance, which up to then had been experimental	Dialogue, Conflict Management, Learning, Negotiation, Institutionali-sation	Formal agreement between the PGG and the 11 *comarca* agencies on the col-laboration model	The complementa-rity of the critical and relational dimensions of the processes was extended (Arrona & Larrea, 2018)
2017–2022	Increase efficiency in programmes for SMEs and people at risk of exclusion	Multi-level governance, Industry 4.0, Digitalisation, Networks for Employability	Collaborative pro-grammes of Industry 4.0, digitalisation and the *Elkar-Ekin Lanean* initiative.	A positive relationship was built up between democratisation and policy efficiency (Larrea, Estensoro & Sisti, 2018)

Source: adapted from Larrea (2019).

2.3. ARTD at *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* Think Tank

The methodological bases of EETT, designed jointly by its policy-makers and the action research team, are based on ARTD and were published in the research diaries on the EETT website (see Appendix 4). Since then, consistent with Kolb (2015), there has been a move towards an abstraction of the experience through the concept of *action research think tanks* (Larrea & Karlsen, 2021). EETT currently has four spaces for dialogue, linked to the ecosystems addressed by the policies in four areas: the welfare state of the future, the green recovery, the work of the future and the new political culture. Each of these spaces has approximately five members from the PGG with responsibility for policies in these areas and between 15 and 20 representatives from the corresponding ecosystem. Each group is led by a political officer from the PGG, in three cases a deputy (*diputado* – member of the PGG Governing Council) and in another case a director (the next rank down). These policy-makers and their teams speak directly with the participants at EETT. In addition, with the action research team, they lead the experiential learning process (Kolb, 2015) of the group in question. The groups are stable, but not static, and have been gradually adapted to the needs of the processes. Following the cycles of reflection and continuous action proposed by ARTD, each group has: 1) agreed on the specific problem on which it wishes to focus its deliberations; 2) invited in experts to help it understand the problem; 3) established, through reflection, guidelines for action; and 4) defined mechanisms whereby it can continue learning from action.

One of the features of EETT is that these four dialogue spaces are not independent. EETT's overall activity is coordinated by the management team. This body comprises: one or two representatives from each dialogue space (one deputy, two directors and two political advisors); two policy-makers from *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*; the individuals responsible for studies/publications and dissemination of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*; the representative of the technical secretariat of the Think Tank; and three people from the action research team. In all, there are 13 people learning from the processes of the four dialogue spaces and feeding back a series of operating criteria. Thus, EETT continues to be designed and built on an emergent basis, through the work of the approximately 100 people participating in it.

The authors of this chapter are members of the deliberation group on new political culture and one of them is also in charge of coordinating the action research team. On the basis of the documents reflecting this process of deliberation on new political culture (and, therefore, on the application of ARTD), and on the authors' own experience at EETT, three lessons have

been identified on how action research has become a methodology for experimentation.

3. Action research applied to the construction of collaborative governance: three key lessons

The following are not only lessons *on* action research, but also lessons learned *through* action research.

3.1. ARTD builds non-linear relationships between theory and practice that aid in transformation

Praxis is a central plank of ARTD and consists of a continuous combination of reflection and action. Through praxis, the 20 participants in the deliberation group on new political culture (comprising representatives from the PGG, the three universities in the territory, several research institutes and two reference centres for experimentation) have gained awareness of their different approaches to knowledge generation, and how these can be combined more efficiently to build a new collaborative governance and transform the political culture in the ecosystem.

The lesson is that action research offers a relationship between reflection and action that helps overcome the expectation of a linear process from theory to practice. In ARTD, the action is no longer put off until the theoretical or conceptual dilemmas have been resolved. On the contrary, the action itself becomes the context in which answers to these dilemmas can be constructed.

This lesson helps ARTD practitioners to understand the effective importance of combining types of knowledge of a different nature, meaning and purpose in the process of building collaborative governance. It is not merely theoretical learning; it also entails a commitment to action.

The lesson has been learned through reflection on the contradictions raised in the deliberation group. The interpretation of praxis that emerged in the group at the beginning of the process was apparently quite simple: the aim was to create a plural and heterogeneous group with people involved in the PGG policy ecosystem in order to *transfer* to participants' organisations the ideas that were put forward and suggested by experts invited to join the process on an *ad hoc* basis.

The term *transfer* implies that knowledge is generated within a space (the academy or the EETT itself) and applied in another (the organisations of the ecosystem, including the PGG). However, this runs counter to the idea

of praxis in ARTD, whereby action is not the result of applying knowledge brought in from outside, but rather, action acts as the starting point for reflection.

This coexistence of different frameworks in an ARTD process is commonplace. As was to be expected, certain differences of opinion arose at the outset. These were sometimes expressed in the form of incomprehension, demotivation or even ineffectiveness and a feeling that it would be difficult to channel the ideas expressed into practice. For instance, some people who said they tended to learn from practice felt that certain other members of the group ranked this type of knowledge below theoretical knowledge; others, in contrast, felt that the group did not value theoretical knowledge highly enough.

For such situations, the ARTD approach is to get these conflicts out in the open and seek agreed ways of overcoming them. The action research team assisted the group in this exercise. As a result, tasks were added to be carried out in smaller groups made up of people with similar ways of generating knowledge. One group took charge of making a theoretical contribution, while others undertook to intervene in three specific experiences (the PGG's *Aurrerabide* programme, and the *Arantzazulab* and *Badalab* reference centres) with a view to transforming governance of these experiences and bringing the lessons learned from this practice to the deliberation group. The theoretical results and these experiences are set out in *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* (2022). At a personal level, sharing these experiences has led several participants to change their judgements, deep-held beliefs and behavioural patterns in a quest for mutual understanding.

At the time of writing, the deliberation group continues to hold diverse views on how the knowledge required to transform the ecosystem should be generated. Nonetheless, progress has been made in overcoming a linear interpretation of knowledge transfer, in which it was assumed that acquiring and understanding abstract and disciplinary knowledge implies – if there is a desire and a willingness – transforming practical and organisational activity. By actively listening to the unease provoked by the dissociation of theory and practice, we have learned that theory, desire and willingness are not enough. Fertile knowledge is complex and the pace of transformation depends on a series of interests, routines, demands and resistances that tend to be undervalued or neglected in more theoretical reflections. ARTD offers ways in which these interests, routines, demands and resistances can be addressed.

From this position, by practising ARTD, the group has been able:

– To identify the root problem that explains the low level of linkage perceived, felt and experienced between theory and practice: the group had very different frameworks on how to generate knowledge for transformation. We believe this is often the case in other contexts as well.

– To see the advisability of knowing how to address and combine theoretical knowledge with knowledge originating from daily experience and also with knowledge arising from processual interaction in the spaces for reflection. The deliberation group combined the *theoretical* knowledge provided by guest experts and some members of the ecosystem, the *experiential* knowledge linked to *Aurrerabide*, *Arantzazulab* and *Badalab* and the *process* knowledge integrated through facilitation, which has basically consisted of the ARTD principles.

– To learn that action research requires a willingness to assume personal and collective responsibilities based on cognitive, affective, emotional or strategic learning and that it generates trust in other people. For example, based on the awareness of different ways of generating knowledge, participants committed to contributing the type of knowledge that they believed they could best generate.

– To understand that action should be viewed not as a single area in which to apply theoretical knowledge, but as different spheres that are open to reflexivity and generate robust knowledge in so far as they are contextualised. Thus, *Aurrerabide*, *Arantzazulab* and *Badalab* have not been spaces in which the Think Tank's knowledge has been *applied*, but spaces whose reflexivity around the Think Tank's approaches has enabled new transformative knowledge to be generated.

3.2. ARTD helps to assume and manage the fears and suspicions generated by the participation of collaborative governance

Taking its inspiration from Greenwood & Levin (2007), ARTD includes participation as a third element that complements reflection and action, and serves as a link between them. Participation takes the form of processes of dialogue in which participants learn and negotiate action.

One of the important lessons learned at EETT is related to the ethical and political nature of the work of participating agents. Specifically, it has been seen that the participation involved in ARTD generates fears and suspicions that need to be addressed if real transformation processes are to be undertaken – or in other words, if we want to ensure that participants can "change their own practice" (Townsend, 2014, p. 7).

These fears and suspicions appear at the intersection between reflection and action, i.e. when the co-generated knowledge is likely to have an impact on the political agenda and, therefore, on the PGG's public policies.

Participation in EETT involves a collaborative or cooperative conception of power entailing a recognition that the plurality and complexity of our societies

requires the cooperation of 'political' stakeholders (policy-makers *stricto sensu*, experts from various fields, researchers from the academic field, etc.), at different levels, using various instruments of collaboration. Participants in this process understood that ARTD's links with the transformation of power relations towards cooperative or collaborative forms were related to a political dimension of ARTD, which involved seeking the democratisation of processes through participation.

This type of process, in the initial stage of building collaborative governance as a cooperative model for the exercise of political power, requires a basic moral structure that sets the limits of participation and defines the mutual commitments among the agents and their levels of responsibility. Without such a structure, fears and suspicions can arise. In the case of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* Think Tank, these fears and suspicions were stated explicitly at the beginning of 2022, two years after the Think Tank's activities began, when there was little more than a year remaining before the end of the government's term of office and the 2023 elections.

Fears and suspicions were initially raised in one of the four focus groups. Some of its participants expressed their concern that the government might somehow attribute responsibility for governmental decisions to the group of people participating in the Think Tank. The proximity of the elections only served to heighten this feeling. This gave rise to a concern that might at first sight appear contradictory. The Think Tank was created precisely in order that its reflections would impact PGG policies, and this characteristic was accepted by the people from the ecosystem who participated in it. However, when, in 2022, this impact on policy began to be realised, some participants expressed their worry. This raised the following question: who would be responsible for an unwise decision made by the government based on the Think Tank's reflections?

In order to answer this question, between March and May 2022 the action research team facilitated a process based on ARTD guidelines for stating conflict explicitly and building agreements for action. By means of this process, a structure was constructed for collective action. This was set out in a 'Code of Good Governance'. The purpose of this code is to clarify the commitments and the degree of responsibility of the people involved, with a view to boosting their trust in the process. Starting from the contributions made at the deliberation group that initially raised the problem in early 2022, a proposal for a code was developed and taken to the EETT management team. It was subsequently discussed in each of the dialogue spaces.

The code explicitly sets out the ethical commitment of the participants in the Think Tank, their position *vis-à-vis* the diversity of interests represented in

the deliberation groups, and the obligations and commitments they are willing to take on. The fundamental principle agreed upon among the participants is that the PGG has sole responsibility for its own decisions and actions. This means applying to the PGG the general principle adopted on the use of knowledge co-generated in the EETT, which is set out below:

> People participating in deliberative processes, who are part of policy ecosystems, can use the co-generated knowledge for decision-making and actions in their own organisations. The responsibility for each participant's use of such knowledge rests with that person, or to the extent to which it is assumed by his or her organisation, with each organisation.
>
> Application of this principle to the specific case of the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa, which proposes and leads the Think Tank, means that in cases in which the individuals or teams from the Provincial Government consider integrating the knowledge co-generated in the Think Tank in their decision-making processes and actions, the remaining participants do not directly assume any commitment in said decision-making process or in relation to said actions.
> (Excerpt from EETT's Code of Good Governance)

It is important to note that one of the promoters of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* raised the concern that this principle did not favour the construction of co-responsibility of all participants in the public policy ecosystem. Consequently, the management team added another heading to set out the dynamic nature of EETT, thus contemplating the possibility that some of the principles contained in the code could be adapted at a later date:

> The code responds to the initial stage of building collaborative governance, in which the PGG has opened some of its decisions and actions to deliberation with the ecosystem. It is in this context that the PGG's exclusive responsibility for decisions and actions is framed. However, processes are beginning to emerge within the Think Tank oriented towards deliberating on decisions and actions shared by the entire ecosystem, thus further extending collaborative governance. As the Think Tank moves in this direction, this code will be adapted also to accommodate forms of shared responsibility for the ecosystem transformation process.
> (Excerpt from EETT's Code of Good Governance)

The lesson learned from the experience of developing the code is that, in the transition from reflection to action, materialised through participation, the

participants' contributions impact not only on their own actions, but also on those of other participants. An awareness of this impact may generate fears. In the short term, EETT has addressed these fears by delimiting each participant's areas of responsibility (see first excerpt from the code). However, the EETT management team hope that, going forward, conditions will be generated in EETT for co-responsibility to emerge (see second excerpt from the code), for example through shared projects in which members of the ecosystem not only contribute knowledge to PGG decisions and actions, but undertake shared projects in which everyone decides and acts together.

3.3. ARTD makes it possible to address the emotional dimension of building collaborative governance

Another of the lessons learned in EETT in relation to action research is the relevance of the emotional dimension. The critical role described in section 2.1 of this chapter, as articulated by both researchers and ecosystem members, can lead to emotional exhaustion among participants.

Action research has contributed to an explicit consideration of emotions in the Think Tank, within the framework of first-person action research. One of the most recent proposals in this field is *action research for transformations* (ART) (Bradbury, 2022). *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, and more specifically the deliberation group for the construction of a new political culture, have examined this framework (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, 2020a). Consequently, some of its principles (adapted to the territorial context) have been integrated into ARTD.

The main result of this experimentation has been to propose integrating the concept of *reflexive co-agency* as part of ARTD. This form of cooperation "aims to transform the very mindset and relational interactions that hold our political systems captive in either/or thinking that is largely unresponsive to the growing complexity of modern democracies" (Larrea, Bradbury & Barandiarán, 2021, p. 44).

Reflexive co-agency in ARTD requires an appreciation of subjectivity, and in practising it, policy-makers and researchers turn the camera simultaneously on themselves and on each other, discovering different subjective interpretations of their own actions, relationships and the structures within which these operate. By looking at themselves, politicians and researchers discover not only their own rationality, but also their emotions; they are so closely linked to one another that it is difficult to view them as separate entities.

To explain this idea better, we would like to conclude this section with an excerpt from the dialogue generated in one of the experiments conducted at *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, which serves as an example of a process of reflexive co-agency (Larrea, Bradbury & Barandiarán, 2021, p. 51):

> Xabier: In politics, up to now we consider the political objects and the rules that regulate them. But we do not consider this intangible feature that we can name as love, affection, admiration. But it exists and it is not anecdotal. The most transformative political relationships that I know have been based on the love that certain people felt for each other.
> Hilary: I'm surprised that you, that we, say love in our conversation. I don't think we normally say love. Which is actually really interesting. 'Cause we are talking about love, yet somehow, we cannot use the word. This says something about the normative discourse that prevents this conversation.
> Xabier: I think this intangible factor, OK, let's call it love, is an element to relearn politics in the context of the actual transformation worldwide. The political system will not be able to face complexity unless it becomes more horizontal, democratic and flexible.

The processes for talking about emotions, not just about rational thought, are not often found in processes linked to politics. However, they can help to integrate the emotional dimension of the processes in a healthier way, improving not only the wellbeing of the people involved, but also the long-term consolidation of the processes. By incorporating reflexive co-agency, ARTD can help achieve these objectives.

4.   Final reflections

The three lessons shared in this chapter were made within the framework of transformation processes framed within *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. However, it would be naïve to think that the transformation sought by this initiative has already taken place. We (all participants in *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*) will need to sustain this effort over time, using this and other methodologies, going further and deeper at every step. What the lessons learned in this chapter show us is that action research – and specifically ARTD – can be a valid methodology for making progress along the road towards collaborative governance, overcoming the dichotomies that often block it.

5.   Lessons for practitioners

–   Policy-makers can use action research as a strategy to construct collaborative governance.
–   To integrate action research into policy-making, policy-makers and action researchers need to work as a team; this approach differs from the traditional relationship between policy-makers and researchers, which is based on reports and other types of deliverables.
–   When constructing collaborative governance, action research can help:
    •   to overcome excessive reliance by collaborative governance processes on planning or, alternatively, to explore emergent strategies;
    •   to express and manage participants' fears that the process of collaborative governance might be misused; and
    •   to address the emotional dimensions of the process.