

Report on a Visit to the Basque Country, July 2023

The principal focus of this visit was Arantzazulab, a new democracy lab established as a joint initiative by the different levels of government – local, provincial and Basque – and civil society at a site of huge historical resonance for the development of Basque identity.

Location

During my visit I was shown the impressive surroundings and heard the fascinating history of Arantzazu which are an important part of understanding the role of the laboratory in contemporary Basque society. Arantzazu is located in Onati, a small town situated in an idyllic valley high in the Aizkorri mountains. It has been a place of pilgrimage since the late 1400s, and the Franciscan monastery located there – with its bold modernist basilica dating from 1950 – became synonymous both with support for the Basque language and culture and opposition to Francoism.

Origins of Arantzazulab

Arantzazulab is a social innovation or democracy laboratory located in the former seminary building adjacent to the basilica. The early genesis of the idea was the desire of the now aging Franciscan community's desire to create a legacy that could build on Arantzazu's heritage as a place of reflection and development for Basque society. The lab itself is the main initiative of the Arantzazu Gaur Foundation established by the Franciscan Order of Arantzazu, the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, the Basque Government, the Onati Town Council, the Mondragon Corporation and the Kutxa Foundation (associated with one of the Gipuzkoa region's main banks).

Arantzazulab was established in the wider context of the Gipuzkoa Province's work on collaborative governance which began in 2016 with its Etorbizuna Eraikiz (EE) programme of work, jointly conceived with local civil society and the region's universities. 50,000 people are estimated to have participated in these activities so far. Central to this programme is the EE think tank and Gipuzkoa lab (separate from but also linked to the work of Arantzazulab).

Current Focus

Arantzazulab's central focus is on practical and experimental development of the idea of a collaborative governance – the social and democratic innovations that will allow society to tap into its collective intelligence in solving today's and tomorrow's problems. Specific examples include:

- A Gipuzkoan citizens' assembly focusing in particular on the role of the rural sector in leading action on climate change
- A citizens' assembly in the city of Tolosa based around health and emotional wellbeing

First Impressions

A number of things were quite striking on this first visit:

- The presence and prominence of women as key drivers of change at Arantzazulab, including its managing director, Naiara Goia, and
- The centrality of the Basque language which is the lab's working language
- The emphasis on international collaboration, particularly the interest in social innovation in other similar-sized small nations
- The strong linkage between 'thinking' and 'doing', including close relationships with universities and thought leaders in the field of social and democratic innovation like Xabier Barandiaran and Gorka Espiau

- The cross-party and cross-sector collaborative ethos which is at the heart of Arantza Zubizarbela's philosophy

Possible Collaboration

Much of our discussion focussed on possibilities of collaboration in the context of the soon-to-be-created National School of Government in Wales. Initial interest was expressed by a range of stakeholders in exploring a joint project on the development of new public service leadership capacity. A paper on possible next steps is being prepared.

Other Discussions

Parallel to the main purpose of the meeting I met with representatives of different political parties in the Basque Country to discuss contemporary developments in Wales and the Basque Country/Spain. These discussions were held in the days following the Spanish state-wide elections and so a key topic of discussion was the possible consequences of the result for the Basque Country. Particular interest was expressed in the work of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, and I have committed to sharing the outcome of the Commission's work once its final report is published in January next year.