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Social Economy, Culture and Identity across the Border: Lessons from the Basque Case

This think piece addresses the role of the Third Sector and Social Economy in the emergence of cross-border network governance in the Basque border region between France and Spain. Cross-border relations have historically been initiated by movements within civil society, anticipating policy actors in this matter. A policy change occurred in the 1990s, with the gradual Europeanization of a new policy framework which enables and encourages cross-border cooperation. The current engagement of Social Economy actors in this kind of cooperation is marked by this double heritage, with contrasting forms of implementation which require a sector-based analysis.

Social Economy, culture and identity across the border

Cross-border cooperation constitutes one of the most tangible effects of European integration. Not only public institutions, but also civil society and Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) actors have played a crucial role in such activities. This is particularly the case in cross-border regions which are marked by a cultural identity transcending state frontiers. This cultural variable facilitates and complicates the nature of cross-border relations and the uses made of European instruments.

This complexity comes into full play in the Basque region, located across the French-Spanish border. SSE has contributed there to the emergence of cross-border governance networks, in the sense of "public policy making and implementation through a web of relationships between government, business and civil society actors" (Klijn and Skelcher 2007: 587). These governance networks are meant to go beyond corporatist-type models of negotiation, allowing processes of agenda-setting, as well as devising and implementing public policies which are more flexible and more transparent. In the Basque border region, the participation of SSE actors contributed to cross-border cooperation going beyond instrumental forms of partnership. Their use of institutional and non-institutional cross-border schemes had contrasting results, depending on the sector involved.¹

The ongoing institutionalization of cross-border relations in the Basque region

In the Basque Country, Third Sector actors were more advanced than policy makers in matters of cross-border relations. The French Basque workers' cooperative movement was directly inspired and supported by the emblematic Mondragon experience in the Spanish Basque country since the 1970s. The Basque cultural movement also had considerable experience of cross-border relations and mutual learning since the early twentieth century.

The stabilization of the Spanish democratic regime and Spain's accession to the European Community in 1986 favoured cross-border cooperation in Basque areas, which took two very different forms. On the one hand, inter-state cooperation over border controls was strengthened by European anti-terrorist and immigration policy. At the same time, European integration helped establish a framework of cooperation favourable to interventions by regional and local authorities, this framework having been hitherto exclusively reserved for states. The progressive institutionalization of cross-border relations was strongly supported by the EU and opened a new set of opportunities for the participation of Third Sector actors. Existing cross-border civil society networks thus began to acquire an institutional dimension.

From 1983, the French Aquitaine region and the Spanish Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) were among the nine border regions which founded the Pyrenean Labour Community. Cooperation between the BAC and Aquitaine developed after 1989, a period which coincided with the reform of structural funding and the impetus given to regional policy by the Single European Act. To the identity-based cooperation of social networks was now added institutional cooperation, stimulated by European funding. The BAC, Navarre and Aquitaine added to the numerous structures in existence by setting up common intervention funds for research, development and training.

One example of such cross-border institutional cooperation is the Bayonne-San Sebastian Eurocity, which established cooperation in planning matters between the two urban areas. Another example is the Bidasoa-Txingudi cross-border consortium (1998), which brought together the French town of Hendaye and the Spanish towns of Hondarribi and Irun. The Treaty of Bayonne, signed by France and Spain in 1995, strengthened the legal framework for cooperation by granting more room for manoeuvre to local authorities. Small-scale cooperation between border municipalities and valleys flourished. Finally, the Aquitaine-

Euskadi Euroregion, inaugurated on 12 December 2011, represented a new phase in setting up a framework for cross-border cooperation.

The process has had to overcome institutional and political asymmetries. There is a significant budgetary gap between the Aquitaine region, the BAC, and Navarre. Similarly there are large differences between the extensive fiscal powers of the Basque Provincial Deputations and the more limited options of a French *département* (administrative area). At a political level, the perception of cross-border cooperation by political elites is markedly different. French leaders had a functional and not identity-based perception of cooperation. To the south of the border, the BAC, when controlled by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), also saw cross-border cooperation as an opportunity to strengthen cultural ties between Basques and to develop a European identity and diplomacy that would bypass the State.

Until the mid-1990s, the lack of territorial institutions in the French Basque Country served as a brake on the effective development of cross-border cooperation. This situation started to change when the Development Council, representing civil society, and the Council of Elected Representatives for the Basque Country were set up. In 1997, the French Basque Country was recognized as a *pays*.² These institutions were compromises between civil society and public authorities which were partly intended to compensate for the refusal by the State to create a new *département*. A joint

study carried out by the Development Council and the Council of Elected Representatives for the Basque Country led to the signing of territorial development plans by the state, the regional and local authorities, including cross-border cooperation. Cross-border policies were thus promoted by heterogeneous coalitions of actors who had instrumental and/or identity-related visions of the border.

Cooperation at work: Sectoral illustrations

These institutional schemes could have remained empty boxes if Third Sector actors had not used them repeatedly. Contrasting observations can be made on three areas: minority language and culture, cross-border Social Economy, and social integration through economic activity.

Minority language and culture

In matters of Basque language and culture, cross-border movements used the new policy instruments in order to consolidate tried and tested forms of partnership. In the 1990-2000s, cross-border concerns for cultural matters were generally linked to a shared Basque “identity”. At the same time, a number of projects were experiencing difficulties in implementation because of institutional asymmetries: many cultural projects were sponsored by public authorities on the Southern side, while their French Basque partners were often associations with scarce resources.

The Basque Autonomous Government had been intervening in the French Basque Country since the 1990s, providing financial and logistical support to Basque teaching networks and Basque media. This governmental activity—outside its jurisdiction—was accompanied by interventions by cross-border associations of local councillors (*Udalbide* and *Udalbiltza*) in favour of the Basque culture. Equally, public policies were jointly implemented on both sides of the border, as illustrated by the cross-border radio station (*Antxeta irratia*) in the Txingudi area. Sociolinguistic surveys were organized on a regular cross-border basis from 1991 to 1996.

Cross-border experiences played in favour of the institutionalization of language policy in the French Basque Country, with the establishment of a Basque Language Council in 2001, which in 2005 became the Public Office for the Basque Language (OPLB). Promotion of *euskera* (Basque language) was no longer exclusively in the hands of activist associations, but became a fully-fledged policy area. Up to this point, it had been an association—albeit one publicly financed—the Basque Cultural Institute which, by federating cultural associations, provided a bridge between the Third Sector and public administration in cultural matters. The OPLB signed a cross-border partnership with the Basque Government in 2005.

In 2009, the institutionalization of cross-border relations reached a new stage which again drew on the Social Economy and European schemes, with the constitution of a European Cooperative Society associating French and Spanish Basque schools (called *ikastolak*). The European framework was then used to strengthen a horizontal form of organization on a regional and local basis.

Third Sector and cross-border economic campaigns

The identity-based dimension of cross-border relations is less obvious in economic matters.

Despite this, some SSE organizations have made a strong commitment to relations which go beyond commercial relationships and which rely on a shared set of values, including cultural ones. Examples can be taken here from the cooperative movement and from the small farmers' movement.

Directly linked to cooperative networks, the *Hezkuntek* association was created in 2003 with the aim of encouraging young French Basques to follow technical education courses in the Spanish Basque Country. This association's mission was to facilitate industrial development in the French Basque Country by promoting professional education in Basque-speaking environments. It was thus not only professional education which was to be supported here, but education in *euskera*. In 2003 Hezkuntek received financial support from the cross-border association of city councillors Udalbiltza. In 2006, Hezkuntek signed a convention with the Basque Government to facilitate access to professional training in the Spanish Basque region for students from the French side. As a result, Hezkuntek found its natural partners among the French Basque *ikastolak* and, south of the border within cooperative circles, at the University of Mondragón. This experience was an example of a structural partnership between public, semi-public and cooperative entities. It also illustrates the way the Basque cooperative movement tried to balance purely business-oriented cross-border relations by updating its original set of values (Altuna-Gabilondo 2012).

In the field of agriculture, one experiment illustrates the 'social movement' aspect of cross-border dynamics. On the French side, the creation in 2005 of an alternative Chamber of Rural and Agricultural Development for the Basque Country (EHLG, *Euskal Herriko Laborantxa Ganbara*) reactivated cross-border dynamics. When the administrative authorities and the majority farmers' union refused to recognize the new entity, in the name of the principle of 'one *département*, one Chamber of Agriculture', members of the ELB (*Euskal herriko Laborarien Batasuna*, Union of the Farmers of the Basque Country) farmers' union decided to set up an alternative organization with the status of an association, inspired by SSE and small-scale peasant farming. There ensued an enduring conflict of legitimacy between the state, professional organizations, political elites, and farmers' and environmental associations.

The campaign by peasant smallholders was supported by the Basque cross-border social movement. A foundation (*Manu Robles Arangiz Fundazioa*, which emerged from the ELA: *Euskal Langileen Alkartasuna*, Solidarity of Basque Workers trade union), other social organizations and individual donors provided financial and logistic support to the alternative

Chamber of Agriculture. In 2007 the EHLG signed an agreement with the cross-border association of municipal councillors Udalbide and with *Itsasmendikoia*, a public rural development company linked to the Basque Government. This cross-border involvement continued a tried and tested partnership between the ELB and the EHNE (*Euskal Herriko Nekezarien Elkartasuna*, Farmers' Solidarity in the Basque Country) unions, both participants in the transnational *Via Campesina*.³

Social integration through economic activity: A counter-example?

In contrast to the preceding examples, Social Integration through Economic Activity (SIEA) offers a picture of complete separation between two sets of territorial principles and practices marked respectively by their national and regional contexts, which up to the present have not sought to accommodate each other. The public action framework for SIEA features an asymmetry between the Spanish BAC and the French Basque Country. The government of the BAC is currently responsible for all policy functions related to the SIEA. The French Basque Country offers a contrasting and fragmented reflection of the distribution of powers in France between the state, regional and local authorities. These two very different institutional approaches, which co-exist in the Basque Country, are reproduced when it comes to business and Third Sector networks. Basque identity, in this case, does not seem to play a relevant role in enhancing cross-border cooperation. However, observation of this sector shows the cross-border reality of new forms of social precariousness in the border area, a situation further aggravated by the global economic crisis (Itçaina and Manterola 2013).

Concluding remarks

The small number of sector-based examples mentioned here precludes any categorical statements on the role of SSE in the consolidation of cross-border network governance. Paradoxically, it would appear that initiatives motivated by a shared cultural identity, despite being constructed historically as political and economic alternatives, are today effectively spearheading cross-border governance networks. In a more peaceful political context, the activists' skills have become a source of expertise for a framework of public action which is looking for well-prepared and genuine cross-border projects. In contrast, the example of the SIEA emphasizes how institutional asymmetries and differences in one area's structure currently work against the emergence of this type of network governance. In any case, the emergence of cross-border forms of precariousness underlines how urgent it is to create new forms of active solidarity within a territory undergoing profound changes.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ This piece is based on a research project coordinated by the Centre Emile Durkheim (supported by the Regional Council of Aquitaine) on SSE and cross-border governance in the Basque and Irish border regions. The project is called [*Vers une gouvernance transfrontalière en réseau? Expériences du tiers secteur dans les régions frontalières en France et au Royaume-Uni*](#).

² The notion of *pays* (development area) in the administrative sense used here was created in France by the *Loi d'Orientation pour l'Aménagement et le Développement du Territoire*, also called the Pasqua Act, of 4 February 1995 and complemented by the *Loi d'Orientation de l'Aménagement Durable du Territoire* (Voynet Act) of 25 June 1999. A *pays* is constituted by municipalities forming an area with a geographical, economic, cultural and social coherence. The aim of this type of *pays* is to foster common development programmes by bringing local authorities, civil society organizations and citizens together. In January 2008, there were 358 recognized *pays*, totaling 27,485 municipalities. This policy was stopped in 2010, when a new Act (*Réforme des collectivités territoriales*, 6 December 2010) banned the creation of new *pays*.

³ La Via Campesina is an international peasants' movement. It defends small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. La Via Campesina comprises about 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Altogether, it represents about 200 million farmers. See <http://viacampesina.org>

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