

Successes and failures of cross-border collaboration: The example of the Bidasoa

Éxitos y fracasos de la cooperación transfronteriza: El ejemplo del Bidasoa

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Abstract

The Lower Bidasoa region, which encompasses the municipalities of Irun and Hondarrabia in Spain and Hendaye in France, has been cultivating municipality collaboration for decades, especially after the foundation of the international partnership of Bidasoa-Txingudi in 1998. The objective of the investigation is to show the activity of this entity as an example of the development of policies between interstate border boundaries in the European Union, and of the spatial socialization schemes that operate around them. We opted for the in-depth interview to contrast the results obtained through published sources. The results suggest an unquestionable willingness to materialize this relationship. However, this collaboration is limited by the difficulty of initiating common projects governed by legislation from two different States.

Keywords: conurbation, development agency, Bidasoa, Basque Country, international partnership, border.

Resumen

La comarca del Bajo Bidasoa, que engloba a los municipios de Irun y Hondarrabia en España y a Hendaya en Francia, lleva décadas cultivando la colaboración intermunicipal, especialmente tras la puesta en marcha del consorcio transfronterizo Bidasoa-Txingudi el año 1998. La investigación tiene el objeto de mostrar la actividad de esta entidad como ejemplo de desarrollo de las políticas entre límites fronterizos interestatales dentro de la Unión Europea, y de los esquemas de socialización espacial que operan en torno a ellas. Optamos por la entrevista en profundidad para contrastar los resultados obtenidos mediante fuentes publicadas. Los resultados dejan entrever una incuestionable voluntad de materializar una colaboración limitada, sin embargo, por la dificultad de iniciar proyectos comunes regidos por legislación de dos Estados diferentes.

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Palabras clave: conurbación municipal, agencias de desarrollo, Bidasoa, País Vasco, colaboración transfronteriza, frontera.

Introduction to the Scope of the Study

During recent decades, the acceleration of the globalization of economic and cultural exchange, the recomposition of state territoriality, and the strengthening of regional integration mechanisms have led to a mutation of the functions traditionally attributed to state boundaries (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). Formerly functioning as a territorial barrier that fulfills a structuring role in the differentiation of political and economic systems but also in the affirmation of different cultures and identities, borders appear as an interface that favors contact and exchange (O'Dowd, 2010). Currently, the development of functional and discontinuous urban areas is no longer restricted to the boundaries of national territories. Rather, it increasingly pertains to border areas (Sohn, Reitel & Walther, 2009).

The disappearance of state borders is a fundamental step in the liberalization of economic transactions and in the achievement of a common market that, progressively, leads to another economic-social scenario. There are increasingly more European, national, and regional initiatives, but it is the local institutions, the municipalities, that, due to their physical proximity, maintain a daily relationship that materializes on both sides of the border (Barrios, 2013).

In this work, the approach to borders is derived from the notion that they constitute an unfinished process. If borders grow as part of states, political identifications are constructed through border practices (Kuus, 2010), understood as a wide range of transformative and affective processes in which social and spatial order and disorder are constantly reworked (Woodward & Jones, 2005). Rethinking borders through border practices means understanding these practices as implicit to their own construction. They cannot be analyzed as incomplete or finished developments because they are in a constant process of materialization (Prokkola, 2008).

The objective of this article is to present the Bidasoa cross-border consortium as an example of policy development between interstate border boundaries within the European Union (EU); this is a model with interesting advances as well as barriers that have been impossible to overcome for decades and that limit the model's options for future progress.

The chosen space forms a clearly defined geographical unit, with common and converging natural, social, and economic attributes and with a dynamic relationship that materialized in common institutions and trajectories over several decades (Arbaiza, 2006). The lower Bidasoa region is an ideal laboratory for observing the progress of collaboration between local border communities, especially that which begins with the physical suppression of the border. Within this region converges the interest of institutions to strengthen a common governance, the need to expand economic activity towards new markets of close proximity, and even Basque idiosyncrasy itself, with a common culture and language divided into two border territories.

The study makes use of previous contributions (Alberdi, 2006; 2013) that also focused on this problem and in this environment. It updates those results with recent contributions regarding other practical examples, updates the situation of local

cooperation between France and Spain in the last decade, and analyzes the incidence of new transnational cooperation entities that act at the local level.

The methodology used is based on the collection of published information from very diverse origins (annual reports, newspapers, and case studies, among others), given that the area has not been the subject of any detailed study. However, these sources were complemented with information provided by other methods. In this study, we chose in-depth interviews as a technique to provide a qualitative contrast with the results obtained through published sources and facilitate the subsequent understanding of this contrast (Guerrero, 2001).

There are two relevant aspects regarding the preparation of this study's in-depth interviews. First is planning the interview script, which contains the topics to be covered. These topics vary according to the interviewee's responsibilities, but they mainly focus on assessing the path of the cooperation entity. We choose an open scheme, with a list of points to be addressed that do not necessarily have to be followed in the order in which they are presented. The scheme picks up on the particular flow of information given by the interviewee and captures aspects not foreseen in the script. The second aspect is the selection of respondents. We opted for interviews aimed at technical and political agents in charge of promoting cross-border actions and engaged in conversations with those who lead both specific projects and the management and responsibility of the consortium.

We interviewed the consortium's two technicians, the managers of Bidasoa Activa responsible for tourism promotion in the area and the projects led in collaboration with the *Communauté Sud Pays Basque*. We also interviewed a representative from each of the municipalities in the cross-border consortium. Interviews were conducted between October 2016 and March 2017, within the framework of the research project "Cross-border cooperation in Europe. Geopolitics at the local level".

Literature Review: An Unequal and Different Degree of Collaboration According to Scale and Region

Since the 1990s, the literature on European policy has paid more attention to cross-border regions. Academics such as Scott (2007) and Perkmann and Sum (2002), among others, have presented studies on contemporary changes in cross-border regions. These authors have tried to create a paradigm that explains why cross-border integration occurs and how this process has affected their communities.

Most of these studies examine the specific measures of European policy used to develop border integration on the continent. The first of these measures is included in the Schengen Agreements, signed in 1985 and extended in scope in 1990. These agreements abolished border controls between most of the EU member states. As Koff (2008) points out, many academics agree that they created two kinds of borders in the EU: internal and external.

For example, Luxembourg has formed The Great Region with parts of Germany, France, and Belgium. This merger has helped Luxembourg transform itself from a small nation-state into a regional capital. Researchers who have studied The Great Region indicate that more than 120 000 people cross national borders daily for professional reasons (Berger, 2005; Sohn et al., 2009; Statec, 2007).

The Schengen Agreements have also had the opposite effect on communities located at the external borders of the EU. This is especially the case for Eastern Europe. Researchers such as Alexeev (1999) have claimed that the implementation of the Schengen Agreements artificially divided the border economies that had been fueled by intergovernmental cooperation. Some scholars, such as Kupiszewski (2004), refer to the Schengen borders as “the new iron curtain.”

Going deeper into internal borders, another important contribution of the EU to the promotion of cross-border integration has been the creation of economic development policies that focus on geographic and economic regions rather than on states. The programs referred to as “cross-border” have multiplied since the birth of Interreg in the early 1990s. Most of the research on European borders has rightly established that Interreg’s greatest contribution has been in the field of governance. Interreg programs have created transnational communities within the EU and have reinforced the union’s external borders. For this reason, researchers further argue that border integration improves social cohesion in affected communities (Ventura-Fernández, 2013).

Other analysts, however, take a more in-depth look at the integration that results from these policies. Based on a study of different examples, Koff (2008) points out that in border integration, it is the local actors who determine the real nature of such processes. He distinguishes between two different realities, especially in the analysis of regional collaboration: areas in which integration is carried out exclusively at the level of the elites because they have little incentive to share their economic benefits with the population as a whole and, on the contrary, areas where there are no dominant actors, the benefits of integration are dispersed, and social cohesion improves. Koff maintains that local power structures explain border integration more effectively than do institutionalist approaches that currently dominate the literature on border policy in Europe.

As we move down the collaboration scale, physical proximity involves, in one way or another, the entire social fabric, relationships increase, and reciprocity visibly progresses. There are many studies that analyze this relationship (Prokkola, 2008; Matthiessen, 2005, Rogut & Welter, 2012). Focusing on collaboration cases related to Spain (Oliveras, 2013; Barrios, 2013; Feliu, Berzi, Ruff, Castañer & Llussà, 2013; Lois & Carballo, 2015; Márquez, 2016; Martín-Uceda & Castañer, 2018), several trends can be observed that merit reflection.

- A first element to highlight is the consolidation of collaboration spaces. First, these structures demonstrate how, over the years and with the change in the meaning ascribed to borders, regional and local actors who had a secondary role in cross-border relations transform their role and begin to take part in this process. Their ability to emerge as actors who work alongside the central state is reinforced.
- Economic development is the main theme of most of the projects that are approved and promoted. This fact implies the realization that, in most cases, border spaces still have difficulty promoting economic strategies that allow sustainable economic growth over time, a growth that, at the same time, has a positive impact on the socio-economic structures of the local territory.
- As for the motivations that lead to the institutionalization of a cross-border relationship, they have often been reduced to a simple interest in obtaining European funds from Interreg programs. According to this argument, had it not

been for possible external financing, many of the projects would not have been carried out. However, researchers show that there are other motivations that, in some cases, are more relevant. These include the resolution of border conflicts, the aggregation of the added value in economic sectors in crisis and in need of innovations and new markets, or the formation of sufficient population catchments for services, equipment or infrastructure planning at the inter-municipal level (cooperation in health and education).

- Regarding the object of collaboration, studies establish a double differentiation. On the one hand, there is collaboration regarding already existing or new services and equipment, which are resized within the framework of a new cross-border space. This is represented by agreements on health care, the shared management of natural elements, or the urbanization of interurban spaces, among other things. On the other hand, there is collaboration on the implementation of initiatives that enhance the joint promotion of an area based upon the idea that it should be more united internally (school activities, festive events...) by presenting a common image to the outside, with initiatives linked to tourism promotion.

The evaluation of processes and results presents different assessments in each case, which are not generalizable to the whole. Collaboration on health, construction, and the commissioning of the Cerdanya Hospital (Oliveras, 2013) can be described as successful. To the contrary, collaboration on education seems to have failed in those cases that involve the construction and implementation of shared educational centers, whereas exchanges, school parties, and the development of pedagogical materials have proven successful (Feliu et al., 2013).

The pace also seems to vary depending on the socioeconomic situation of the moment. Some researchers point out that collaboration is strengthened in expansive contexts but presents problems when carried out within a framework of impoverishment in border societies. This has been demonstrated in the economic crisis of the beginning of this decade, with the sharp decline in the movement of workers, of tourists, and even of trade between the two sides of border regions (Lois & Carballo, 2015).

In any case, there may be several reasons for success or failure. Of these, the following can be highlighted: disagreements between the agents, either between the two sides or between agents on the same side; slow or incompatible administrative, political, technical, or financial rhythms, which go against the expectations created; or permanence of barriers (psychological, linguistic, legal, etc.).

Studies agree that despite all efforts, the usefulness of cooperation is less than desirable. There is a surprising absence of greater global and integral coordination and reflection at the regional level, evaluation of the coherence of projects, and sharing of results and lessons learned. The lack of coordination is also evident in a larger cross-border area, among regional-level cooperation agencies that assume this function to a lesser or greater degree (Oliveras-González, Colomb & Durà-Guimerà, 2016).

Approach to the Territorial Framework: From Trans-Pyrenean Collaboration to the Conurbation of Bidasoa

Despite the considerable role that the political frontier has exerted as a barrier and sieve, flows and relations between the two sides of this border have occurred over time (Fernández, 1985). On the Spain-France border, the first step of institutional cooperation, however, did not occur until 1983, with the founding of the Working Community of the Pyrenees (CTP). Since then, several cooperation organizations and projects have been established, from the regional to local levels.¹

Full integration into the European institutional framework is key to understanding the implementation of modern cross-border collaboration. According to Oliveras (2013), there are three conditioning factors. First, the decentralization of Spain and France was accompanied by the provision of political and financial autonomy to its sub-state entities, which facilitated the establishment of cross-border cooperation agreements. However, it was not until 1992 in the French case and 1997 in the Spanish case that states legislated in this regard. Both laws are similar: they require prior communication on the part of the central administration, restriction within the competence limits, and respect for the state's international commitments. They also define the legal personality of the cooperation organizations (Public Interest Group, European Districts and Consortia).

Second, in 1980, the Council of Europe approved the European Framework Convention for cross-border collaboration between authorities and territorial communities (the first legal regulation with these characteristics). It was ratified by Spain and France in 1990 and followed in 1995 by the rubric of a bilateral agreement, i.e., the treaty on cross-border cooperation between territorial communities (or the Bayonne Treaty). This treaty authorizes the respective border sub-state entities to establish cooperation agreements and establish bodies with the objectives of creating and managing public facilities and services, studying and coordinating decisions in domains of common interest, and formulating cooperation proposals. In 2006, the EU created its own legal regulation, i.e., the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Three years later, Spain and France agreed on the procedure for the participation of their sub-state entities.

Third and last, in 1989, the EU launched the Interreg programs to finance cross-border collaboration projects.² For the Spanish-French border, these have been channeled through the operational program *Interreg France-Spain Pyrenees* and, as of the 2007 reform, through the program *Cross-border Cooperation Spain-France-Andorra* (POCTEFA). In the initial years, its management was monopolized by the states. The sub-state entities integrated more slowly, and in 2007, the CTP was designated the

¹ There are several studies that analyze the evolution of cross-border collaboration on the Pyrenean border, some of which materialized three decades ago. In this study, we highlight the contributions of Altemir (1989), Llimona I Balcells (2001), Arbaiza (2006) and Oliveras (2013), whose contributions we follow to a great extent.

² The implementation of European financing instruments is justified, as suggested by Llimona I Balcells (2001), because the process of European integration gives regions that have been divided by a border the opportunity and, in some sense, also the obligation to recover and revitalize the links between them. In addition, cross-border collaboration is also an enormously valuable element for rapprochement between European peoples.

managing authority (Hereadero & Olmedillas, 2009; Harguindéguy & Rodríguez, 2010, Feliu et al., 2013).

Given these conditions, the Basque Autonomous Community has incorporated or promoted a series of associations or institutions of international cooperation (Galdos & Ruiz, 1995), some of a more extensive scope, as in the case of the so-called macro associations, and others more closely linked to the border between Spain and France and the Basque sphere (Ibarra & Ikardo, 1997).

The Euskadi-Aquitaine Cooperation Protocol was created for the exchange of information regarding their respective policies in different spheres, such as the economic and social spheres. Its aim is to boost and promote training and research as well as to reevaluate cultural and linguistic heritage (Fourny & Velásco-Graciet, 2005). In this regard, in the last two decades, a common fund has been set up within the protocol for financing different projects, which are funded in equal measure by the Basque Autonomous Community and the Aquitaine Regional Council.

This last decade has given new impetus to this area of regional relations, with the creation of the Euskadi-Aquitaine Euroregion in December 2011, its extension to Navarra beginning in 2017,³ and the installation of its main headquarters in Hendaye. So far, the main objective of this new entity appears to be the improvement of transport links. This includes three main areas of work: high speed transport, internal transport, and maritime transport.

It seems clear that the EU is betting on developing interregional infrastructure projects and that the Euroregions acquire a strategic role in the execution of these projects. Steps are being taken in all of these areas, but, at least so far, these projects remain in the projection phase, and actions have only just begun materializing in the proposed work areas.

Regarding the agreement between the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa and the Biarritz-Anglet-Bayonne District, the physical and social reality of the Bayonne-Donostia urban area has determined the need for collaboration across borders that will structure and develop said urban space. The aim is to strengthen the system of middle cities in the Atlantic zone, relative to the systems of the central European and Mediterranean spaces. The Basque Eurocity, according to Sansinenea (2001), is one of the nodes of the Atlantic Arc in the pipeline and must therefore compete or collaborate with the most prosperous European metropolises. As a border region, it also draws on assets that grant it its distinctive character. However, so far, collaboration in the Eurocity, such as that which takes place in the Euroregion, has only been established at the level of projects that have materialized only in exceptional cases.⁴

It is at the local level, however, where projects are materializing, especially in the Bidasoa conurbation. The region has received the name Bidasoa-Txingudi in reference to two fundamental geographical accidents in its configuration, these being the Bidasoa River and the Txingudi Bay. This river is born in the mountains of Navarra and flows into the Txingudi Bay, marking the natural boundary between Spain and France. The region is constituted by the municipalities of Irun and Hondarribia.

³ Consult at: <https://www.euroregion-naen.eu/leuroregion/historique/>

⁴ Lozano (2007) concludes that the Baiona-Donostia Eurocity project presented a great challenge for the future, to overcome the internal borders of the EU and develop a region that is established on both sides of the Bidasoa, in a balanced and joint fashion. However, the results after a decade do not appear to be overly optimistic. Political-administrative obstacles and a lack of will and large funds has set back, or failed to develop in a sustainable way, everything that was originally planned.

Administratively, it is comprised of the Basque Autonomous Community and the municipality of Hendaye, under the Department of the Atlantic Pyrenees and the New Aquitaine region (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Txingudi Bay conurbation



Source: Google Earth. Prepared by the author.

The border function it fulfills has affected many aspects of its social configuration, from the foundation of its villas to its present organization. Its current imprint is reflected spatially in two differentiated and highly contrasted territorial models whose maximum expression is evident between Irun and Hendaye.⁵

Irun, developed mainly on the alluviums that originate from the Bidasoa River, concentrates the majority of the region's economic infrastructures and continues increasing its population weight, with its inhabitants numbering 61 239 at present. As the main crossing point of rolled goods from the Iberian Peninsula, Irun takes advantage of its strategic location by developing all types of services aimed at transport companies. This reorientation of the customs activity that was traditionally exercised by the municipality has enabled Irun, following at least a decade of uncertainty, to recover part of its previous economic strength.

Hendaye, with just over 15 000 inhabitants, is characterized, first, by the dominance of the tourism and commerce branches and, second, by employment in transport and communications. As the main strategic point of the municipality, the railway station and platform should be noted. Here, the international transfer of people and goods is carried out. Along with transport, municipal commercial activity is notable and is reinforced during the summer, at which time Hendaye reaches five times its resident population. Hendaye has 22 hotels, 7 215 campgrounds, 270 tourist apartments, and approximately 5 000 secondary residences. This tourism, however, is concentrated in the summer months, with seasonality being one of the main problems that the town currently faces.

⁵ Following the approval of the InnovMugabe Adebisa project and the Communauté Sud Pays Basque, they created an observatory in which the most significant data on the population and economy of the towns that make up this region are collected. They can be consulted at the project's webpage www.bidasoa-sudpaysbasque.com

Hondarribia, located on the left bank of the Bidasoa River and protected to the west by the foothills of Mount Jaizkibel, developed its historic center on a small promontory surrounded by walls. Rising up behind these walls is the Marina neighborhood, a typical fishing village that contrasts with the nobility of the medieval quarter. All of this has led Hondarribia to be given the title of National Historic Monument. At present, the municipality, with 16 500 inhabitants, develops its residential function by attracting a population that works in Irun and in San Sebastián, while tourist and recreational activities acquire increasingly more presence (Table 1)

Table 1: Employment by economic sector % (2016)

	Hendaye	Hondarribia	Irun
Industrial (%)	12.91	3.6	18.65
Construction (%)	4.71	6.2	16.6
Service (%)	81.37	80.57	76.09

Source: Bidasoa Activa (2019).

However, in addition to the peculiarities of each municipality, one of the aspects that distinguishes the region and grants it the special character of its location in a border area is, without a doubt, the current shifting of the population from one side of the border to the other. This is very well reflected in the current characterization of the municipality of Hendaye.

Population movement from Gipuzkoa to Hendaye and the surrounding municipalities is not new but has begun to increase. Currently, at least one in three neighbors of the Basque-speaking town is of Gipuzkoan origin. According to the Statistical Institute of France, approximately 28% of the current 15 000 inhabitants is of Gipuzkoan origin, whereas in 1999, of its 10 000 inhabitants, only 13% were of this origin. Other quantifications currently raise the percentage to 48% of the population. The reported data are obtained with the aid of enrollment studies and municipal information regarding electrical discharges and taxes (Sallaberry, 2012).

Study Results

The published information, which is available in the preferential newspaper archives and annual reports, supported with the results of the semi-structured interviews, allows us to obtain a vision of the situation the cross-border institutional relationship between the municipalities of the Bidasoa region is currently facing. We present these findings in three different sections: the description of the chosen collaboration model, valorization of the results, and challenges to face.

Municipal Consortium: Figure Chosen for Cooperation in the Bidasoa Region

The cross-border consortium between Hendaye, Irun, and Hondarribia (1998) brings to fruition a common legal project. This entity is also born with the aim of promoting common socio-economic development by facilitating actions and studies that can enhance the region.⁶

Following the contributions of Alberdi (2006), the creation of the consortium was preceded by a previous collaboration. Its first precedent dates back to 1990, the year in which the institutional declaration for the lower Bidasoa region was signed before the single market. Following the guidelines of this declaration of intent, the development of the Bidasoa strategic plan, among other actions, was set in motion in 1993. This plan established the medium-term lines of action for the revitalization and economic development of the Bidasoa region. It indicated actions such as the creation of an Institute of Transportation, Commerce and Marketing and projected the region as only a tourist destination. The guidelines had the virtue of opening a line of work that materialized in the achievement of an agreement that same year: the constitution of the Bidasoa-Txingudi Eurodistrict (Adebisa-Bidasoa Activa, 1993).

This first institutional step was supported by the European framework agreement for cross-border cooperation of communities or territorial authorities, which entered into force in 1981 and was ratified by the Spanish and French states with the approval of the Bayonne Treaty (1995). It establishes the specific legal context on which the experience of the Bidasoa-Txingudi consortium is based, requiring the development of an agreement between territorial entities that seek to create and manage public facilities or services and coordinate their decisions in areas of common interest. This agreement was finally signed on December 23, 1998. In principle, it was signed in order to fulfill the purposes summarized below:

- Tourism: Among other aspects, the agreement was intended to make a common offer of the three municipalities, requiring them to establish a similar policy, promote themselves jointly, and create a center of initiatives directed by the consortium itself;
- Culture: Promote learning different languages, conduct qualifying training courses, and conduct cultural events;
- Social: Establish a common reception service for migrant groups with difficulties, set up a social information office, and provide advice to professionals and citizens regarding social and health legislation; and
- Economic development: Create an information, advice and training cell for project promoters, organize regular border transport; support the establishment of an intermodal platform and participate in its management.

Regarding the figure chosen for the materialization of the consortium, this emerges as public administration of an exceptional nature, born from the need to comply

⁶ For a more in-depth perspective on the background and objectives of the consortium, consult its website: www.bidasoa-txingudi.com. This site collects information about this entity's composition, formation, and statutes and details its activities and the main issues it addresses.

with both Spanish and French law. In principle, it is regulated according to Spanish legislation, but all of its initiatives must be endorsed by the French administration, this being a supranational sphere of action. This requires a very important endeavor of inter-administrative coordination that becomes almost impossible once the municipal sphere of competence is exceeded.

In relation to its internal regime, the consortium is governed by a General Council composed of the three mayors, together with two representatives from each municipality. In this council, each person has one vote, regardless of the budget contributed by each municipality (Irun 50%). However, for a project to be initiated it needs the support of at least two of the representatives of each village, which, in practice, ensures consensus.

If the council makes the decisions, the Steering Committee is the body responsible for implementing the initiatives undertaken. Formed by political representatives, the Committee ensures municipal consensus and organizes and directs the working groups and commissions that bring together competent individuals from each municipality who are knowledgeable in each of the defined areas. There are a total of six areas in fields as diverse as education and tourism.

For the implementation of promotional actions, the committee is aided by its collaboration with Adebisa. The Bidasoa Development Agency (Adebisa-Bidasoa Activa, 1993) was created in June 1992 at the initiative of the municipalities of Irun and Hondarribia and with the endorsement of the Department of Economy of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa. The work by the society, extendable to many fields, is currently concentrated in five different departments, in addition to the coordination of the cross-border consortium. Although the consortium is theoretically independent of the society's future, its activity is led by it. The five departments are as follows, coinciding with those usually found in Spanish development agencies: employment, orientation and training; prospecting and continuing education; economy, studies and innovation; self-employment and business center; and tourism (Campos, Sanchís & Cantero, 2002).

Actions that Promote Social Relations Move Forward While other Strategic Fields Remain Unaddressed

Going deeper into the peculiarities of each field addressed, the annual reports published by Adebisa, which also record the consortium's activity, are analyzed. In them, we observe that neither the actions undertaken nor the fields worked upon show important variations in their trajectory.⁷

Taking the published information as a starting point, interviews with different agents (consortium technicians, Bidasoa Activa, and political representatives with a voice in both agencies) are used to carry out an assessment exercise regarding the

⁷ On the consortium's website www.bidasoa-txingudi.com, the actions that it has undertaken recently in each field are widely reported on. To delve further into its evolution, it is necessary to consult the annual directories that Adebisa has been progressively publishing and in which the consortium appears as one of the areas that it has worked upon. This information can be consulted at the following link: <http://www.bidasoa-activa.com/es/sala-de-prensa/publicaciones>. Its conclusions are collected and summarized by Alberdi (2013).

scope of the different actions undertaken in cross-border collaboration. From this, we draw the following conclusions.

In the last decade, the consortium has barely addressed new fields but has reinforced the work carried out in previous years by multiplying the number of initiatives in areas such as tourism, culture, and sports, among others. In general, a cross-border conurbation's potential when promoting itself in two different regions and states is highlighted.

In tourism, the consolidation of the Bidasoa region as a new holiday destination, mainly in sectors of the French and Spanish states, is confirmed as the main work objective. To this end, a series of objectives have been set up that have been reinforced as a result of the experiences garnered from the collaboration between the regional tourism offices. These consist of the joint edition of tourist tools for use in the bay area, promotional activities in the Bidasoa region, and advertising campaigns for attracting tourists during the off-season. This work also impacts the fabric of regional tourism, seeking to definitively establish the importance of cooperation and tourism simultaneously promoted by the consortium's tourism commission. The results are undeniable, and at the present time, the transfer of tourists from one side of the border to the other is a normal occurrence, a situation that benefits the entire region.

For example, at the cultural level, the activity lends continuity to competitions that began years before. The cultural work group is one of the first that began to function, even before the consortium was constituted as such. In 1997, it promoted the first "Txingudi day"; this celebration was the first of numerous initiatives promoted by this group. The greatest advance that they observe is centered on the diffusion that these events currently have. Because they are organized by local associations that are related to one another within different regional and national spheres, the contacts and public that each one attracts are diverse. As a result, these types of activities are greatly enriched.

The Bidasoa-Txingudi heritage revaluation project gives continuity to the initial philosophy. The road that unites the three cities continues to be developed, resulting in a physical continuum and the creation of an itinerary that shows citizens the common, shared, and complementary resources that make up Txingudi Bay. As a result of the reflection initiated and the lines of work to be followed, a set of actions is outlined, the objective of which is to lead the three local entities, in a concrete fashion, to form a closer relationship and embark upon a lasting collaboration. The direct involvement of the residents in the area is sought so that they might discover the attractions (history and environment) that are the unknown face of the territory (Figure 2).

The technicians recognize that outside of the areas worked upon, results are scarce. The consortium was originally created to promote areas of economic development. Throughout its trajectory, its aim has been to provide public services such as solid waste collection and water supply. However, in general, due to administrative obstacles, these initiatives never materialize. There are few actions initiated in these areas. In general, their results do not go beyond the project phase, and they are quickly shelved.⁸

⁸ This reality contrasts with more optimistic statements, such as those made by Rubiralta (1997), who pointed out that "to the extent that nation-state structures are primarily responsible for reducing Pyrenean space to a secondary and marginalized function, such as that of mere border barriers, these structures are both dissolving themselves and, at the same time, bringing to a close an unfortunate stage as concerns the future of the Pyrenees, which has become more pronounced, especially in the last hundred years. Perspectives that favor a more intense intra-Pyrenean collaboration are becoming a reality, and with this, the unity of the Pyrenean world can emerge again in all its historical dimension".

Figure 2: Examples of areas worked upon by the Bidasoa-Txingudi consortium



Source: <http://www.irunhondarribiahendaye.com>. Prepared by the author.

As an indicator of the type of proposals that have prospered and those that have not, these affirmations indicate the evolution of the conurbation's different strategic plans. The first of these plans, which bears the name Strategic Plan of Bidasoa, was approved in 1993. It is proposed as an economic plan that arose from the initiative of the municipalities of Irun, Hondarrabia, and Hendaye, with the collaboration of the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, the Basque Government, the General Council of the Atlantic Pyrenees, and the Aquitaine Regional Council.

Within the list of proposals made in 1993, ongoing projects coexisted alongside mere sketches of ideas that required specific treatment. Among those that were executed, it is worth mentioning the creation of an integral merchandise center (Zaisa) inserted in the European distribution network, the promotion of industrial land as public heritage with the creation of a public management company, the creation of a shopping center with supraregional projection, and the development of sports marinas in localities such as Hendaye and Hondarribia. Other proposals, however, are still under discussion today, such as the construction of an intermodal merchandise center. However, what is really remarkable is the small number of initiatives designed to serve the three locations.

Unlike that carried out a decade earlier, the strategic plan that began in 2000, which is still in force, ceases to prioritize economic activities in order to focus on social, cultural, tourist and sports functions. Today, the consortium lacks a new strategic plan, with many voices demanding greater operability⁹, revealing the difficulties that municipalities face when they attempt to implement initiatives that respond to a conurbation's needs in terms of transport, public services, and the environment, etc. Meanwhile, this collaboration is reduced to promoting actions that help maintain a certain social relationship, that is, cultural and sports activities.

⁹ Sallaberry (2012), president of the consortium and mayor of Hendaye states: "In the consortium, there is a common approach, but the reality is that the laws are different. It's not a matter of life or death, but you're left with a bitter taste in your mouth when you try to solve a cross-border problem and you cannot because you get mired in legal questions of competence. There is much to do to make this go as smoothly as it should."

Challenges and Opportunities of Cross-Border Collaboration: The Consortium Faced with Necessary Adaptation to New Institutional Realities

The administrative integration of the conurbation does not advance. There are other entities that assume a large part of the role that the cross-border figure should play. This is the case of the *Communauté Sud Pays Basque*,¹⁰ created in 2006. Several services, such as waste management, which were handled collectively in the conurbation, have passed into the hands of the Communauté. This has limited the fields of community work on either side of the border or, at best, left it dependent on agreements no longer between three but between twelve municipalities¹¹ (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Southern Basque Country Agglomération, between Hendaye and San Juan de Luz



Source: Google Earth. Prepared by the author.

The Communauté Sud Pays Basque has a population of 64 863 inhabitants (see Table 2). Half of the population lives between Hendaye and San Juan de Luz, and another quarter lives in extensions of these municipalities, i.e., Ziburu and Urruña. The rest of the population is made up of more discrete, once rural, villages dotted with scattered hamlets and currently subject to the pendular

¹⁰ The Community of Communes (*Communauté de Communes*) is an administrative structure of France. It is a public entity of inter-communal cooperation that, in the place of the comunas miembros, exercises a certain number of competencies defined by the law of February 6, 1992, concerning the territorial administration of the French Republic, modified by the law of July 12, 1999, and later by the law of February 27, 2002.

¹¹ For a more in-depth perspective on the actions carried out by the Communauté during the 2005-2012 period, consult the publication "D'une Communauté de Comunes à une Agglomération", found on the entity's website. In addition to the report, on the same website, we found individual objectives, actions, and plans for each of the areas in which the entity has competencies. The web page also contains more recent information in the form of annual directories, which can be consulted at www.agglo-sudpaysbasque.fr/nos-publications.html

movements of those people who work in the urban environment and reside in this dispersed habitat.¹² As of 2013 and after Hendaye's population exceeded 15 000 inhabitants, the Communauté acquired the sub-status of Agglomération. This did not change its previous dynamics but led it to acquiring new skills that it had not yet developed, some in a mandatory way. Infrastructure maintenance, urban transport, the development of public spaces, etc., are among the new skills that the Agglomération has begun to manage.

Table 2: Population and employment in the Agglomération Sud Pays Basque (2016)

Total population (inhabitants)	63 014
Unemployment rate (%)	10.7
Number of unemployed	2 970
Number of jobs	21 538
Industrial sector employment (%)	11.9
Construction sector employment (%)	7.6
Service sector employment (%)	78.4

Source: Bidasoa Activa (2019).

In addition, the municipalities decided that the Agglomération would address cross-border relations. Although Hendaye is where these relations have a greater presence, there are many bordering municipalities, such as Biariatu, Urruña, Sara, Senpere, and Ainhoa, which compose a significant part of the Bidasoa muga and which already have Navarre towns such as Bera or Baztan. There are many projects between localities on both sides of the border, some related to community sanitation and others to water quality control and the promotion of natural spaces, among others.

One of these projects, InnovMugabe, is aimed at promoting the relationship between companies on both sides of the border. After an agreement between Bidasoa Activa and the Agglomération, a project of collaboration between companies began in 2010. This initiative tried to break the traditional mistrust between the populations on either side of the Bidasoa (Álvarez, 2010). The interview with those responsible allows us to assess its scope and possibilities.

InnovMugabe is a business development project that remains active due to the support of different grants and that, through collaborations between companies, universities, and technology centers of the Bidasoa and Sud Pays Basque, wants to develop and promote joint projects on subjects that promote and facilitate innovation processes. The results have not been spectacular, nor is the number of companies that have participated in collaborative projects between the two sides of the border

¹² Bidaso Observatory at: www.bidasoa-sudpaysbasque.com

noteworthy. However, the relations initiated have been positive, and progress has been made, as the interviewees point out.¹³

Moreover, as indicated in the interviews with those responsible for the project, the collaboration in economic development will continue, with or without financial support because the responsible entities have laid the foundations so that the tools developed can be continuously renovated by the users themselves (catalog of companies, GIS, etc.), and they have committed to maintaining a dynamic of continuous collaboration.

In fact, if before the crisis the transfer of population from one side of the muga to the other was evident, it is now the companies of the Bidasoa and all of Gipuzkoa that seek to expand their market in the French Basque country. Training, advising, and directing this interest is the responsibility of Bidasoa Activa and the Agglomération Sud Pays Basque, and for this reason, this collaboration is increasingly in demand.

However, in this development there is an entity whose influence decreases: the cross-border consortium. The possibility that the conurbation of the Bidasoa acquires administrative influence becomes more remote, while the relations between supramunicipal entities increase.

Discussion of the Results: The Bidasoa, in View of the Difficulty of Overcoming the Administrative Barrier of the Border

The assessment of the agents involved in the future of cross-border relations in the Txingudi-Bidasoa region, together with the critical reflection that is obtained from the analysis of more than two decades' worth of news archives, reveals the persistence of a mental, social, and institutional border in the Bidasoa region, despite the disappearance of the physical barrier. The permeability of the border is an unquestionable reality, but its existence is still present and manifests itself in different areas.

- *Low functionality of the cross-border consortium.* All the interviewees, but especially those of the political leaders, highlight the difficulties of inter-administrative coordination as the reason for the current lack of progress in international collaboration. The initial difficulty seems to be rooted in the delay produced as a result of the centralist character of the French administration. Any action in the field of education, economic promotion, and mobility, must have national

¹³ In line with the European program POCTEFA (Operational Program for Territorial Cooperation between France, Spain, and Andorra), the project is approached from the perspective of competitive improvement of the business fabric based on the use and enhancement of opportunities derived from its cross-border status. The actions are aimed at companies from all sectors, located mainly in the business estates of the Bidasoa and Sud Pays Basque regions. It has two participating partners, Bidasoa Activa and the Communauté de Communes du Sud Pays Basque, and an official project website: www.bidasoa-sudpaysbasque.com

endorsement. Such a task is not contemplated in the current legislation and often set aside as a separate concern.¹⁴

- *Excessive competence administration surrounding the bay.* The international dimension, the fact that it is a coastal area, the existence of an international airport, and the fact that the region contains a protected wetland, a natural park, a double corridor within the Natura 2000 network, and a border crossing means that any cross-border project will have to overcome thousands of administrative barriers. Often times, whether due to the impossibility of the task or due to fatigue, projects are thrown out.
- *New competence structures that weaken the existing structures.* An observation made by the French political representatives in particular but recognized by all of the interviewees is that while the consortium has to circumvent the legislation of two different states, new administrative structures arise that assume competences that were initially considered to fall within the activities of the cross-border entity. From 2002 onwards, France has facilitated the creation of groups of communes to address the achievement of certain competences in a more effective way. With this, Hendaye addresses these actions by joining San Juan de Luz and other small communes in the area instead of joining -given the difficulties it has faced- Irun and Hondarribia.
- *Lack of an independent budget to initiate cross-border actions.* The economic problems of the administrations in general and, especially, the Spanish ones, have resulted in a drastic reduction in the budget since 2009. With this, the consortium's possible paths of action have been even further reduced. Its current situation is critical, and it finds itself largely dependent upon its ability to obtain projects financed by the EU.
- *Persistence of the border as a mental, social, and economic barrier.* Despite the years of collaboration and residential permeability, the mental border between the inhabitants of both sides continues to exist. The inhabitants seek solutions within their territory, avoid dealing with the other side, while the language barrier limits the possibilities of communication. There is hardly any progress in this field, and the deficiencies, especially on the Spanish side, are evident. Nor is there permeability of the business fabric. The association is hardly fruitful, and each company seeks to develop its activity in its respective territory.¹⁵

Despite the deficiencies observed, the cross-border relationship continues to progress. The urban continuum we face continues to grow, and awareness of the

¹⁴ Everything indicates that the established legal framework is not efficient and that it is necessary to create a European framework that protects this collaboration from state administrative obstacles. It is a classic claim, taken up by those directly involved in the progress of these relationships. Llimona I Balcells (2001) already pointed out that so far, this development has occurred in a poorly defined legal context. The dimension that this collaboration has acquired requires a stable legal framework, not only at the state level but mainly at the European level, as has been claimed by the different actors.

¹⁵ The new consortiums that have been created throughout the present decade are born with broad objectives and perspectives. If they follow the example of Bidasoa, they will likely see their claims stopped. Manero's statements regarding the Duero Consortium serve as an example. He is aware that "the fulfillment of the goals that inspire it will not be an easy or comfortable task because its management still poses many unknowns, which only the practical application that experience provides us, with its corrective signals, will be able to resolve, in accordance with the regulatory modifications that will have to be carried out in order to ensure the intended levels of effectiveness" (Manero, 2012, p. 270).

need to boost the relationship is evident among local institutions; this is manifested in different fields:

- There are many people, companies and entities that observe how business opportunities increase, especially in the hospitality industry. The opening of a maritime connection between Hendaye and Hondarribia, with a figure that exceeded three hundred thousand travelers in 2017, clearly benefits the service sectors of both municipalities, especially Hondarribia, whose economy is focused on the possibilities provided by restoration.
- Promotion of these localities, both as a tourist destination and of any event that they celebrate, benefits from networking. All dissemination takes place at the international level, and any event is disseminated throughout the Donostia-Bayonne Eurocity, the Aquitaine and Basque Country regions, and the French and Spanish states.
- The technical and political structure is already generated. The collaboration between the municipalities is continuous and fluid. The commitment to strengthen these relationships is not questioned, and there are many projects that have already materialized in a joint fashion. Moreover, the same municipalities try to overcome administrative difficulties by designing, each from their own territory and competency, projects aimed at the citizens of the Bidasoa as a whole: walks in the bay, biking, community public transport, etc.

All this is happening at a key moment for collaboration on both sides of the Bidasoa. As a result of the construction crisis in Spain, not only entrepreneurs but also freelancers began to offer their services, and this continues to be the case a decade later. This phenomenon extends beyond the scope of Hendaye, reaching all the way to Biarritz and Bayonne. The current situation forces the business fabric to move quickly. The individual seeks immediate solutions. If the administration does not provide solutions, the public simply will not turn to it, as indicated by those responsible for the consortium.

By Way of Conclusion: A Collaboration that Moves Slower than Expected

The purpose of the investigation, the analysis of the Bidasoa cross-border consortium as an example of the transformations that internal borders are undergoing in the EU, portended a scenario in which there could be a clear process underway of overcoming the separation of two communities occasioned by a border.

The support of European programs, or the existence of a space with symmetrical and close relations, aided in the consideration of a stage in which socio-economic collaboration and social cohesion were deeply developed.

Studies more focused on the type of modality chosen, that is, the structure of the consortium, showed the scope that these relationships could have. This was especially true for those cases in which the population mass was significant. In such cases, these relationships even included the common planning of certain public services or economic collaboration in order to achieve greater added value of certain products.

The space under study, the conurbation of Txingudi Bay, an environment that is in close proximity, small in size, physically defined and with clear economic, cultural, linguistic, and social links, foreshadowed a priori the rapid advance of inter-community relations. The speed of institutional progress, the signing of the Bayonne Treaty in order to cover inter-community relations such as the one posed in the Bidasoa River, and even the recent location of the coordination office of the Euskadi-New Aquitaine-Navarra Eurogion in Hendaye, could presage a scenario of great advances in overcoming borders.

The results of the study, however, make it clear that the expectations have not been met. The statements made by local political representatives throughout the current decade, together with the indications of the interviewees, confirm that cultural, sports, and promotional actions are advancing. The implementation of community initiatives in the area of services and equipment, so important for a conurbation, have not been addressed. Furthermore, Hendaye has to ally with other communes that, despite being located within a radius of no more than 30 km, are not part of the same neighborhood. The same applies to urban planning and territorial planning, which are impossible to address in joint documents.

The justification of the situation presented does not lie precisely in a lack of interest by the three municipalities to address these services jointly. Undoubtedly, they would obtain economic and social benefits from doing so (regional hospital, trilingual education in Spanish, French, and Basque, and unified public transportation services with access to the regional and even national connections of each locality). The study concludes that it is the administrative obstacles, with totally different and even incompatible rhythms, that make it impossible for these fields to be addressed.

The hindrance of competency is combined with the persistence of a mental or psychological and, to a lesser extent, linguistic border. Each community views the other with reluctance, and relations are barely established; all this affects the economic process that, far from taking advantage of synergies, entails communities seeking their livelihood independently of one another.

Although the Basque conurbation is a geo-social space with undeniable cultural, political, social, and economic ties that should facilitate cross-border collaboration, it encounters many of the barriers that were already pointed out in other border spaces. To a certain extent, the situation reflected here seems to be common among European cross-border consortia, in which, due to administrative rhythms or the persistence of psychological barriers, the collaboration that is actually established is less than what was hoped for. However, unlike other examples, this does not occur due to a lack of reflection, economic situations, or excessive dependence on European economic funds. Nor does it occur due to a lack of coordination with other scales of institutional collaboration. In the Basque case, the difficulty lies in combining the competencies of an autonomous state with those of a centralized state.

Diluting the border seems, therefore, to be a slow and winding process that can be faced only if administrative and socioeconomic conditions change. It is precisely in this field that the main innovations are being produced. The Spanish real estate crisis, with the consequent increase in unemployment rates, has led a part of the business and autonomous fabric that focuses on construction to turn, for the first time, to the French Basque Country as a place of employment. Labor movement as well as commercial and tourism movement are increasing. However, the administration has failed to adapt to the needs that this overcoming of the border entails.

In this process, Bidasoa-Txingudi has to look for allies. The Agglomération Sud Pays Basque (2013) can become a key element for increasing the relationship between the two sides, expanding it into a population volume that is more balanced on each side. Without neglecting endowment aspects, the collaboration between the two entities is an opportunity to expand the consortium's traditional fields of action and ensure that business collaboration becomes one of its pillars of development. In turn, the Agglomération has assumed responsibility for some of the fields traditionally worked upon by the consortium, such as culture and tourism.

Everything indicates that we are advancing in the cross-border relations of the Bidasoa, from the conurbation of three municipalities to the understanding between Adebisa and the Agglomération. The new geographical area allows us to address actions in fields that have not materialized in the two decades of relations between one side of the Bidasoa and the other. The InnovMugabe project and the interest shown by entrepreneurs seems to augur an interesting field of development.

It now falls upon the consortium and its allies, the Bidasoa Development Agency and the Sud Pays Basque Agglomération, to see to it that this interest becomes the basis for more than a temporary relationship. This can be achieved by supporting and training entrepreneurs, intensifying relations between economic agents, covering new fields, and driving a bidirectional interest.

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