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How do small nations cooperate? An action research framework for Wales and the Basque Country

Igor Calzada  ^{a,b,c,d}

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Welsh and Basque Governments in 2018, this article introduces a multiscalar and transdisciplinary social sciences action research framework that emerged from a workshop held in May 2023. The workshop engaged stakeholders from both sides and is part of the broader ongoing project. This project seeks to address the main research question, ‘How do small nations cooperate?’ through the exploration of transregional cooperation and mutual learning between Wales and the Basque Country. The structure of the article is as follows: First, it commences with an introduction defining ‘small nations’, presenting the main research question, articulating two related aims, outlining three primary methodological goals and providing a broad context for these two small nations within the framework of their MoU. Second, following a brief description of each small nation, the article concurrently develops the action research methodological framework while analysing findings stemming from workshop discussions between stakeholders of Wales and the Basque Country. They addressed three intertwined territorial scale challenges: Macro, examined through devolution and fiscal federalism perspectives; Meso, explored through social innovations in urban spaces in Cardiff (SPARK) and Bilbao (ASFabrik); and Micro, investigated through grassroots innovations. Finally, the article concludes with an action research and policy agenda. It suggests one operational research question per territorial scale as the conclusion of this article, offering a response to the main research question. The conclusion acknowledges limitations and outlines future research and policy pathways for this ongoing project.

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Small nations; social sciences; Wales; Basque Country; policy; action research; social innovation; transdisciplinary

1. INTRODUCTION: IS SMALL BEAUTIFUL?

The study of regional sociopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics has captured the attention of scholars and policymakers, particularly in the context of *small nations* (Keating, 2018; Keating & Harvey, 2014). However, establishing a taxonomy for small nations – in an era where

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globalisation appears to erode traces of sovereignty (Agnew, 2009) – inevitably poses an analytical burden and serves as a polemical point of departure (Breiding, 2019; Calzada, 2015, 2022a; Remenyi, 1953). To contribute constructively to this necessary debate, small nations in this article are defined as imagined communities, city-regionally bounded and propelled by a unique sense of collective action rooted in historical, linguistic and cultural uniqueness (Anderson, 1983). Schumacher (1973) argued that small nations prioritise appropriate and sustainable technologies, policies and polities tailored to their size and needs, rather than attempting to emulate larger nations. However, Latimer (2023) challenges this vision, presenting a case of localism on a small scale and contesting the idea that local things are inherently superior, echoing Schumacher's argument. Despite this ongoing discussion, Wales (Lawson-Jones, 2013; Morgan, 1999) and the Basque Country (Boronska-Hryniewiecka, 2016; Konstantynova, 2017) can be considered (stateless) small nations due to their: (i) significant roles in history, (ii) strong sense of national identity, (iii) unique cultures and languages and (iv) city-regional and metropolitan configurations with similar-sized populations (Beel et al., 2021; Calzada, 2015, 2022b; Keating, 2018; Moisiso et al., 2020).

Wales and the Basque Country meet the *small nations* definition provided in this article, as both have undergone significant political and economic post-industrial transformations over the past century (Calzada, 2015; Chetty et al., 2022; Keating & Harvey, 2014; Sheen, 2022). Hence, against this backdrop, the research question of this article is: How do small nations cooperate? In responding to this research question, the aims of this article are twofold: (i) to provide a preliminary comparative analysis through an action research framework between these two small nations, showcasing ongoing cooperation framed through the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between both governments in 2018 (Basque Government, 2022; Welsh Government, 2020a, 2020b, 2021) and (ii) consequently, to disseminate the findings of recent action research fieldwork through a workshop stemming from a funded ongoing research project (Table 1).

In the era of globalisation and increasing interdependence, small nations encounter distinct challenges and opportunities in their pursuit of sustainable development and growth. Consequently, the question of how these small nations can cooperate effectively and meaningfully has emerged as a crucial area of inquiry (Breiding, 2019; Rioux, 2020). This article introduces a transdisciplinary action research framework to scrutinise the ongoing cooperation between Wales and the Basque Country (Delbridge, 2014). It concurrently develops the action research framework while presenting findings derived from joint discussions among stakeholders of Wales and the Basque Country, addressing three intertwined territorial scale challenges: Macro, Meso and Micro. The framework is shaped by the outcomes of a workshop held on 5 May 2023 and is funded by a Wales based institution (Table 1). By employing a multiscalar and transdisciplinary social science approach (Calzada et al., 2013) that integrates perspectives from diverse fields, including social innovation studies, political geography and regional and urban studies, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in small nations' cooperation. Moreover, it provides valuable insights for policy-makers and practitioners.

The action research methodology was established to pursue three primary methodological goals (Bradbury, 2022; Moulart et al., 2022). (i) To gather more than 50 key stakeholders from both sides, creating a collaborative and knowledge-sharing environment that encourages dialogue and fosters new partnerships. (ii) To establish a strategic network that may endure over time, providing a solid foundation for future collaboration and policy development. (iii) To outline an action research and policy agenda on transdisciplinary social sciences, focusing on current developments in both small nations on three intertwined territorial scales. Consequently, the action research methodology pursuing the three primary goals defined above resulted in the establishment of three intertwined territorial scales: (i) Macro (devolution):

Table 1. Multiscalar, transdisciplinary, and comparative analysis of small nations.

Scale	Wales	Basque Country
Macro	Devolution of power from the UK central government began in 1999, resulting in the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales. The Welsh government has legislative powers in areas such as health, education, and the environment. However, UKIMA may signify the end of devolution according to Morgan & Wyn Jones (2023), which may necessitate a profound analysis of future scenarios (The Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, 2023).	The Basque Country (through BAC and CCN) has a high level of autonomy within Spain, with its own government and parliament. It has a separate legal system and control over taxation and public services which could be presented as the 'Basque Fiscal State' (Agirreazkuenaga & Alonso, 2014; Calzada, 2022a).
Meso	Initiatives such as SPARK by Cardiff University, supported by the Cardiff Capital Region, aim to use technology and innovation to improve quality of life and create more sustainable urban areas through micro-missions (Henderson et al., 2023). Additionally, there are social enterprises focused on technology and community development.	The Bilbao Effect, which transformed the city through cultural and urban renewal, is a well-known example of social innovation in the Basque Country. The small nation has also been recognised for its sustainable urban planning and the use of smart technology in urban spaces. ASFabrik, with the co-leadership of Bilbao City Council and Mondragon University, aims to consolidate Zorrozaurre as an innovative ecosystem and a benchmark in the field of advanced services for Industry 4.0 and the digital economy. This is achieved by combining university training and a community of people spearheading innovative business and social initiatives (Van Winden, 2017).
Micro	Wales has a strong tradition of community-led development. The Welsh government has also established a fund to support social enterprises and community-led projects. The ongoing Banc Cambria initiative is a result of this.	The Basque Country has a long history of co-operative and solidarity-based economic models, such as the Mondragon Corporation, the largest worker co-operative in the world. The small nation has also established a network of institutional hubs to support entrepreneurship and innovation at the grassroots level. Against this backdrop, Talaios Koop represents a new wave of transformative co-operativism from below.

Stakeholders from both sides discussed the implications of devolution policies and sought to identify best practices by jointly reflecting on the current challenges around the territorial political economy. (ii) Meso (urban transformations): Stakeholders jointly explored current developments in Cardiff and Bilbao through the SPARK and ASFabrik flagship urban projects. By exchanging knowledge and experience, they learned from each other's urban transformation challenges as the initial strategy to cooperate and sought innovative ways to create sustainable and inclusive small nations beyond replicability (Calzada, 2020). (iii) Micro (grassroots innovations): Stakeholders' discussions focused on identifying grassroots innovations in the territorial ecosystems of both small nations, particularly emphasising the digital foundational economy and co-operativism (Barbera & Jones, 2020). By highlighting these localised initiatives, the workshop fostered more resilient and decentralised socioeconomic materials and digital landscapes (Table 1).

Small nations, such as Wales and the Basque Country, grapple with unique challenges in economic development, political influence and cultural preservation. Over time, Wales and the Basque Country have established both formal and informal paradiplomatic networks of cooperation (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999), exemplified by the MoU, facilitating knowledge sharing and partnership building between these two small nations. These networks provide avenues for small nations to glean insights from each other's experiences, share best practices, and collaborate on joint projects in crucial domains like economic development, cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. Through these collaborative efforts, small nations, exemplified by Wales and the Basque Country, can enhance their visibility and influence on the global stage, all while preserving and promoting their distinctive identities and cultures.

Since July 2018, the MoU has outlined eight priority areas for cooperation (Welsh Government, 2020b): health, innovation, cybersecurity, life sciences, agri-food, research and education, taxation and language. A recent meeting between Mark Drakeford, Welsh First Minister, and Lehendakari Iñigo Urkullu, Basque President, in Bilbao has ignited significant interest among stakeholders from both sides (Welsh Government, 2023). To date, several stakeholders have actively participated in this co-operative endeavour. In Wales, organisations such as WISERD, the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales, the Wales Governance Centre and Cardiff Capital Region are engaged. In the Basque Country, key participants include the Presidency of the Basque Country (through the External Affairs General Secretary and Social Transition/2030 Agenda General Secretaries), Bilbao Metropoli 30, St Sebastian City Council, Arantzazulab and Euskampus (2021), among others.

In the upcoming section, after a brief description of each small nation, findings and discussions are presented on three territorial scales, building the framework: Macro, Meso and Micro (Calzada et al., 2013). The conclusion, in the final section, elaborates on three operational research questions per scale, offering responses to the main research question while acknowledging future pathways for this ongoing project.

2. ANALYSING MACRO, MESO AND MICRO TERRITORIAL SCALES: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS WITHIN THE ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As introduced in the preceding section, operationalising a multiscale and transdisciplinary analysis of two small nations may pose several analytical challenges. To address the main research question, the ongoing project adopted an action research methodology, conducting a stakeholder workshop in May 2023 that aligns with the three methodological goals outlined in the Introduction. Therefore, this section presents the action research methodological framework, while the subsequent section outlines the agenda, both contributions to this article. This article fulfils the claim made in the Introduction's last paragraph, aiming to provide findings from the action research process on the three intertwined territorial scales. The research findings are integrated into the framework, encompassing discussions and analysis. Beyond the descriptive aspect of this section, the workshop's findings have been thoroughly incorporated (Table 1).

Action research, as defined by Lewin (1946, p. 35), is 'transformative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, leading to social action that employs a spiral of steps, each consisting of a cycle of planning, action, and fact-finding to assess the outcomes of the action'. Action research aims for transformative change through the integrated process of taking action and conducting research, interconnected by critical reflection (Argyris et al., 1985; Bennett & Brunner, 2020; Bradbury, 2022). The workshop and the ongoing project align with the rationale behind action research, as elucidated by Moulaert et al. (2022) around social innovation. The MoU includes explicit references to the foundational economy as the

paradigm advocating social innovation in Wales and the Basque Country (Barbera & Jones, 2020).

Wales is situated in the western part of the United Kingdom, boasting a population of approximately three million and covering a land area of 20,735 square kilometres. The Welsh people exhibit a distinct cultural identity, evident in their language, music and literature. Cymraeg, also known as the Welsh language, is spoken by around 20% of the population. Conversely, the Basque Country comprises three administrative entities: in northern Spain, (i) the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and (ii) the Chartered Community of Navarre (CCN) and in southern France, (iii) the Northern French Basque Country (NFBC). It holds a population of approximately three million people and spans a land area of 7234 square kilometres. The Basque people share a distinct cultural identity rooted in their language, Euskara, spoken by about 30% of the population. The territorial analysis in this article pertains to the Basque Country as a whole, acknowledging the existence of two separate Economic Agreements concerning tax devolution for the two Spanish administrative entities (Agirreazkuenaga & Alonso, 2014; Uriarte, 2015): (i) *Concierto Económico* in the BAC and (ii) *Convenio Económico* in the CCN (Figure 1).

The socio-political contexts of Wales and the Basque Country have been shaped by their respective histories. Wales was annexed by England in the thirteenth century and has been a part of the United Kingdom since the Act of Union in 1536 (Morgan, 2007, 2014; Wyn Jones & Lerner, 2020, 2021). In contrast, the Basque Country has a long history of independence struggles, with the Basque nationalist movement seeking autonomy or independence from Spain (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015).

2.1. Macro: devolution and fiscal federalism in small nations

The devolution of power from central governments to regional authorities has been a significant trend in many small European city-regional small nations, including Wales and the Basque Country. Devolution refers to the transfer of political and administrative powers from the central to regional or local levels of government, allowing for greater autonomy and decision-making authority at the local level.

Devolution and fiscal federalism are key policy issues for small nations, as they seek to balance the need for effective governance with the desire for greater autonomy (Bournakis, 2019).

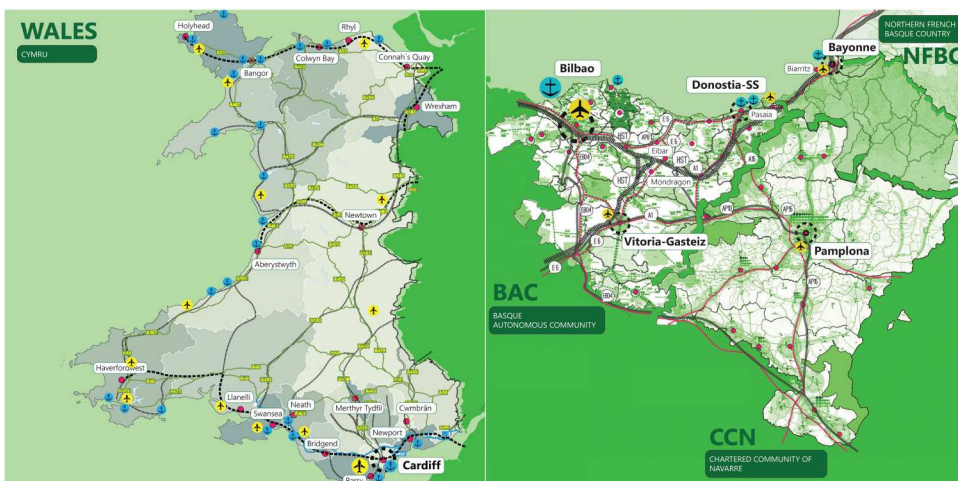


Figure 1. Maps of Wales and Basque Country (BAC, CCN, and NFBC).

Fiscal federalism can help small nations manage their resources more efficiently, while devolution can enable the decentralisation of power to subnational governments, allowing them to respond better to local needs and preferences. However, the design and implementation of these policies can be complex and require the careful consideration of issues such as taxation, intergovernmental transfers and regional economic disparities.

Rodríguez-Pose argues that the devolution of city-regions and, more broadly, small nations could be positive (1999). Rodríguez-Pose's position on devolution is that it can lead to economic and political benefits for regions; however, it is not a panacea for all the challenges faced by regions. He argues that devolution can help address regional inequalities and promote economic growth by allowing regions more control over their resources and policies. However, he also acknowledges that devolution can create challenges such as a lack of coordination and competition between regions, and that it may not be appropriate for all regions. Rodríguez-Pose suggested that devolution should be considered as part of a broader strategy for regional development, which includes investment in infrastructure, education, and innovation, as well as the implementation of policies that support regional cooperation and coordination.

In the case of Wales, devolution has taken place in stages since the late 1990s, with the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 and subsequent legislative powers granted through the Wales Act 2014. This Act provided the Welsh Government with limited tax-raising powers and made other constitutional changes, including renaming the National Assembly for Wales to *Senedd Cymru* or the Welsh Parliament. More recently, the Wales Act 2017 devolved further powers to Wales, including greater control over energy, transport and elections.

Similarly, the Basque Country has a long history of seeking greater autonomy (and even independence) from Spain (Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015). The devolution of power to the Basque Country began in the late 1970s with the creation of the Basque Statute of Autonomy in 1979, which institutionally established the Basque Country as an autonomous community, the BAC (as one part of the entire city-regional Basque Country) within the Spanish kingdom. The BAC has since gained additional powers in areas such as education, healthcare and taxation, allowing for greater decision-making authority at the local level. Furthermore, from the fiscal federalism perspective, both the BAC and CCN have special financial competencies, making them the only autonomous communities in the Spanish kingdom with the power to maintain, establish and regulate their tax regimes. The fiscal regulations in these communities are guided by principles such as the fiscal and financial autonomy of BAC and CCN institutions; respect for solidarity, coordination and cooperation with the Spanish kingdom over budget stability; contribution by the BAC and CCN to State expenses not assumed by the autonomous community; and financial supervision of local authorities corresponding to BAC and CCN institutions. In the BAC, the second act contains regulations on taxes and establishes the power of the BAC in each tax figure. The second act also summarises all the financial relations between the Spanish kingdom and the BAC by defining *Cupo*, which is the financial contribution made by the BAC and CCN to cover Spanish kingdom expenses not assumed by the autonomous community. The BAC and CCN have the unique ability to establish and regulate their tax systems within the framework of the Spanish Constitution and their respective Statutes of Autonomy.

Against this backdrop, and assuming that both cases are located in entirely different contexts, Morgan and Wyn Jones (2023) argue that Brexit, alongside the new recentralisation in the UK through the UK Internal Market Act (UKIMA) and Post-Brexit Regional policy (also known as *Levelling Up*), has put Wales in front of insurmountable internal (city-deals) and external challenges (unilateral manoeuvres by the UK Government). According to them, Brexit involved a repatriation of powers from Brussels to the UK, despite the fact that it was assumed that devolved powers would be returned to the Celtic nations in line with the 'reserved powers' model of devolution. Boris Johnson's government used Brexit to empower the central government through recentralisation using the UKIMA, which allowed London to intervene

in all devolved policy domains. As such, Morgan and Wyn Jones signal the death of devolution, which has been known for the past 21 years. These authors envisage two future scenarios for Wales that the current Independent Commission is assessing (2023): Labour's (a new federal-like system as outlined in *A New Britain*) and Plaid Cymru's (a journey to become a fully independent country) (Calzada, 2022b).

Discussion at the macro level in the workshop revolved around the potential benchmarking of how Basque devo-max could be adaptively implemented in Wales. The mutual learning and shared practices for the Basque Country focused on understanding how to benefit from subnational sport paradiplomatic activities,¹ which Wales was effectively implementing (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999).

2.2. Meso: social innovations in Cardiff and Bilbao

The development of urban spaces for social innovation, crucial components of regional development policies, has become an increasingly important area of focus. Urban spaces for social innovation are physical locations that allow innovation ecosystems to flourish, where individuals, local communities, and stakeholders can come together to collaborate, innovate, and co-create *micro-missions* to address social, economic and environmental challenges (Henderson et al., 2023; Moulaert et al., 2022).

This article juxtaposes two paradigmatic cases of urban spaces for social innovation in Cardiff and Bilbao respectively: the Social Science Research Park (SPARK) (Price & Delbridge, 2015) and ASFabrik (Martín et al., 2021; Van Winden, 2017).

Both projects aim to be propelled by challenge-driven innovation and small-scale *micro-missions* that address place-based challenges. Situated on the peninsula of Zorrozaurre, often referred to as 'little-Manhattan' and relatively close to the emblematic Guggenheim Museum, ASFabrik is a prominent innovation hub. In contrast, SPARK is located in the central area of Cardiff, at the heart of the campus. Both flagship projects highlight universities (Cardiff and Mondragon Universities) as safe, convening spaces and emphasise their role in bringing together local stakeholders to design and deliver a *micro-mission* approach, incorporating grassroots innovation (Henderson et al., 2023). *Micro-missions* provide a more holistic and multiscalar approach that seems necessary for socio-economic development through innovation policy, given the tensions between the meso- and micro-levels (Kattel & Mazzucato, 2018). These tensions were deliberated upon in the workshop among stakeholders. According to Henderson et al. (2023), universities such as Cardiff and Mondragon might assume a more significant role in place-based *micro-missions*, enabling the exploration of macro-meso-micro inter-scale tensions and contradictions.

ASFabrik aims to establish Zorrozaurre as an innovative ecosystem and a benchmark in the fields of advanced services for Industry 4.0 and the digital economy. This involves a fusion of university training with a community of individuals driving innovative business and social initiatives. ASFabrik primarily focuses on supporting technology-based start-ups and entrepreneurs. In contrast, SPARK has a broader focus, extending its support for innovation across various sectors, including its own research centres and institutes (Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations, WISERD, ESRC Wales Doctoral Training Partnership, Remaker-Space, Centre for Innovation Policy Research, DECIPHer, Digital Transformation Innovation Institute, Wales Centre for Public Policy, Ylab, Cascade and HateLab, among others) and external organisations such as third-sector organisations (Cwmpas, Carers Trust, TGP and Llamau), social enterprises (Sustain Wales, Institute for Community Studies, Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales and NESTA), creative industries (Red Knight) and technology (Centre for Digital Public Services, Simply Do and Sotic).

ASFabrik offers a variety of facilities, including coworking spaces, meeting rooms, event spaces and prototyping labs. On the other hand, SPARK provides coworking spaces, meeting

rooms, and event spaces, along with access to 3D printing and scanning facilities. ASFabrik provides a range of programmes and services to support entrepreneurs, such as mentorship, training and access to funding opportunities. Similarly, SPARK offers comparable services, coupled with access to networking events, workshops, and business development support. ASFabrik boasts a growing community of start-ups, entrepreneurs, and tech entrepreneurs. In comparison, SPARK has a diverse community of entrepreneurs and innovators from various sectors, along with partnerships with academic institutions, industry organisations and local governments.

Overall, both ASFabrik and SPARK play crucial roles as innovation hubs in their respective small nations, providing valuable support and resources to entrepreneurs and innovators. While ASFabrik takes a more focused approach, supporting technology-based start-ups, SPARK has a broader emphasis on innovation across various sectors.

Despite differences in context and scale between Cardiff and Bilbao, both initiatives share the common goal of creating physical spaces for collaboration, innovation and social impact. By offering a platform for diverse actors to come together and co-create solutions to local challenges, SPARK and ASFabrik contribute to the development of urban spaces for social innovation, with the potential to transform local economies and communities. Furthermore, SPARK receives support from the Cardiff Capital Region, while ASFabrik is backed by the Bilbao City Council.

The development of urban spaces for social innovation in Cardiff and Bilbao also presents opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between the two small nations. Through sharing best practices, exchanging knowledge, and building networks of support, Cardiff and Bilbao can collaborate to develop and promote innovative solutions to shared social and economic challenges.

The proposed joint transdisciplinary social sciences action research framework builds on the strengths of initiatives such as SPARK and ASFabrik, with the goal of promoting greater mutual learning,² collaboration and cooperation between the two small nations while supporting the development of urban spaces for social innovation that drives regional development and social progress.

Meso-level discussions in the workshop revolved around common practices that enable the transformation of urban spaces into multistakeholder platforms through micro-missions. Common funding schemes between the two small nations, including Norface³/Chanse,⁴ T-AP⁵ or more recently, the positive shift towards the UK becoming a Horizon Europe Associated Country,⁶ remain crucial for consolidating knowledge transfer among stakeholders.

2.3. Micro: grassroots innovations in Wales and the Basque Country

Grassroots innovations, or innovations driven by communities and individuals rather than large institutions or corporations, have emerged as a potent force for regional development and social change (Calzada, 2022c; Smith et al., 2016). These grassroots innovations are often deeply rooted in local knowledge, culture and traditions, propelled by a commitment to addressing local challenges and fostering more equitable and sustainable societies.

Nevertheless, meso-level micro-mission initiatives frequently overlook or dismiss these grassroots innovations. In fact, these initiatives, often relegated to the margins and deemed niche experiments, may not even be considered robust enough to qualify as *micro-missions*. Addressing grassroots innovations in the digital economy, particularly concerning platform and data co-operatives (Bühler et al., 2023a; Calzada, 2021), reveals three primary structural challenges. First, there is a lack of recognition of local leadership beyond their communities at the meso/policy level. Second, due to the network effect, scaling up preliminary initiatives proves challenging for platform and data co-operatives. Third, the proliferation of grassroots innovations in various organisational forms (e.g., co-operatives, alliances with trade unions, employee ownership, community groups, etc.) repeatedly encounters the same obstacle, the

difficulty of federating micro-scale initiatives widely scattered across a small nation (Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2018).

Two examples of grassroots innovations in Wales and the Basque Country are Banc Cambria and Talaios Koop, respectively.

Banc Cambria was proposed as a community-focused bank for Wales with strong grassroots support. It aims to offer a comprehensive range of banking services to individuals, businesses and communities in Wales. The concept was developed in response to the widespread closure of bank branches and the decline of banking services in Wales, which has had a significant impact on local communities and businesses. Banc Cambria's mission was to be a customer-owned, locally based and socially responsible bank that prioritised the needs of the people of Wales. The initiative was supported by various stakeholders, including the Welsh Government, local authorities, credit unions and other community-based organisations. The proposed bank intended to operate both physical branches and digital services, catering to customer needs while promoting financial inclusion, sustainability and local economic development. Its focus was on providing banking services to individuals, businesses and communities that may have faced difficulties accessing such services through traditional banks and fostering strong relationships with customers. Despite being conceived to be operative by 2023, Banc Cambria faced several scalability issues. Delays were announced in February 2023 by the Minister for the Economy, Vaughan Gething, citing factors such as 'rising interest rates, a contraction of the mortgage market, falling house prices and a cost of living crisis, with the Bank of England predicting a recession' (BusinessLive, 2023).

Talaios Koop is a worker-owned co-operative based in the Basque Country, Spain. Founded in 2011 by a group of engineers and technicians, the cooperative aims to foster technological sovereignty through data literacy and community empowerment. Talaios Koop is a young co-operative that can be situated among two main cases in the Basque Country: First, the so-called Mondragon Co-operative Corporation group, as the world's first-largest industrial co-operative (Calzada, 2013); and second, REAS, a solidarity-driven economy, and social movements group. Talaios Koop defines itself as 'the new wave of Basque co-operativism', attempting to federate ongoing co-operative initiatives. At present, they operate across the Basque Country by offering training and consultancy to public, private and third-sector organisations. Additionally, they are engaged in transforming existing private firms into employee-owned companies. Talaios Koop collaborates with the CoopCycle platform co-operative (Calzada, 2021) to develop the network of Eraman Koop, a food delivery cooperative (Wired, 2022). This collaboration highlights the evolution of worker-owned co-operatives towards digital cooperatives, whether platform or data co-operatives (Bühler et al., 2023b), as a way to take advantage of emerging and disruptive technologies (Calzada, 2023a). The resulting action research and policy agenda in the next section elaborates on this finding.

Despite differences in context and focus between Banc Cambria and Talaios Koop, both initiatives share a common commitment to grassroots innovation and community empowerment. By providing alternative models of economic development and promoting social sustainability, Banc Cambria and Talaios Koop have contributed to the development of more equitable and resilient regional economies.

The development of grassroots innovations in Wales and the Basque Country also presents an opportunity for cooperation between the two small nations. By sharing best practices, exchanging knowledge, and building networks of support, Wales and the Basque Country can collaborate to promote grassroots innovation and community empowerment, aiming to build more sustainable and equitable societies.

Micro-level discussions in the workshop opened up new pathways of action around various cooperative forms that could be blended with the digital foundational economic paradigm.⁷ This includes exploring further the potential integration of traditional co-operatives, platform

co-operatives, and data co-operatives. Traditional co-operatives have a long-standing history of fostering collective ownership and decision-making among their members. Platform co-operatives, which operate in the digital realm, extend this model to online platforms, ensuring that users have a stake in the platforms they contribute to. Data co-operatives, a relatively emerging concept (Bühler et al., 2023a; Calzada, 2023a), focus on collectively managing and leveraging data for the benefit of the co-operative members, thereby addressing data ownership and privacy concerns in the digital age. The discussion in the workshop and afterward highlighted the need to articulate a diverse range of co-operative cases to create a comprehensive and inclusive approach within the digital foundational economic paradigm. This paradigm may essentially suggest digital futures that consider emancipatory datafication strategies (Calzada, 2023b).

The following visualisation illustrates the resulting action research methodological framework encompassing the three intertwined territorial scales. (Figure 2)

3. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A JOINT TRANSDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCES' ACTION RESEARCH AND POLICY AGENDA FOR WALES AND THE BASQUE COUNTRY

To operationalise the response to the main research question, 'How do small nations cooperate?', the action research methodology sought common ground about the workshop findings and discussions presented in the previous section (Learned Society of Wales, 2023) (Table 1). The action research methodology resulted in one operational research question per territorial scale as the conclusion of this article (Calzada et al., 2013). The contribution of this article, therefore, is achieving a joint transdisciplinary social sciences' action research and policy agenda for Wales and the Basque Country as a way to respond to the general research question presented in Section 1. Hence, this article concludes with these three operational questions as the main corpus of the transdisciplinary social sciences action research and policy agenda for Wales and the Basque Country. In doing so, the article achieved both aims presented in Section 1: (i) to provide a preliminary comparative analysis through an action research framework between two small nations; and (ii) to disseminate the empirical findings of recent action research fieldwork through a workshop⁸ (Table 1).

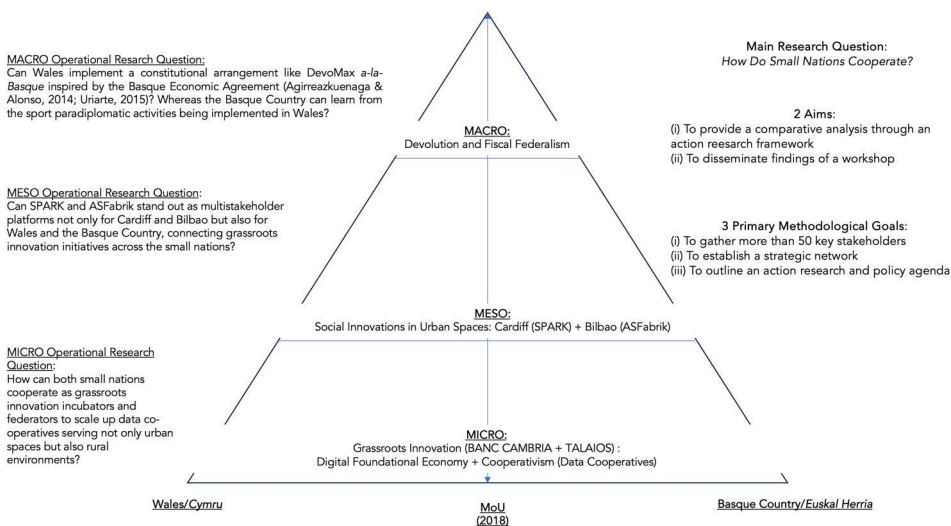


Figure 2. Action research methodological framework for Wales and the Basque Country.

In the context of this article, and broadly the ongoing project to which it belongs, the action part was primarily bringing together more than 50 key stakeholders from both sides (the first methodological goal) and the research part involved building the action research and policy agenda from a critical social innovation reflective perspective, as will be shown in the final section of this article. In fact, the latter resonates with the fact that both small nations are currently interested in promoting socio-economically inclusive and socio-politically transregional cooperation (Welsh Government, 2023). Therefore, the action research methodological framework emerged directly from the ongoing project, currently funded by a Wales based institution. The workshop resulted in the operational research questions as the conclusion and contribution of this article. These operational research questions emerged from the workshop stakeholders' discussion. The aim of the workshop was to set up an action research and policy agenda for Wales and the Basque Country, given their common interest in establishing transregional cooperation through their MoU (Welsh Government, 2023). The research data, empirics and findings are included as part of the data availability statement of this article in open access.⁹

Macro: The creation of the Independence Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales (2023) in 2022 raises the question of whether a DevoMax arrangement inspired by the Basque Economic Agreement is feasible for Wales in the post-Brexit era. This is characterised by an increasing recentralisation of devolved powers under the UK Internal Market Act (UKIMA) (Morgan & Wyn Jones, 2023; Radical Federalism, 2021; Report of the Independence Commission, 2020). The workshop discussion resulted in this Macro operational research question: Can Wales implement a constitutional arrangement like DevoMax *a-la-Basque* inspired by the Basque Economic Agreement (Agirreazkuenaga & Alonso, 2014; Uriarte, 2015)? Whereas the Basque Country can learn from the sport paradiplomatic activities being implemented in Wales?

Meso: SPARK, as the new Social Science Research Park, was envisaged as the world-leading hub for tackling global and societal problems in 2015 (Cardiff University, 2015). ASFabrik is a relatively new project in Bilbao (Van Winden, 2017). The workshop discussion resulted in this Meso operational research question: With the push of the Cardiff Capital Region and the leadership of Bilbao City Council, can SPARK and ASFabrik stand out as multistakeholder platforms not only for Cardiff and Bilbao but also for Wales and the Basque Country, connecting grassroots innovation initiatives across the small nations?

Micro: Against the backdrop of the rapid response stemming from grassroots innovation (Calzada, 2023a), and particularly pointing out data co-operatives (Bühler et al., 2023b), around disruptive technologies towards Web 3 and decentralised organisational models reverting data extractivism and the increasing awareness of data privacy, the workshop discussion resulted in this Micro operational research question: How can both small nations cooperate as grassroots innovation incubators and federators to scale up data co-operatives serving not only urban spaces but also rural environments? This question was recently presented in the *Global Innovation Coop Summit 2023* taking place in Montreal in the small nation of Quebec and received remarkable feedback that reinforces this operational question as a key element for the policy agenda of small nations (<https://www.globalinnovation.coop/speakers/>).

The three operational questions foreground transregional cooperation and mutual learning (avoiding pure replication or patronising) as advocated by the MoU, as follows: The Macro question suggests exploring how Basque devo-max could be adaptively implemented in Wales while Basque could learn from subnational paradiplomacy in action (i.e. sports paradiplomacy)¹⁰ (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999). The Meso question shows that SPARK and ASFabrik could become multistakeholder platforms for each small nation by broadly opening opportunities to share joint initiatives and funded projects (even more now that the UK has become an officially Horizon Europe associated country) in several topics

and sectors under the framework of social innovation in urban spaces. The Micro question opens a new pathway of action to establish grassroots innovation incubators and federators to set up and scale up data co-operatives serving urban spaces and rural environments (Bühler et al., 2023b). The three operational research questions stem from the social innovation perspective (Moulaert et al., 2022) and have in common their willingness to act with agency towards learning from each other, mutual learning and cooperation in specific topics and sectors.

In summary, this article in the journal *Regional Studies, Regional Sciences* aimed to respond to the main general question ‘How do small nations cooperate?’ within the context of the ongoing project funded by a Wales based institution. This action research and policy agenda constitute the results and contributions of this article, paving the way for further advancements in the ongoing project. It proposes an action research methodological framework (Section 2) and concludes with the action research and policy agenda encompassing three operational research questions per scale (Section 3). The author acknowledges a limitation in terms of being a summary, but simultaneously, it could be considered an opportunity to present this kick-off agenda to be followed by stakeholders from both sides framed by the MoU. Future research and policy pathways will be determined based on this agenda and the three operational research questions presented in this section, demonstrating how small nations are currently cooperating in practice and from scratch, as an answer to the main research question.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Details of the workshop(s) held as part of this study can be found at the following webpages:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUobjjGUa_s and <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/welsh-basque-cooperation-online-workshop-tickets-592307105497>
- <https://wiserd.ac.uk/news/dr-igor-calzada-awarded-funding-by-the-learned-society-of-wales/>
- <https://wiserd.ac.uk/blog/international-comparative-and-action-research-triangulating-wales-with-the-basque-country-and-california/>
- <https://wiserd.ac.uk/event/wales-and-basque-country-cooperation/>

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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NOTES

- ¹ <https://www.uik.eus/en/activity/challenges-opportunities-sports-diplomacy-21st-century>
- ² The workshop and the ongoing project drew inspiration from the H2020 project called Replicate, where the author served as the principal investigator (PI) of the City-to-City-Learning programme, emphasising a focus beyond mere replicability (Calzada, 2020): www.replicate-project.eu/city2citylearning. The approach to understanding and implementing action research in this intervention aligns with the same rationale and methodological background.
- ³ <https://www.norface.net/>
- ⁴ <https://chanse.org/>
- ⁵ <https://www.transatlanticplatform.com/>
- ⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-02812-1>
- ⁷ <https://wiserd.ac.uk/event/data-cooperatives-through-data-sovereignty-towards-a-digital-foundational-economy/>
- ⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUobjJGUa_s and <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/welsh-basque-cooperation-online-workshop-tickets-592307105497>
- ⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUobjJGUa_s and <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/welsh-basque-cooperation-online-workshop-tickets-592307105497> <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/welsh-basque-cooperation-online-workshop-tickets-592307105497> <https://wiserd.ac.uk/news/dr-igor-calzada-awarded-funding-by-the-learned-society-of-wales/> <https://wiserd.ac.uk/blog/international-comparative-and-action-research-triangulating-wales-with-the-basque-country-and-california/> <https://wiserd.ac.uk/event/wales-and-basque-country-cooperation/>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.uik.eus/en/activity/challenges-opportunities-sports-diplomacy-21st-century>

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