



From institutionalisation to embeddedness: Internal mechanisms in collaborative governance

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Abstract

This article examines how a formally adopted collaborative governance model becomes internally institutionalised within a public administration. Its aim is to explain the mechanisms through which collaborative logics are embedded in bureaucratic routines. The study employs a longitudinal qualitative case study of the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa (Spain), based on systematic document analysis of meeting minutes, organisational artefacts and authorising documents produced during 2020. The analysis traces the sociomaterial evolution of two key artefacts (the Project Portfolio and the Monitor) and identifies a four-phase mechanism of creating, translating, legitimising and maintaining. These mechanisms reveal how boundary objects mediate institutional work and gradually stabilise new collaborative practices inside the administration. The findings show that internal institutionalisation is not merely procedural but a sociomaterial accomplishment. The article contributes to socio-legal debates on democratic innovations by specifying how participatory logics become materially anchored and embedded within the everyday work of public bureaucracies.

Key words

Collaborative governance; institutional work; sociomateriality; embeddedness; boundary objects

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo un modelo de gobernanza colaborativa formalmente adoptado se institucionaliza internamente en una administración pública. Su objetivo es explicar los mecanismos a través de los cuales las lógicas colaborativas se integran en las rutinas burocráticas. El estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo longitudinal mediante un estudio de caso de la Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa (País Vasco, España), sustentado en un análisis documental sistemático de actas de reuniones, artefactos organizativos y documentación habilitante producida durante 2020. El análisis reconstruye la evolución sociomaterial de dos artefactos clave (el Portafolio de Proyectos y el Monitor) e identifica un mecanismo analítico de cuatro fases: creación, traducción, legitimación y mantenimiento. Estos mecanismos muestran cómo los objetos de frontera median el trabajo institucional y contribuyen a la estabilización progresiva de nuevas prácticas colaborativas dentro de la administración. Los resultados evidencian que la institucionalización interna no es un proceso meramente procedimental, sino un logro sociomaterial. El artículo contribuye a los debates sociojurídicos sobre las innovaciones democráticas al especificar cómo las lógicas participativas se anclan materialmente y se integran en el trabajo cotidiano de las burocracias públicas.

Palabras clave

Gobernanza colaborativa; trabajo institucional; sociomaterialidad; integración; objetos frontera

Table of contents

1. Introduction	959
2. Theoretical background.....	961
2.1. Institutional work: From structures to agency in public sector change.....	961
2.2. The material turn: Artefacts as constitutive of institutional practice	962
2.3. The research gap: Internal institutionalisation in public administrations.....	963
3. Methods and data.....	964
4. Findings	967
4.1. Phase 1: Creating a foundation.....	968
4.2. Phase 2: Translating logics.....	968
4.3 Phase 3: Legitimising through performance.....	969
4.4. Phase 4: Stabilising and maintaining the system	969
5. Discussion.....	970
6. Conclusion.....	972
References.....	973

1. Introduction

Collaborative governance is promoted as a means to address complex public problems that cross organisational boundaries (Ansell and Gash 2008, Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). By fostering cross-sector deliberation, it aims to create institutions that are more adaptive and legitimate (Sørensen and Torfing 2021).

However, a persistent gap exists between policy intent and implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). This is particularly acute in collaborative governance, where designing participatory structures is often less challenging than instilling the trust, shared motivation, and operational routines required for sustained cooperation (Ansell and Gash 2008).

More recently, collaborative governance has been interpreted as a proactive policy instrument structured through collaborative platforms; organisational frameworks endowed with competences and resources to facilitate the creation and adaptation of multiple or ongoing collaborative projects (Ansell and Gash 2018, Wegner *et al.* 2024). This conceptualisation underscores that sustaining collaboration requires not only deliberative forums but also infrastructural platforms capable of orchestrating coordination. Yet even when such enabling infrastructures exist, a persistent challenge remains: the difficulty of embedding new collaborative practices within the complex, often resistant ecosystems of public bureaucracies (Head and Alford 2015).

This implementation gap frequently manifests as collaborative inertia, where the momentum of participatory ideals dissipates against established administrative routines and power structures (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Consequently, the critical challenge lies in moving collaborative governance from a sporadic aspiration to a sustained, embedded reality within governmental practice (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

Overcoming this inertia can be understood as a fundamental challenge of institutional work, requiring the active disruption of established routines and the creation and maintenance of new collaborative ones. A significant, and often underemphasised, dimension of this challenge is internal. While considerable scholarship examines the external, inter-organisational dynamics of collaboration, a comparable focus on its internal institutionalisation within public bureaucracies is lacking (Head and Alford 2015), leading to a neglect of the internal dimension of governance (Kuipers *et al.* 2014).

The sustainability of collaborative arrangements is therefore contingent upon this under-theorised process of internal anchorage. Two theoretical streams offer a pathway for analysis. First, the concept of institutional work provides a lens for understanding how actors purposefully shape institutions. It has been defined as the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). This perspective refocuses institutional analysis from structural determinism towards the situated agency of actors (Lawrence *et al.* 2009). In the context of environmental governance, this work is seen as central to achieving a dynamic balance between stability and flexibility in governance systems (Beunen *et al.* 2017); a tension central to embedding collaborative models within stable bureaucracies.

Second, the sociomaterial turn in organisational studies posits that the social and the material are constitutively entangled in practice (Orlikowski 2007). This perspective

argues that artefacts, including tools, technologies, and documents, are not neutral intermediaries but active participants in shaping organisational life (Orlikowski and Scott 2008). A key concept here is the boundary object, defined as artefacts that are both robust enough to maintain a common identity across different arenas and flexible enough to be adapted to local needs (Star and Griesemer 1989, Carlile 2004). Research on institutional work integrates this insight, highlighting that the design of artefacts constitutes a form of institutional work (Lawrence *et al.* 2013).

However, a synthesis of these perspectives remains underdeveloped. Consequently, there remains a lack of understanding of how the internal institutional work of public officials, mediated and constituted by sociomaterial artefacts, drives collaborative governance models. This article addresses this gap by posing the research question: *What mechanisms explain the internal institutionalisation of a collaborative governance model within a provincial government?*

Sub-regional governments are ideal for studying this process, operating at a scale suited to both complex challenges and innovative governance (Sørensen and Torfing 2021). This study focuses on the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa (Spain). After a 2015 political shift, it committed to an “open and collaborative governance model” (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa 2016, p. 6). A dedicated Working Group operationalized this vision through mutual learning, culminating in a new territorial governance model (Barandiaran *et al.* 2023, Pomares *et al.* 2023). This democratic innovation (Elstub and Escobar 2019) illustrates that collaboration depends on internal capacities.

The political continuity afforded by the re-election of the governing coalition in 2019 was pivotal. The renewed government made an explicit commitment to institutionalise the model, embedding it within the 2020-2023 Strategic Plan. The plan described the approach as “a model based on institutional commitment to make possible and operational the participation and cooperation of different social actors in the reflection and strategic development of the public agenda” (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa 2020, p. 2). A key moment of formalisation was the internal decree approved in January 2020, which created a Project Office and established the model’s structure. This adoption makes the subsequent period a critical juncture for examining the internal institutional work required to build collaborative governance from within.

This study employs a longitudinal qualitative case study, focusing specifically on the operational year 2020 as a period of active institutionalisation following the model’s formal decree. The analysis traces two central coordination processes (Project Management and Monitoring) and the evolution of the sociomaterial artefacts that organised them, specifically a strategic project Portfolio, and a Monitor.

By addressing the organisational dynamics through which collaborative governance becomes embedded in bureaucratic practice, the study contributes to debates in Public Administration on institutional change. The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it develops a mechanism-based explanation of internal institutionalisation, specifying a sequence of institutional work that moves a model from formal adoption to embedded practice. Empirically, it demonstrates how administrative artefacts function as boundary objects mediating institutional negotiation. Practically, it distils low-burden design heuristics to help administrations consolidate collaborative routines.

Recent work in the socio-legal tradition has argued that democratic innovations should be analysed not only in terms of their formal institutionalisation, but also in terms of their capacity to generate participatory embeddedness in political and institutional cultures (Ahedo *et al.* 2024). Building on this distinction between institutionalisation and embeddedness, this article examines the internal anchoring of a collaborative governance within the bureaucratic apparatus of a public administration. Rather than focusing on citizen-facing arenas, the analysis traces how a formally adopted collaborative governance model becomes materially embedded in the everyday work of civil servants.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework on institutional work and sociomateriality, synthesizing them to define internal institutionalisation. Section 3 details the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings, and Section 5 discusses their implications before concluding.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Institutional work: From structures to agency in public sector change*

Institutional theory has shifted from an emphasis on constraining structures to an interest in the purposive agency of actors who shape and sustain institutions. This transformation, crystallised in the notion of *institutional work*, highlights the practical actions through which individuals and organisations create, maintain, and disrupt institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, Lawrence *et al.* 2011). Rejecting deterministic models of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), this perspective emphasises agency, situated practice, and intentionality in institutional evolution (Battilana *et al.* 2009, Thornton *et al.* 2012).

Within public administration, institutional-work theory has been applied to show that civil servants, managers, and political appointees are not merely implementers but active contributors to institutional change (Smets *et al.* 2015, Scott and Thomas 2015). This work is critical for navigating the demands of contemporary public sector (Van Hulst and Yanow 2014, Micelotta *et al.* 2017).

Institutionalisation is therefore understood not as a fixed outcome but as a continuous process of embedding new rules, routines, and cognitive schemas into organisational life (Van de Ven and Poole 2005, Jepperson and Meyer 2021). Organisational routines offer a micro-foundation for this process: they are dynamic patterns of action in which ostensive (normative) and performative (situated) aspects interact (Feldman and Pentland 2003). Public-sector studies confirm that institutional change often arises through incremental adjustments combining top-down design and bottom-up adaptation (Kuipers *et al.* 2014).

Four interrelated forms of institutional work are particularly relevant for analysing organisational change: creating, translating, legitimising, and maintaining (Suchman 1995, Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). Creating work defines new categories and routines; translating work adapts and interprets abstract ideas for local contexts; legitimising work renders these innovations acceptable to wider audiences; and, maintaining work stabilises emerging arrangements through repetition and repair (Feldman and Pentland 2003, Lawrence *et al.* 2013).

This work unfolds within hybrid contexts shaped by competing institutional logics; the historically patterned configurations of practices, assumptions, and rules that guide organisational action (Thornton *et al.* 2012). The introduction of a collaborative governance model represents the encounter between a *collaborative logic* of flexibility and shared deliberation and a *bureaucratic logic* of hierarchy and standardisation (Ansell and Gash 2008). Such friction provokes institutional resistance and defensive routines (Kraatz and Zajac 1996, Erwin and Garman 2010). Consequently, institutional work to create and sustain collaborative practices also entails disrupting and re-legitimising entrenched bureaucratic routines as actors navigate these environments (Pache and Santos 2013).

2.2. *The material turn: Artefacts as constitutive of institutional practice*

A second major development in institutional theory is the growing recognition of materiality. Artefacts (i.e. documents, templates, and digital interfaces) are not neutral tools that merely record organisational activity; they actively mediate and constitute it (Orlikowski 2007, Orlikowski and Scott 2008, Leonardi 2011). In this view, materials are integral to the production of organisational reality, shaping how actors perceive, coordinate, and legitimise their work. Public administration research has shown how performance indicators, dashboards, and standardised forms reconfigure structures (Moynihan 2008, Pollitt 2018), while strategic documents and digital infrastructures participate in enacting the very realities they aim to describe (Kornberger *et al.* 2017, Leca *et al.* 2019).

The concept of boundary objects provides a lens for analysing this constitutive role. Boundary objects are artefacts that are simultaneously robust enough to sustain a shared identity across social worlds and flexible enough to accommodate local needs (Star and Griesemer 1989, Carlile 2004). In public administrations artefacts often play this function, becoming material vehicles through which collaborative ideals are stabilised into practice (Kornberger and Clegg 2011). Through recurrent use in decision-making forums, such artefacts acquire legitimacy and become infrastructural components that materially instantiate institutional logics (Prior 2008, Saetnan *et al.* 2010).

By providing shared reference points, boundary objects facilitate the translation of knowledge across departmental boundaries (Carlile 2004, Nicolini *et al.* 2012). They make collaborative activity collectively legible and connect operational routines with strategic visibility that underpins adaptive governance (Emerson *et al.* 2012, Sabel and Zeitlin 2012). Their increasing digitisation does not diminish but rather amplifies their capacity to structure coordination in complex systems (Mergel *et al.* 2019).

Tracing the sociomaterial evolution of these artefacts offers unique empirical access to the mechanisms through which collaborative policy aspirations are translated into durable organisational forms (Bianchi *et al.* 2021). From this perspective, artefacts do not simply embody pre-existing institutional logics but actively shape and stabilise new ones (Orlikowski 2007, Lawrence *et al.* 2013).

In place-based approaches to collaborative governance, territorial actors are understood as a collective subject that owns regional problems and mobilises shared agency and resources to address them (Larrea *et al.* 2024). From this perspective, the design of internal administrative artefacts is not merely an organisational concern but a

precondition for place-based collaborative governance: without internal infrastructures that render collaborative activity visible and actionable for bureaucrats, it becomes difficult for “place” to articulate its agency.

2.3. *The research gap: Internal institutionalisation in public administrations*

Despite the maturity of the literatures on institutional work and materiality, their synthesis remains underdeveloped for explaining how collaborative governance becomes institutionalised *within* public administrations. Most research continues to privilege the external dimension of collaboration (e.g., Ansell and Gash 2008, Bryson *et al.* 2015), whereas the sustainability of collaborative arrangements ultimately depends on their internal anchorage (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015, Head and Alford 2015). This anchorage requires the creation of routines, roles, and material infrastructures that enable public administrations to enact collaboration coherently in their daily operations.

Internal institutionalisation refers to the contested process of embedding new, collaborative coordination logics into the everyday fabric of administrative work. Theoretically, it combines deliberate design with emergent adaptation, sustained by recursive interactions between structure and situated practice (Van de Ven and Poole 2005, Kuipers *et al.* 2014). The introduction of collaborative logics, marked by openness, flexibility, and cross-boundary deliberation, inevitably clashes with bureaucratic logics privileging hierarchy, accountability, and standardisation (Ansell and Gash 2008, Thornton *et al.* 2012). The resulting friction provokes institutional resistance and renders internal institutionalisation a continuous negotiation between competing modes of governance (Kraatz and Zajac 1996, Pache and Santos 2013).

From a policy-design perspective, this process can be understood as the gradual configuration of procedural instruments that enable coordination, learning, and adaptation within the public sector (Howlett 2023). Governments increasingly rely not only on substantive instruments such as regulation or financial incentives but also on procedural and information-based tools that structure interaction and decision-making. In this sense, the artefacts analysed in this study, such as the Portfolio and the Monitor, can be viewed as part of a broader *instrument mix* designed to institutionalise reflexive and collaborative capacities within bureaucratic routines.

Yet, despite their conceptual complementarity, few studies have traced how these artefacts evolve into boundary objects that stabilise collaborative logics from within. An understanding is still missing of how the work of creating, translating, legitimising, and maintaining (as outlined in Section 2.1) unfolds over time and is materially mediated by such artefacts. The study posits that internal institutionalisation occurs through the iterative interplay between artefacts and forms of institutional work, whereby material and social practices co-produce the routines that embed collaborative governance within public administration.

Recent socio-legal scholarship has proposed the concept of participatory embeddedness to distinguish between the formal institutionalisation of participatory mechanisms and the deeper integration of democratic logics into political cultures, practices and temporalities (Bussu *et al.* 2022, Ahedo *et al.* 2024).

From this perspective, institutionalisation describes a descriptive state, whereas embeddedness refers to the depth, density and temporality of democratic practices. Extending this distinction to the internal dimension of governance, the article conceptualises internal institutionalisation as a particular form of embeddedness: the degree to which collaborative logics are materially and routinely anchored in the everyday work of bureaucracies. This emphasis on collectively understood, accepted and legitimised procedures is echoed in the institution's own assessment, which explicitly identifies collective legitimisation as a condition for the model's consolidation (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa 2021).

This article addresses that gap by conceptualising internal institutionalisation as a sociomaterial process, wherein artefacts constitute the medium through which institutional work is enacted, negotiated, and stabilised (Orlikowski 2007, Lawrence *et al.* 2013). Synthesising these perspectives provides a mechanism-based explanation of how collaborative governance is built from the inside out, grounding institutional change in the material and procedural infrastructures of public administration.

3. Methods and data

This study employs a longitudinal, qualitative single-case design to investigate the processual dynamics through which a collaborative governance model was institutionalised within a public administration. This approach is epistemologically aligned with interpretive inquiry, which seeks to understand the "how" and "why" of complex social processes as they unfold in their real-world context (Ospina *et al.* 2018).

A single-case design is particularly suited to capturing the contextual, temporal, and emergent nature of organizational change, addressing persistent calls in public management scholarship to move beyond ahistorical and processual accounts of reform (Kuipers *et al.* 2014). The design enables a focus on process and sequence, which is essential for theorising about change mechanisms (Langley 1999, Van de Ven and Poole 2005).

The empirical focus is the internal institutionalisation of the collaborative governance model within the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa (Spain). The model rests on an institutional architecture that links participatory and experimental arenas with a liaison body, the Project Office, and a set of supporting processes (Pomares *et al.* 2023). Two institutional artefacts sustain coherence and reflexivity: the Portfolio and the Monitor.

The Portfolio is a structured repository that compiles all initiatives through standardised templates recording objectives, actors, status, results, and expected impacts. The Monitor aggregates these data into indicators that track strategic relevance, maturity, policy alignment, and transformative potential. Together, these artefacts enable system self-observation and connect everyday practice to strategic reflection, exemplifying a democratic innovation that builds institutional infrastructures for observation, reflection, and adaptation (Elstub and Escobar 2019).

In early 2020 the Governing Council approved an internal decree that created the Project Office and formalised the collaborative governance model. A public press conference on 28 January 2020 announced the consolidation of the model and its integration into the organisation's decision structures. A subsequent decree codified this reorganisation,

signalling a decisive institutional commitment. The temporal boundary of the study is the operational year 2020, a pivotal period during which implementation routines and organisational artefacts were designed, tested, and consolidated.

Accordingly, 2020 is a critical juncture for observing the initial institutional work of embedding the model. An official 2021 assessment reconfirms 2020 as the decisive year in which the Governing Council formally approved the model and appointed the Project Office, marking the beginning of its organisational consolidation (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa 2021).

The unit of analysis is the administrative process through which the model was translated into practice. This process is examined through two central, interlocking coordination processes (Project Management and Monitoring), which together operationalised the model's core functions of strategic prioritisation and knowledge codification. The sociomaterial artefacts that organised these processes, specifically, the Portfolio (a structured repository of initiatives) and the Monitor (a dashboard for system adjustment), functioned as boundary objects enabling coordination across governance components.

This framing privileges an in-depth understanding of processual mechanisms over variance across multiple cases, consistent with the rationale for theory-building from qualitative research (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007, Ospina *et al.* 2018).

The evidential base is a comprehensive corpus of organisational documents produced during implementation. The primary data consists of the complete set of internal minutes¹ and action lists from the two central processes: 9 sessions of the Project Management process and 9 sessions of the Monitoring & Follow-up process (18 sessions total, May–December 2020). These documents were generated through a structured administrative process. Throughout 2020, these regular coordination meetings brought together a consistent group of participants that included the Director General for Strategic Management (political appointee), senior civil servants heading service units, and technical staff responsible for implementation and data management (see Table 1 in the Appendix). The internal processes were facilitated and documented by a researcher embedded in the administration. This configuration provided a stable forum for collective decision-making and created a dense empirical record of how the model's artefacts and routines were progressively developed, contested, and embedded within the administration.

The dataset comprises, first, the paired sets of minutes from the Project Management and Monitoring processes, which provide a dual-perspective, real-time account of strategic decisions and their operational implementation. Second, versioned artefacts trace the evolution of the project fiche, the Portfolio structure, and the Monitor, capturing how categories, standards, and routines were defined and revised. Third, authorising documents (e.g., management plans; strategic plans and formal communications) situate those activities within the organisation's planning and decision cycles. In qualitative public-administration research, documents are not neutral repositories but constitutive

¹ All internal minutes (Actas de Gestión and Actas de Monitorización) are confidential internal documents produced by the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa. As internal administrative records, they are not publicly available and are therefore cited in-text only.

elements of organisational practice; systematic desk research and document analysis are established strategies to reconstruct decision processes and administrative change (Van Thiel 2014). Treating documents as active artefacts aligns with assessments of qualitative practice (Ospina *et al.* 2018).

To strengthen the internal validity of the analysis, the documentary corpus was triangulated with official sources (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa 2020, 2021). These documents provide a comprehensive overview of the programme's operational architecture and the evolution of its project portfolio. Within the collaborative governance model, the project constitutes the unit of analysis through which collaboration is operationalized. Each project acts as a structured initiative designed to translate collaborative principles into the everyday practice of administration. Collectively, they form an integrated portfolio that links deliberation, experimentation, and institutional learning across the organisation. Sources confirm that, by the end of 2020, the model comprised fifty-nine projects, coordinated through the Project Office. This external documentation aligns with the scope and structure observed in the internal minutes analysed in this study, where Project Management sessions in 2020 focused on consolidating and monitoring this same set of initiatives. The consistency between internal records and official reports strengthens the credibility of the longitudinal reconstruction presented here and supports the interpretation of the Portfolio and the Monitor as institutional artefacts.

Guided by a processual lens (Langley 1999, Van de Ven and Poole 2005), the analysis focused on how institutionalisation unfolds through sequences of actions and events. We conducted a longitudinal analysis of temporal sequences by tracing documented chains of decisions and artefact modifications across the interleaved meeting minutes. This allowed to establish plausible cause-and-effect relationships by identifying consistent patterns where specific interventions preceded developments in the institutional fabric, following accepted practice for process research (Ospina *et al.* 2018).

The analysis followed a thematic approach guided by the four dimensions of institutional work, while remaining open to patterns emerging inductively from the meeting records. The interpretation of the minutes and artefacts was guided by the four dimensions introduced in the theoretical framework. Each instance of documented action (such as the definition of categories, adaptation of protocols, formal endorsement of tools, or routine revision) was coded as evidence of creating, translating, legitimising, or maintaining work. This approach allowed the reconstruction of the temporal sequence of institutionalisation through artefacts. Consequently, each empirical "phase" presented in Section 4 corresponds to one of these forms of institutional work, showing how the collaborative governance model was progressively embedded in everyday administrative practice.

To ensure quality and rigor, the study adhered to established criteria for qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Credibility is established through thick description and the precise citation of source material. Dependability is achieved by maintaining a transparent audit trail that documents the analytical journey from raw data to conceptual findings (Dodge *et al.* 2005). Confirmability is demonstrated through a clear separation of empirical observations from their theoretical interpretation. Transferability is sought not through statistical generalisation but through analytic generalisation (Yin

2018), where the elucidated mechanisms can be tested for their applicability in comparable administrative settings.

The author was embedded in the administration during the study period, contributing to the facilitation and documentation of the processes analysed. This positionality is acknowledged as a source of deep access and potential bias. To mitigate potential bias arising from the author's role as rapporteur, the analysis privileged the versioned evolution of the artefacts themselves (e.g., changes to the Portfolio structure between meetings) over personal recollection or interpretation. The minutes were treated not as subjective accounts but as records of official decisions and action items, which were validated by circulation to all participants post-meeting and approved. All research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for organisational and document-based research (Bowen 2009). Accordingly, internal records are handled under strict confidentiality, and publicly released documents are cited appropriately. This approach aligns with ethical expectations for qualitative research in public administration (Ospina *et al.* 2018).

The single-case, document-based design privileges depth of process reconstruction over breadth of perspectives or statistical generalisability. While semi-structured interviews could have added actor viewpoints, the chosen strategy, leveraging the rich, dual-perspective record of the Project Management and Monitoring processes, provides a rigorous, evidence-based account of internal administrative change, meeting the objective of tracing how institutional work unfolds from within. This trade-off is consistent with the value of in-depth, longitudinal studies of change processes in public organisations (Kuipers *et al.* 2014).

Notwithstanding these strengths, the longitudinal case study provides a unique window into the process of internal institutionalisation, it is not without limitations. The single-case design, while necessary for depth, means the generalizability of the four-phase model must be tested in other administrative contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on documentary data, while robust for tracing formal decisions, may not capture the full spectrum of informal resistance or individual motivation. Future research could combine document analysis with interviews to triangulate these findings and explore the role of power and informal networks more explicitly.

4. Findings

This section traces the processual journey through which the collaborative governance model was translated from a formal decree into the everyday practice of the Provincial Government during 2020. The analysis draws on the dual empirical record of Project Management and Monitoring & Follow-up, and on the iterative evolution of their key artefacts: the project Portfolio and the Monitor. Following the theoretical framework, the findings are interpreted as a sequence of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006) mediated by artefacts that functioned as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989) and enacted collaborative practice through their sociomaterial use (Orlikowski and Scott 2008).

4.1. Phase 1: Creating a foundation

The initial institutional work focused on creating the basic categories and forums necessary to launch the collaborative model under conditions of significant contingency. Immediately following the COVID-19 lockdown, the Project Management track engaged in a pragmatic act of strategic prioritisation. Acta Gestión 1 (2020-05-05) recorded that “projects were classified as ‘continue’ or ‘postponed’ to focus resources after lockdown”. This was not merely administrative sorting but a fundamental act of creating shared priorities, materially embodied in a definitive list that concentrated collective attention and resources.

Concurrently, the team established a structured “governance rhythm”. The minutes (Acta Gestión 2, 2020-05-12) noted: “Regular coordination calendar approved; shared sessions to align departments and external partners”. This institutionalised a stable, cross-boundary deliberative forum, materially enacting the collaborative ethos of the model through its procedural architecture. The triage list and the session calendar functioned as foundational boundary objects; robust enough to maintain a common identity across departments yet flexible enough to accommodate the specificities of different projects.

The creation of these artefacts gave rise to the first version of the Portfolio template, structured around fixed columns for objective, responsible unit, status, and expected impacts. In practice, these design choices lowered coordination costs and made the abstract ideal of collaboration actionable from the outset.

4.2. Phase 2: Translating logics

As the model moved into operation, the core institutional work became one of translation; converting the divergent logics of project execution and organisational learning into a shared representational framework.

Early meetings in both tracks converged on the need for a standardised project fiche to ensure “uniform management” (Acta Gestión 1, 2020-05-05). This artefact, combining mandatory fields with narrative space, was designed to translate dispersed project realities into a comparable format, enabling knowledge to travel across unit boundaries.

A critical tension surfaced around the meaning of “approval”, revealing a fundamental clash between the incumbent bureaucratic logic and the nascent collaborative logic. The Project Management process, operating within the bureaucratic logic, privileged hierarchical authority and formal mandates, arguing that projects listed in the Management Plan, approved by the Governing Council, were de facto “approved” and should bypass a formal “assessment” protocol (Acta Gestión 3, 2020-05-19). In stark contrast, the Monitoring track, championing the collaborative logic of learning and adaptation, insisted that skipping the “Project Proposal > Assessment > Results” sequence would “break traceability”, create an “epistemological gap”, and undermine organisational learning (Acta Monitorización 3, 2020-05-20). This was not merely a procedural disagreement but a manifestation of institutional resistance (Kraatz and Zajac 1996, Erwin and Garman 2010), as actors embedded in the bureaucratic logic defended established routines against the new collaborative practices.

The negotiated compromise materialised in the artefacts themselves: a new field titled “Assessment completed (Yes/No)” was inserted into the project fiche to reconcile both logics. This small but consequential modification allowed hierarchical authorisation to coexist with deliberative assessment, exemplifying how translation work is materially encoded. The Project Management track, operating within the entrenched bureaucratic logic, argued that formal authorisation by the Governing Council was the sole requisite. The Monitoring track, championing the new collaborative logic of organisational learning, insisted on a deliberative process. The negotiated solution was, therefore, not just a procedural fix but a moment of institutional work that temporarily reconciled these two opposing logics, allowing the collaborative model to proceed without fully dismantling the bureaucratic one.

Following this phase of procedural negotiation, the next stage of institutional work focused on legitimising the new system through its demonstrated practical value.

4.3 Phase 3: Legitimising through performance

The institutional work of legitimising the new model was achieved not by decree, but through its demonstrated utility and iterative refinement in practice, which clarified the function of key artefacts (Ansell and Gash 2018).

The Monitoring track conceptualised a twin-pillar system: an internal Portfolio as the “codified source of record” and a Monitor for transparency (Acta Monitorización 2, 2020-05-13). Initially, Project Management leadership perceived them as “two different things” (Acta Monitorización 3, 2020-05-20), revealing a strategic disconnect rooted in competing institutional logics. From the bureaucratic standpoint, the Portfolio was a reporting tool for vertical accountability, while the Monitor was an external communication channel. The collaborative logic, however, required them to function as an integrated learning system. Clarifying that “the Portfolio feeds the Monitor, and the Monitor visualises the Portfolio” was essential to overcome this resistance and legitimise the new governance model.

As iterative discussions unfolded, descriptors and data fields were progressively harmonised. The Monitor’s dashboard incorporated a “strategic alignment” panel linked to the axes of the 2020–2023 Strategic Plan, while Portfolio entries were reclassified accordingly (Acta Gestión 6, 2020-08-08). This evolution enabled a shift from managing discrete unit outputs to analysing system-level patterns and overall strategic coherence. When projects were later mapped against the provincial strategic axes, concentrations and gaps became visible, reinforcing the model’s legitimacy by demonstrating its capacity to generate a coherent, system-wide view of collaborative activity.

4.4. Phase 4: Stabilising and maintaining the system

The latter part of 2020 saw a discernible shift from managing discrete projects to stabilising an integrated governance system, turning artefacts into organisational infrastructure. This phase combined the strategic work of institutionalising the system with the continuous, often-invisible work of maintaining it against friction and complexity.

The Project Management track instituted short update interviews with project leads to feed the portfolio and directly inform the 2021 Management Plan (Acta Gestión 7, 2020-10-06). This practice embedded reflexive data cycles into the formal planning calendar and culminated in the work documented later (Acta Gestión 9, 2020-11-03), which explicitly focused on developing an “integrated model” and reframing the portfolio as a three-tier device connecting projects, collaborative spaces, and the overall collaborative governance model. This represented the artefact's final evolution from a project list to an infrastructural framework that materially instantiated the strategic logic of the entire collaborative governance system.

Simultaneously, the system required constant maintenance against operational friction. Through their recurrent use, the Portfolio and the Monitor evolved from administrative tools into infrastructural boundary objects that materially mediated learning and coordination, sustaining the reflexive capacity of the governance system. A persistent challenge was the administrative imperative of bilingualism (Basque/Spanish), a legitimate policy requirement that often became a site of institutional friction (Acta Monitorización 3, 2020-05-20; Kraatz and Zajac 1996). Negotiations over which interface fields were “critical” for translation exemplified how procedural compliance could constrain collaboration. The sociomaterial artefacts themselves also required constant maintenance, with the minutes documenting numerous “iterative fixes”; debugging search functions, repairing web displays, planning automated data transfers, and creating user manuals (Acta Monitorización 5, 2020-06-10; 7, 2020-07-01; 8, 2020-09-02). This work of structured repetition and adjustment was essential to stabilise the routines without allowing the system to become rigid or unusable.

These incremental upgrades, including the implementation of automatic synchronisation and a user manual, marked the artefact's transition from a tool to an infrastructure that sustained reflexive governance. Thus, stabilisation was not an endpoint but a dynamic balance between institutionalising infrastructure and maintaining its functionality, ensuring the system's persistence beyond the tenure of individual actors while remaining adaptable to daily challenges.

5. Discussion

This study explains that the internal institutionalisation of collaborative governance is fundamentally a process of managing tension between competing institutional logics through sociomaterial mediation. The findings contribute to policy design research by showing how the iterative design of procedural instruments such as the Portfolio and the Monitor shapes broader governance capacities for coordination and learning (Howlett 2023).

The article situates these findings in relation to collaborative governance regimes. While Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) model of collaborative governance regimes conceptualises collaboration as an inter-organisational system, this study focuses on the intra-organisational dimension of that regime. The findings reveal how the internal routines, artefacts, and infrastructures of a public administration constitute the operational substrate that allows such regimes to function and endure. In this sense, internal institutionalisation precedes and sustains the external collaborative arena: it provides the procedural and cognitive stability that makes cross-sector coordination

possible. This perspective extends the regime framework by highlighting the administrative conditions and sociomaterial mechanisms through which collaborative intent becomes durable practice.

First, the study demonstrates how sociomaterial artefacts serve as primary arenas for institutional negotiation. Rather than a straightforward replacement of bureaucratic logic by collaborative logic, the two were found to coexist in a negotiated co-habitation (Pache and Santos 2013). The Portfolio and Monitor became the tangible sites where abstract struggles between flexibility/control and learning/accountability were concretely fought and temporarily settled. Consequently, operational disputes over “approval” or “system design” in meeting minutes represent empirical indicators of deeper institutional contestation (Kraatz and Zajac 1996, Erwin and Garmann 2010). The institutional work observed essentially involved mediating these logics through artefacts functioning as boundary objects, creating fragile but workable hybrid practices. This internal evolution is consistent with the official 2021 assessment, which explicitly recognises the Portfolio as the backbone connecting experimental projects, reference centres, strategic missions and deliberative spaces (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa 2021).

Second, the research provides a rare empirical trace connecting micro-level institutional work to macro-level institutional structures. The gap between situated agency and enduring institutional arrangements is bridged through the documentation of how public officials filled, debated, and revised artefacts in daily practice (Thornton *et al.* 2012). This challenges deterministic views of bureaucracy by showing how officials not only navigate but actively reshape the very structures that constrain them through their sociomaterial practices.

Third, the study advances a mechanism-based explanation of internal institutionalisation as a cumulative sequence. By synthesising institutional work with sociomateriality, the analysis moves beyond identifying barriers to proposing a positive process theory. The identified sequence (creating, translating, legitimising, and maintaining) provides a diagnostic framework for understanding how collaborative governance is built incrementally from within. This mechanism-based view offers both scholars and practitioners a tangible roadmap for implementing collaborative models beyond superficial adoption.

Fourth, the socio-legal debate has recently insisted on distinguishing mere institutionalisation of participatory mechanisms from their embeddedness in democratic cultures, practices and temporalities (Bussu *et al.* 2022, Ahedo *et al.* 2024). From this perspective, collaborative governance programmes such as Etorikizuna Eraikiz can be seen as instances of “governance-driven democratisation” that only contribute to broader democratic deepening when participatory logics become embedded in everyday institutional life. The four-phase mechanism identified in this article specifies how such embeddedness can be constructed inside the bureaucracy. Creating foundational categories and forums increases the depth of collaborative practice; translating logics and legitimising artefacts expand the density of spaces where collaboration is enacted; and maintaining the system through routine repair sustains the temporal continuity required for embeddedness.

In this sense, the internal sociomaterial work reconstructed here provides the administrative preconditions for the place-based collaborative governance described

elsewhere (Larrea *et al.* 2024). Only when collaborative logics are anchored in internal routines and artefacts can “place” effectively act as a collective subject through government-led arenas.

Collectively, these discussions reframe internal institutionalisation from an administrative challenge to a sociomaterial accomplishment, where the design and use of mundane administrative artefacts become central to institutional change.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question: What mechanisms explain the internal institutionalisation of a collaborative governance model within a provincial government? The case provides a clear, processual answer. The institutionalisation of the collaborative governance model was not a single event but a cumulative sequence of institutional work, materially mediated by key artefacts.

Across 2020, this process unfolded through four interconnected mechanisms: (1) Creating the foundational categories and deliberative forums that established a new collaborative space; (2) Translating the abstract clash between bureaucratic and collaborative logics into negotiable procedural disputes; (3) Legitimising the new model by demonstrating its performative utility and strategic value; and, (4) Stabilising and Maintaining the emerging system by embedding reflexive routines into the administrative infrastructure.

Critically, this sequence was not purely social or discursive. The project Portfolio and Monitor acted as evolving boundary objects that materially enabled each phase. They were the tangible interfaces where divergent logics met, were negotiated, and were temporarily reconciled. Their sociomaterial enactment (how they were filled, discussed, revised, and circulated) did not merely record the model’s activity; it actively constituted the model itself. This recursive relationship made the governance system reflexive, capable of observing and adjusting itself through the very artefacts that encoded its logic. In this respect, the study aligns with contemporary perspectives on policy design that emphasise the strategic configuration of procedural instruments and tool mixes to manage complexity and learning in governance (Howlett 2023).

For public managers, these findings translate into two concrete design heuristics. First, invest in the iterative design of key administrative artefacts treating them not as static reporting tools but as boundary objects that must be robust enough to ensure common understanding yet flexible enough for local adaptation. Second, anticipate and legitimise the “work” of translation and maintenance. This involves creating forums where clashes between collaborative and bureaucratic procedures can be explicitly negotiated, and dedicating resources to the continuous, often-invisible work of repairing and updating the digital and procedural infrastructure that sustains collaboration. The Portfolio and Monitor thus operated as internal collaborative platforms, anchoring the collaborative governance model in organisational routines and providing the competences and resources necessary for its sustained adaptation (Ansell and Gash 2018).

This mechanism-based account moves beyond describing the idea that internal institutionalisation is important, to explaining how it is practically achieved. It demonstrates that embedding collaborative governance is fundamentally a

sociomaterial accomplishment, requiring the deliberate design and sustained use of artefacts that can travel across and reconfigure the internal boundaries of the bureaucracy itself. While grounded in a specific provincial administration, the mechanisms identified are likely to apply to other meso-level governments seeking to embed collaborative governance. This study offers an analytical framework for understanding the organisational mechanisms through which collaborative governance becomes a sustained administrative practice.

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