

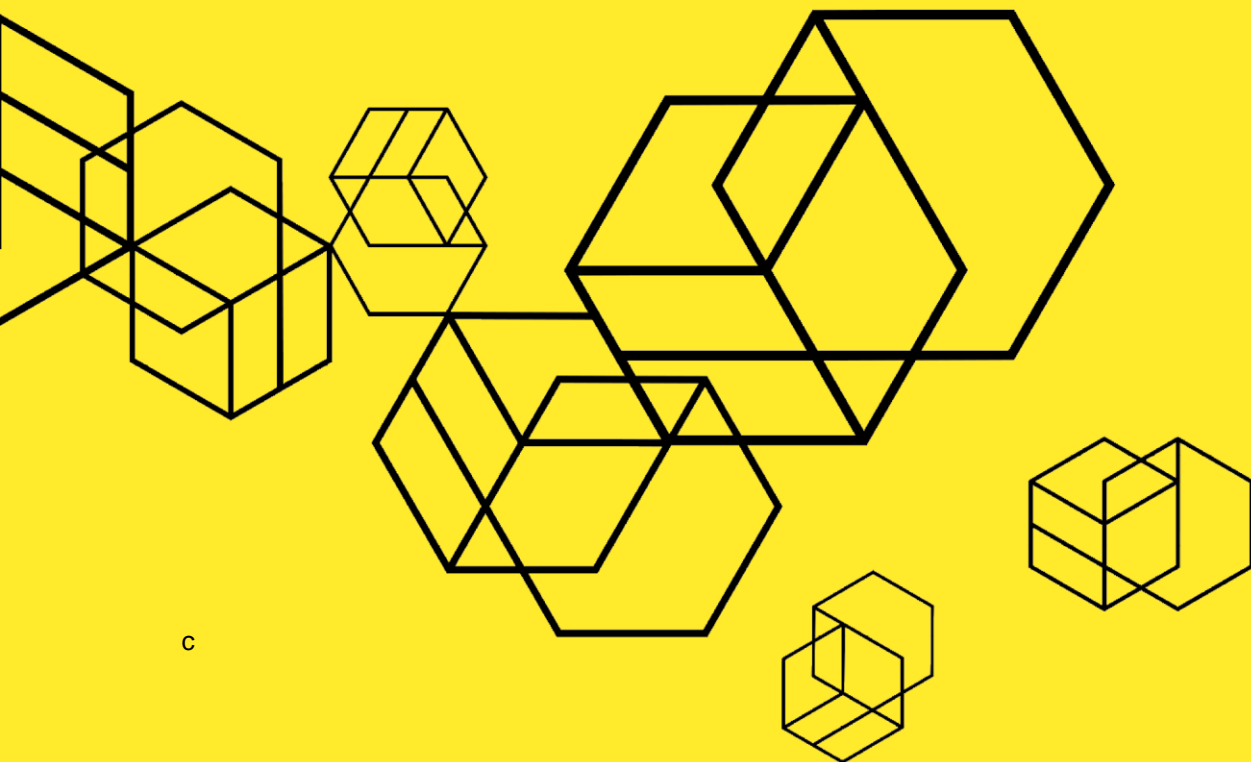


**SOCIAL
INNOVATION
COMMUNITY**

The case of Agintzari

*Álvaro Luna, Javier Castro Spila, and
Igone Guerra*

*SINNERGLIAK SOCIAL INNOVATION
(UPV/EHU)*





The case of Agintzari

Abstract

Argintzari is a Social Cooperative of public utility located in Bilbao (Basque Country) since 2000. Although deeply engaged in social movements and community development since 1977, the organization didn't grow to become a social cooperative until 2000. This change was seen as an important step towards growing professionalization and expertise inside their context. The cooperative is mainly focused its work in community development through publicly funded socially innovative projects, community training programs, and delivery of social services oriented towards the social needs of vulnerable and socially excluded sectors of the population.

Agintzari holds three important lines of work. The first line of work is related to Community Intervention, which manages socio-educational and psychosocial services. The second line of work is related to Fostering and Adoption, which manages programs of infant protection through a service called Arlobi Adoptia that is promoted by the cooperative. The third line of work is linked to Intervention in Violence and Relational Conflicts. It manages services, which are part of the Policy Social Services of the Basque Country. Agintzari has strongly influenced the detection of policy failures and the need for the new design of social services inside the Basque local and regional institutions, by improving social policy and having an important effect in Basque social policy, specially in the province of Biscay. Since 2010, the organization has focused in expanding its activities to the whole region and also at the national level.

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

The context

Agintzari is a non-for profit social cooperative of public utility since the year 2000. It is currently composed of 500 workers. Initially the name of Agintzari before becoming a cooperative was linked, since 1977, to social movements in Bilbao formed by a collective of young social workers which worked along the University and the Church, mainly focusing on the work in the streets and with local communities to attend social needs. This movement was built soon after the Spanish Dictatorship and the strong industrial and economic crises suffered in the 1980s, which immersed the Bilbao City Region in a very difficult historical period. This historical period also gave birth to the baby boom and the first young generation, which was able of attending University.

In 1991 this work initiated a close connection with the local public administration in the Bilbao City



Region. It was then when Agintzari saw the opportunity and the necessity to professionalize itself, due to the long time knowledge and experience they accumulated through the years. In the year 2000, the work with the community and other public administrations started to build up closely related to the work and the influence in the design and construction of public social services, municipal services and commonwealth communities inside the province of Biscay in the Basque Country. This trajectory consolidated itself in 2010 when Agintzari reached a strong influence inside the province reaching 250 employees.

Nowadays, Agintzari holds three important lines of work. The first line of work is related to Community Intervention, which manages socio-educational and psychosocial services, which have become key in the range of social services advocated in the Law 12/2008 of the 5th of September of Social Services of the Basque Country. This line of work also manages prevention programs in the scholar and family environments, and other consulting projects and professional training.

The second line of work is related to Fostering and Adoption, which manages programs of infant protection through a service called Arlobi Adoptia that is promoted by the cooperative. This service provides services of psychosocial attention, consulting, and family and professional training, having built a network of entities with those Agintzari cooperates.

The third line of work is linked to Intervention in Violence and Relational Conflicts. It manages services, which are part of the Policy Social Services of the Basque Country. The nature of these services is diverse, and includes services of telephonic and online attention, socio-educational services of residential fostering of women victims of violence, and specialized services in psychological explorations in situation of family sexual abuse.

Agintzari also pilots diverse innovative programs, on of the most important ones is called “Family Nests” (“Los Nidos Familiares”); an experience that is supported by the Basque Government focused on new processes to address childhood care through the promotion of conciliation strategies between family and work life. Another important piloting experience is the “Network of Houses” (“Casas en Red”), which was initiated in 2010, as an intensive and integrated innovative social resource, to prevent family adoption failures or ruptures.

The case

Since becoming a social cooperative of public utility in the year 2000, Agintzari has focused on its geographic expansion. Along the years, the cooperative has become a major influence in the design of actual social services, some of them non-existing until the cooperative started working closely with public administrations. These services have been mainly influenced and built through a bottom-up approach, involving different social collectives, and closely working with the Basque Public Institutions. Today the cooperative has been able to build an action network involving 21 city councils, building 5



common wealth communities, and the Provincial and Basque Governments of the Basque Country. These networks are well connected but are composed of self-managed individual teams, which are closely linked to the specific problems present in the different municipalities.

The target groups of these services of public utility that are managed by Agintzari are mainly focused in the users of Primary and Secondary Social Services, integrated by childhood and youth populations, adults (women), and families which are socially excluded, unprotected or dependant, needing socio-educational and psychosocial attention

The diversification of different lines of work and the provision of multiple and innovative social services, along with the organizational capacities to build a strong, influential and connected network inside the Basque Country, has made of Agintzari an important social innovation case. As described by Cristina Ojanguren, referent of innovation of Agintzari, *“Agintzari are people which work with people and for people, closely working with public institutions to attend and solve social problems through an innovative approach...”* (...) *“our values are based on innovation, social progress, social justice, equality and democracy, through a self-managing process, which has become innovative in its own way”*. Transparency, inter-cooperation, the social and economic sustainability of their programs has build a self managed organizational model where social innovation is seen as a collective process involving multiple agents through four important principles:

- **Autonomy:** The small teams are directly linked to their environments of actions and have autonomy to make their own decisions with the client and the social target group. The social target group co-participates in the different activities and services with the public institutions.
- **Creativity:** The activities of the organization are based in spaces of co-creation linked to the different projects and the different activities where participants work together to improve the quality of the services and provide a quality attention to solve and attend different social needs.
- **Shared Leadership:** Important decisions inside the social cooperative are made at different strategic levels, depending on the context of action. Every team inside the cooperative has a person responsible for the work of the whole team, representing its members in the important organic decisions. These decisions reach the different social action collectives.
- **Heterogeneity:** Actions are different and adapted to the diverse contexts and target populations of the places where they are applied. These actions always have an experimentation and creative phase where specific co-creation teams can be build depending on the social need or problem.



Agintzari's activities depends on public funded programs and projects delivered by public administrations and other institutions through public contracts where we identify four different types of clients at different levels: 1) Municipal Public entities from the Social Services Departments; 2) Territorial and Regional Public Entities of the Basque Government; 3) Public Entities from other Regions in Spain; 4) Local based entities focused in the delivery of Social Services. The model of intervention is therefore based on public-private partnerships and modes of collaboration, where Agintzari strongly identifies and influences new social needs and social problems that need to be addressed, that is, policy failures that haven't been identified by the public institutions.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

The majority of the knowledge gaps in the innovation process of Agintzari have been related to its' process of expansion and the management and on going re-adaptation of the organization. The organization was composed in 1990 by 15 workers, in 2010 there were 250 and in 2016 they have grown up to 500 people working for Agintzari. The management of the successful milestones achieved by Agintzari derived in a big internal crisis inside the organization. In words of the Chief Executive, Mikel Gorostizaga:

"One of the major challenges that we have been able to learn about has been the huge changes in the managing model of the organization, which evolved into an important crisis, and was basically related to the lack of capabilities to manage the growth of the organization and the rate of complexity it was acquiring".

These gaps have been fought through the involvement in networks, the creation of self-managed teams and the importance of marketing and communication strategies.

The organization realised the importance of networks inside and outside the cooperative's domains to create new knowledge, manage this knowledge internally, and train and find working profiles that would best adapt to the goals of the organization. Learning from what other entities are doing, both nationally and internationally has been very important. The establishment of open networks of collaboration with public institutions and universities such as Innobasque and the different Universities in the Basque Country has been crucial to identify and analyse new social needs. Agintzari is now part of different networks such as:

- The Forum of Immigration of the Basque Country
- The Basque Commissions of Social Services and Infancy
- The Networks of Entities of Alternative and Solidary Economies (REAS-Redes de Economías Alternativas y Solidarias)
- The European Anti-Poverty Network
- Gizardatz (Basque Network of Entities of Social Intervention)



- International Federation of Educational Communities (FICE)

Another important gap has been related to the Agintzari's economic and technical dependence on public administrations. The inclusion and collaboration with the mentioned networks has also been crucial in this process. Through these memberships and participations Agintzari not only generated new knowledge and identified new social needs to be addressed, but it also reached some degree of lobby pressure over public administrations to support what the cooperative evaluates important and innovative social projects. An example of this process can be found in the cooperative collaboration with REAS (the Networks of Entities of Alternative and Solidary Economies) that works in different regions of Spain. An important part of the activity done by this network is focused on raising awareness about the different activities that are held in the different regions, influencing Public Administrations to fund and support the activities and entities which belong to the network, and creating a collaborative community of social organizations and entrepreneurs. According to Mikel Gorostizaga:

"We also use networks to face public administrations and generate some influence on the social factors we think should be supported. If we had to face on our own these relations with the public administrations it would be very difficult to influence and make a difference".

Among the different tools they have used to face the growth of the organization there has been the development of co-creation activities, extended leadership in the management of the different projects through new management teams, project teams, informative assemblies, screening activities and proposals. These are recognized by Agintzari as tools that serve the model of management and that they see as socially innovative tools since they involve different actors, agents, partners, social target groups, etc.

Involving the different array of actors, institutions, partners, social groups, agents and social entrepreneurs has been crucial. Learning has been built through activities of collective creation among all the interested parties. In Mikel's words *"if you belief in what you do you are able to create, and if all parties aren't participating and are part of this creation it is very difficult that they belief, they have to be protagonists and feel they are part of something that is being collectively generated" (...)* *"if we conducted these activities through for example, social labs it would be very difficult to adapt the ideas generated in these labs to reality, social innovation cannot be build in a lab".*

Communication activities have also been an important factor inside the organization. However, the approach to communication and marketing strategies has been more focused on face to face encounters rather than in the use of new technologies of information and communication. They have their own training rooms inside Agintzari, where they organize different activities such as workshops, training programs, weekly informative meetings, etc.



Following Mikel Gorostizaga's words *"we want people to come to our organization to see what we do, to get to know us. All activities are physically developed here, we have two training activities per week where we have 20 plus participants, a General Assembly with the different partners once every month, dissemination activities of what we have been working on are held twice a year, and we also develop three Annual Reports to inform about our work. We diffuse these Reports to all the people that we work with. We have a very active newsletter, and we are always trying to engage with new organizations"*.

Learning has been acquired basically through the innovation process, that is, they have been learning as they have been growing as an organization. In this sense, the learning process has been mainly reactive to the problems they have encountered. These problems have been mainly related to the need to achieve more funding and influence inside public administrations, the diffusion of the impact of our activities, the engagement with new actors/agents, and improving the management of the organization as it was evolving. Being a social cooperative of public utility implies that they had to follow and be consequent with what being a cooperative means in terms of salaries, the professionalization of the organization, etc. For example, they don't hire new workers without a University Degree as major policy inside Agintzari's Human Resources department

This learning process has also dealt with the discovery of new social needs that emerged in their contextual domains and had to be addressed. Agintzari emphasizes the fact that a lot of the social services that the Public Institutions deliver today were first addressed by organizations like their own. These needs and services have been institutionalized and there are always new policy failures and gaps to be identified. This implies that they have to stay alert and learn from the context and the people they work with, being able to understand what their problems are and how can these problems be solved. Once they do that, they have to manage to influence Public Administrations to address these problems through the funding of new projects or by directly changing or modifying the social services they deliver. That is to Agintzari a very important social innovation and a learning process in itself. Without this measures, Agintzari, would not have been able to develop the different training programs and socio-educational public services it has co-design along with the social services departments of different city councils in the Basque Country.

3. DISCUSSION

Agintzari has grown to be the social cooperative it is today in relation to the ways in which they shared their problems, their knowledge and managed their success. Communication and gradual adaptation to the different contexts and historical periods has also been very important for the continuous growth and attraction of different resources. Also, most of the actions developed by Agintzari were framed inside specific projects and training programs, which were directly connected to a certain way of self-management through specific teams and extended leadership. According to Tomasso Vitale, this



approach *“favours gradual processes open to ongoing correction and modification, and attracts resources from outside the organization, while creating arenas for involving and making the most of each contribution to the projects (both in financial terms and in terms of voluntary work)”* (Vitale, 2010: 89).

Agintzari also demonstrates a high degree of reflexivity behind every activity and strategy they put into practice. This and the fact that all its members are well trained graduated workers, increases the organisations' capacity to plan, analyse, anticipate and better understand the social problems they are addressing, also increasing the chances for internal and external learning. The historical trajectory of the organization, the experience of its workers and their high engagement with the context benefits and legitimizes their connection with the rest of actors and agents they work with, by demonstrating a very high level of expertise.

In this sense, Agintzari doesn't answer to untrained social organizational models where there is a big distance between their capabilities to manage the organization and the expertise applied to the social problems they are trying to solve. Agintzari learned in a gradual incremental manner professionalizing itself and increasing its level of complexity, but always focused on the institutional environment where the organization developed their activities (Martinelli et al. 2010).

In socially innovative terms, the satisfaction of human needs, the empowerment of marginalised social groups and communities or the change in power relations, cannot be achieved without an adequate internal and external governance model (Moulaert et. al., 2007). This model focuses the growth of the organization directly related to its connections with stakeholders and other partners. Following the premises of situated learning theory, in a “community of practice”, the context influences the learning capabilities of the group or the organizations through the development of its activities. This community shares a common set of problems, they learn about these problems and how to find solutions by mutually influencing each other, increasing in the process their knowledge and their level of expertise (Wenger, 1998, 2002).

In the case of Agintzari, public funding could be seen as an important constraint, but the level of engagement with public institutions has also helped influence the public design of social services by detecting and analysing social needs and policy failures that weren't recognized by public institutions. This has strongly legitimized the position and prestige of Agintzari in the contextual institutional environment where it develops its activities.

Acknowledging that learning activities can be classified into different levels: individual, group, organization, etc.; in the case of Agintzari, the network level has been equally important. That is to say, the open “inter-organizational network learning” (Knight, 2002) has been an important asset for the organisations' internal and external acquisition of knowledge. Most of Agintzari's success as a social cooperative has been based on the importance on its' capacity to engage with networks at different



levels, not only by influencing and sharing knowledge, but also by supporting their activities and favouring their expansion.

REFERENCES

- Moulaert, F., Martinelli, F., González, S., & Swyngedouw, E. (2007). Introduction: Social Innovation and Governance in European Cities: Urban Development Between Path Dependency and Radical Innovation. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 14(3), 195–209.
- Knight, L. (2002). Network Learning: Exploring Learning by Interorganizational Networks. *Human Relations*, 55(4): 427–454.
- Vitale, T. (2010). Building a Shared Interest. Olinda, Milan: Social Innovation Between Strategy and Organizational Learning. In F. Moulaert, F. Martinelli, E. Swyngedouw & S. González (Eds.), *Can Neighbourhood's Save the City*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Wenger E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *A guide to managing knowledge: cultivating communities of practice*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press. p. 4–40.