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Basquing in Sustainability

Known by its people as Euskadi, a small European region with its own culture has evolved into one of the most environmentally progressive, globally competitive, socially inclusive economies in the world through clear priorities and careful planning to implement them



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As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the world is not working out the way many of us hoped. We are witnessing the failure of nations to address the climate crisis, and unrest in many countries over rising inequality and threats to local identity. These trends have generated political instability that has been increasingly exploited by populist demagogues. It is no surprise then that there are growing calls for a political economy that will give greater priority to social cohesion, community, and long-term environmental sustainability.

In the United States, much of the political debate in this election year is focusing on rethinking the purpose of the economy and of business, particularly big business. The Green New Deal is popular in the Democratic party. Last August, the Business Roundtable, representing the CEOs of 181 of America's largest companies, announced that shareholder value and profits can no longer be the sole goals of the corporation, but must be balanced with "supporting the communities in which we work and protecting the environment."

To put these aspirations into practice, we could learn something from a small, rich, entrepreneurial nation of a little over two million people. It has a ratio of internationally competitive, high-wage manufacturing compared with GDP that is double that of the United States, and 16 percent higher than Germany or Japan. It has the fifth highest life expectancy on the planet — four years higher than the U.S. average. It exports

sophisticated machine tools to Germany and high-tech components for space probes to NASA.

Let us take a close look at the Basque Autonomous Region in Spain, known more commonly as the Basque Country, or Euskadi in the local language.

Over the past several decades, the Basque Country has transformed itself into one of the most internationally competitive, socially inclusive, and environmentally progressive economies in the world. It is a polity that welcomes economic globalization as an opportunity, while reaffirming local community and cultural identity. It has achieved a level of income equality higher than Denmark's and the Netherlands', and a per capita GDP on approximately the same level as Sweden.

The Basque government has reoriented its budget planning around the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals, put forth one of the world's more ambitious climate mitigation and adaptation plans, and established 55 natural protected areas covering 23 percent of the region's land area (compared with 14 percent in the United States). Despite inheriting an energy sector heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels, since 1995 the Basque economy has reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 12 percent while GDP increased 70 percent.

The key to these successes is multifaceted: social solidarity rooted in a persistent local culture of national and linguistic identity, coupled with a long history of entrepreneurship and international trade. The Basque Country also benefits from a unique decentralized, autonomous finance structure where most tax funds are raised, administered, and spent in Euskadi's three small

provinces, increasing the likelihood that ambitious social goals are actually implemented, rather than dissipating through the bureaucratic intermediaries of a larger, centralized nation-state. The resilience and innovation of the Basque way are rooted in a collective project to adapt a strong local culture and history to the globalized challenges of the 21st century.

One of the best guides to understanding the Euskadi success story is the second American president, John Adams, who cited the Basques' legacy of democratic self-governance in a work published in 1787 calling for a new constitution for the United States. "This extraordinary people have preserved their ancient language, genius, laws, government, and manners," Adams wrote, noting that the Spanish crown had "left them in possession of those great immunities of which they are so jealous." Many writers, he continued, "ascribe their flourishing commerce to their [geographical] situation; but . . . that advantage is more probably due to their liberty. In riding through this little territory, you would fancy yourself in Connecticut; instead of miserable huts, built of mud, and covered with straw, you see the country full of large and commodious houses and barns of the farmer; the lands well cultivated; and a wealthy, happy yeomanry."

The Basques were already recognized as an ancient people in Roman times, and unlike other Iberian groups they conserved their grammatically complex, non-Indo-European language. During the Roman period and afterwards when the Germanic Goths invaded the peninsula, the Basques governed themselves through customary law and practices known as *fueros*. As the rulers of different fiefdoms, duchies, and other regions in Iberia began to consolidate to form Spain in the late Middle Ages, the Spanish monarchs pledged to respect the Basque *fueros*, including visiting periodically the village of Guernica to renew this oath underneath an oak tree where neighboring communities would meet to debate local concerns. Over the centuries Guernica became the symbolic ground zero of Basque self-governing traditions and national identity.

Feudalism mostly bypassed the small nation; Basque culture evolved in small, independent farmsteads known as *baserri* (formed from the Basque word *baso*, wilderness, and *erri*, settlement), in turn organized in hamlets (*auzoa*) of ten to thirty farmsteads, with shared community labor obligations (*au-*

zoalana). Basque fishing villages organized *cofradía*, literally fraternities of fishermen, which also have a cooperative structure; some of them can trace their traditions back more than five centuries.

Indeed, the Basque Country has a long tradition of commerce and trade. For a millennium it was one of the shipbuilding centers of Europe, already incorporating Viking construction techniques in the 10th century, and building most of the Spanish galleons that dominated the world's oceans in the 16th century. Near the main inland city Bilbao is a small mountain of extremely pure iron ore, first mined by the Romans, which supplied an iron and steel industry that provided much of the metal consumed by Britain in the 19th century.

During that time, the Spanish monarchs continued to respect the Basque *fueros*, of which the most important was one banning the Spanish state from levying direct taxes. Taxes were collected and spent locally by the Basque authorities, coupled with an agreed upon annual sum to Madrid that was periodically renegotiated. In 1936 the fledgling Spanish Republic restored much fuller autonomy to the Basques, who established a regional government that unfortunately only lasted a few months before Spain was convulsed in civil war between the Republic and a fascist military revolt led by General Francisco Franco.

The victorious Franco regime totally suppressed Basque autonomy, outlawing the teaching and use of the Basque language, criminalizing the display of the Basque flag, and even forbidding parents from giving their children Basque names. Following Franco's death, a new, democratic Spanish constitution in 1978 restored substantial autonomy — particularly fiscal autonomy — to Euskadi.

Since then, the Basques have pursued policies quite at odds with the neo-liberal market fundamentalism that has influenced many countries. One pillar of Euskadi's approach was a comprehensive government industrial policy, in close cooperation with the private sector, to support high-tech manufacturing. The policy embraced the promulgation of manufacturing and research clusters of companies, technology institutes, and research centers in areas such as machine tools, electronics, IT and telecommunications, automation, transport and logistics, and environmental industries. By 2005 the Basque Country had 10 applied technology centers, 13 research and development centers, four research laboratories, two public research organizations, and three technology parks. The other main pillar of the Euskadi approach has been expanded social and welfare services to lessen inequality and pro-

mote social inclusion at a time when many countries were instead retrenching such support.

Based on these two pillars, Euskadi undertook at the beginning of the 21st century to promote a model of environmentally sustainable human development.

The result was that in 2017, the Basque government set out its ambitious Agenda Euskadi-Basque Country 2030 to harmonize the policies and budgets of public authorities — including the three main provincial governments and over 200 Basque municipalities — with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The SDGs build on the previous UN Millennium Development Goals and set ambitious targets such as ending poverty in all forms, gender equality, reducing economic inequality and social exclusion, environmentally sustainable production and consumption, terrestrial and marine habitat conservation, and a variety of cross-cutting, urgent climate mitigation and adaptation goals.

The Agenda Euskadi 2030 builds on environmental and social planning initiatives that have been ongoing in the Basque Country since just before the turn of the century. In 1998, the Basque Country General Environmental Protection Act provided for the preparation of Environmental Framework Programs every four years. The Basque environment ministry has declared that Agenda Euskadi 2030 builds on progress achieved in these EFPs and is “at the heart of all our policies,” since it incorporates and links the major economic, social, ethical, and environmental goals that are at the heart of the Basque welfare model.

The Agenda Euskadi 2030 sets out 93 specific commitments, 80 planning instruments, and 19 legislative initiatives. It identifies 50 indicators for monitoring progress — all oriented toward creating policy and budget coherence and cross-sectoral synergies in the Basque public and private sectors to carry out the SDGs. Euskadi President Iñigo Urkull declared that the Basque Country’s commitment to implementing the UN goals reflects the traditional Basque value of “auzoalana, cooperation, and a shared workload” for the local and global “common good.”

Much of the implementation of the Agenda Euskadi 2030 will be at the most local level of Basque municipalities, which already in 2002 began to develop “Agenda 21 plans” for environmental and social sustainability, inspired by the goals of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit’s manifesto. Over 200 Basque municipalities developed and implemented these action plans

through a bottom-up approach, forming the Basque Network of Municipalities for Sustainability, or Udalsarea 21. One of Udalsarea 21’s objectives is to serve as a benchmark framework for best practices internationally in local sustainable development.

The environmental education programs of the Basque government have been identified by the United Nations as leaders in international good practice. For example, the School Agenda 21 program developed environmental sustainability curricula, with a major focus on encouraging students to identify local sustainability recommendations which they share in cooperative meetings with other schools and then present before local mayors and town councils. The Basque environmental ministry is working with the Basque Journalists’ Association to promote accurate reporting on local and global environmental challenges, and has prepared “quick guides” for journalists on climate change and green public procurement, with another on the circular economy in preparation.

Euskadi has established the Circular Basque network that so far numbers 34 companies and organizations that are already undertaking 51 different circular economy initiatives. Already between 2000 and 2016 the Basque economy grew by 26 percent, while the consumption of materials decreased by 25 percent, and the volume of urban landfill waste decreased by 56 percent. The Basque Circular Economy Strategy for 2030 aims to increase economic productivity by 30 percent, increase the circular use of materials (through recycling and remanufacturing) by 30 percent, reduce waste generation per unit of GDP by 30 percent, cut in half generation of food waste, and reduce use of plastic.

In 2015, the Basque government released a “Climate Change Strategy of the Basque Country to 2050.” Known as Klima 2050 colloquially, it sets out a roadmap of 70 separate initiatives for prioritizing and coordinating climate change actions both in the government and in the private sector. It was endorsed at the 2015 Paris climate summit as one of the world’s leading public programs for achieving a climate resilient and low-carbon society.

The preparation of the strategy involved almost all ministries of the Basque government as well as input from provincial councils, municipalities, and the public at large through a number of public forums, including the interactive “open government” website of the Basque government, through which Basque citizens can comment on existing government proposals and suggest new ones.

Klima 2050’s medium-term commitment to reduc-

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Syrian Kurds Governing in a Conflict Zone

As we lament the shortcomings of governments around the world in addressing sustainability challenges within their borders, we should also take note of the growing evidence of success in environmental governance at sub-state levels. Where we see paralysis and institutional inertia within national or federal governments, we often see dynamic energy fueled by social cohesion and a collective sense of shared stakes at more local and regional scales.

At the same time, it is also important to note that our studies of sub-state governance outcomes tend to focus on case studies of highly autonomous political communities nested within liberal democracies — cases such as the Basque Country, Quebec, Scotland, and the region of Åland in Finland. These cases present strong evidence of self-governing institutional mechanisms and regionalized policy dynamics that have proven to be remarkably effective in sustainability challenges.

Still, this also means we tend to overlook cases of regional governance and sustainability practices that do not easily fit within the scope of our framework for research on autonomous systems. That is, we pass over in silence those examples that do not fit liberal democratic models of statehood. And yet regionalization of governance and territorialized policy communities are in evidence in all forms of contemporary states — including those that are authoritarian or even war-torn.

An example of the latter is the case of Rojava, the Kurdish-led self-governing region in northeast Syria established in the wake of the outbreak of civil war. Despite being caught in the midst of a deadly conflict, Rojava managed to thrive and govern effectively against all odds. While leading the assault against ISIS in the Middle East, Rojava



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grew to an area larger than the size of Switzerland and declared itself the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, a multiethnic confederation within the state.

Remarkably — even in the midst of air strikes and armed conflict — this Kurdish-led regional autonomy also managed to pursue a broad-based ecological strategy to address its daunting sustainability challenges. Ecology is in fact one of the key pillars of the administration, and its approach to governance is grounded in a set of policies reversing the effects of environmental degradation wrought by decades of rule by the Assad regime.

As such, Rojava’s environmental policy agenda prioritizes the development of regenerative agriculture to address the effects of monoculture mandated by the Syrian national government since 1971. The regional ecological strategy also includes adopting a plan for more sustainable infrastructure for electricity — including experimental wind power and solar stations — to reduce the region’s dependency on nationally centralized electricity grids and fossil fuels. The comprehensive program even includes the establishment of the Hayaka Nature Reserve to protect biodiversity, as well as the creation of cooperative

tree nurseries to achieve widescale reforestation goals.

This framework for environmental governance developed by Syrian Kurds in Rojava presents a compelling case study of how regional policy management can lead to improved sustainability, even under the most brutal conditions of conflict. But given that Rojava does not easily fit within most existing research programs on self-governments and autonomies, it also demonstrates a gap in our current scholarship. There is in fact a need for new diagnostic tools and analytical vocabulary to examine more effectively patterns of governance across a diverse range of asymmetric states in our contemporary political world.

It was this insight that led to the development of the Research Initiative on Multination States, a program at George Washington University that explores new approaches to self-government and autonomy.

Given the urgency of the sustainability challenges endemic in all such politically contested regions, it is time we reassess our broader public conversations as well. We might well be missing promising potential for responsible governance on the path to global sustainability.

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ing greenhouse gas emissions goes beyond general EU commitments and those of some well-known environmentally progressive countries. The government pledges to reduce GHG emissions by 40 percent by 2030 from 2005 levels. It aims to achieve carbon neutrality for Euskadi by 2050. This pledge is particularly ambitious given that the Basque Country is currently over 90 percent dependent on imports of oil and natural gas that account for 80 percent of its energy use. Renewable energy use has increased in recent years but still only accounts for around 13.4 percent of consumption, which is below the EU average of 17.5 percent. The strategy aims to increase the proportion of renewable energy use to 40 percent by 2050.

The heart of the longer-term strategy lies in replacing fossil fuel consumption by electrification of energy, with power supplied increasingly by climate-friendly sources. Klima 2050 also calls for comprehensive initiatives in energy efficiency, including the promotion of cogeneration, smart grids and smart meters in Basque municipalities, and fostering zero-emissions building construction. The government is to lead by example, achieving a “zero emissions public sector” by 2050.

Major adaptation initiatives include increased biodiversity habitat protection and regeneration (including reforestation) to foster regional climate resilience. The strategy promotes “connectivity between ecosystems that allow species migration” — an important but neglected need that has been identified and promoted for years by some U.S. environmental organizations such as the Wildlands Network, but which has yet to see widespread international recognition.

Klima 2050 maintains it will enhance the Basque economy’s international competitiveness. It estimates annual costs for the first five years of 84-91 million euros, more than compensated by 57 million euros a year in additional gross economic activity (including the creation of over 1,000 jobs), yearly energy use savings of 55 million euros, and health savings of as much as 32 million euros per year. The point that many environmental investments more than pay for themselves in advanced economies is one that has been evident for years, but sadly often ignored in politicized debates in other countries.

The Basque experience can serve as a case study, given its small size, but is it replicable, and is it politically sustainable? Like anywhere else, there are problems and challenges. For decades the Basque Country suffered from the terrorism of ETA, a group that pursued

total independence through bombings and murders. ETA declared a permanent cease fire in 2011, and announced its disbanding in 2018. The egalitarian ideal still faces increasing pressures from international economic competition and the weakening of traditional solidarity in the face of a global, individualistic consumer culture.

What is incontestable is that in recent years Euskadi has soared in international rankings of well-being. In 2017 the Basque Country ranked 8th in the EU in per capita income, 21 percent above the EU average, ahead of France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Finland, and Spain as a whole. Euskadi substantially outperforms — apart from per capita GDP — the United States in many areas of social and economic welfare, including life expectancy, access to public health services, and income equality. So far this socially holistic approach has paid off environmentally: already in 2013 Euskadi ranked number four in the world according to 22 environmental indicators in the Environmental Performance Index developed by the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and the Columbia University Earth Institute. Recent Basque opinion polls show virtual unanimity that protection of the environment is “very important” or “quite important.”

As global challenges — environmental, social, and political — become more urgent, the Basque example may have a lesson for all of us: environmental and social solutions inspired by broader national and international agreements are sometimes, and perhaps often, best realized through local empowerment and democracy. Euskadi helped establish the UN Network of Regional Governments for Sustainable Development (today called “Regions 4”) as a global platform for sub-national governments to carry out international environmental initiatives at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Basque Country co-chairs the Regions 4 network, which in 2019 had a membership of 42 regional governments in 20 countries. A recent comparative study of “Minority Self-Government in Europe and the Middle East” cites Basque environmental progress for showing how “autonomous regions . . . are more dependent than central governments on long-term investments, while offering a better record [than larger nation states] of transparency, reliability and political legitimacy.” In the words of former Basque President Juan José Ibarretxe, “Today, in the ‘global society’ it is ‘the local’ that embodies real hopes that another world is possible.” **TEF**

Professor Sofia Arana and researcher Itxaso Bengoetxea Larrinaga assisted the author in understanding Basque institutions. Any errors are the author’s responsibility.