

## **Economic history, transformative research and policymaking in the Basque Country**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of economic history in shaping policymaking through the case of the Basque Country, an old industrial region of northern Spain that has undergone successful transformation since the 1980s through sustained industrial and innovation policies. Central to this process has been Orkestra–Basque Institute of Competitiveness, a research centre attached to the University of Deusto with a public–private governance structure, which has facilitated collaboration between academics and policymakers. Drawing on the authors' experience, Orkestra's work and outputs, and academic publications resulting from interdisciplinary collaboration, the paper analyses how economic historians engaged with advisory bodies, influenced policymaking, and were themselves shaped by these collaborations. It highlights both opportunities and challenges in using economic history concepts and perspectives to inform policy and assesses the impact of this relationship on scholarship and practice, ranging from government reports to international teaching cases. The Basque experience illustrates the potential of sustained interaction between historians, economists and policymakers.

### **0. Introduction**

This paper aims at studying the influence of economic history on public policies and policymaking through the case of the Basque Country, an old industrial region of northern Spain that has undergone successful economic transformation since the 1980s through sustained industrial and innovation policies (Morgan 2016; Porter et al. 2016). The paper deals with, first, the means by which economic historians connected with policymakers and advisory bodies, second, the influence of economic history perspectives on advisory bodies and policymakers themselves, and third, the consequences of this collaboration for economic historians, economists and other social scientists, on the one hand, and for policymakers, on the other.

The most important channel of engagement has been Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness, a non-profit research centre attached to the University of Deusto, with a multi-

stakeholder, public-private governance structure. Established in 2006 and initially affiliated with Harvard's Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, Orkestra undertakes research projects focused on competitiveness and regional development, ranging from more traditional analyses and reports to interactive, action research processes. Orkestra has played an important advisory role for the regional government's policies and for other governments at the provincial and local levels in the Basque Country, and it has also positioned itself internationally in academic research related to territorial competitiveness.

Drawing on authors' experience and knowledge, on the work carried out by Orkestra, and on the academic publications and other outputs delivered, the paper studies the origins, challenges and problems involved in this joint work, alongside the outcomes of this collaboration, in terms of reports for the Basque Government and other regional agents, books and scientific papers, and Harvard Business School cases taught worldwide on the Basque strategy for regional economic development. It also identifies the economic history concepts and perspectives that have proved most persuasive to policymakers and, in turn, the impact of this close relationship between academics and relevant policy stakeholders (government, cluster management organisations, technology parks, regional development agencies...) on the research conducted on the economic history of the Basque Country.

The paper has three parts. The first one examines the influence of economic history in regional development in general and in policy making in particular. The second section presents the case of Orkestra and its advisory role for both the regional and local governments in the Basque Country. The third part examines the collaboration between historians, economists and policymakers through three different examples and levels of engaging with policymaking in the Basque region: the advisory role for the Basque regional government, work for firms and policy organisms and the advisory role for local governments.

## **1. Economic history, regional development and policymaking**

At least since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a sort of "historical turn" spread across social sciences and, particularly, impacted on disciplines such as economics, economic geography and regional studies. The increasing popularity of evolutionary approaches in these disciplines resulted in the transfer and importation of explicit dynamic and time-sensitive concepts such as path dependence and life cycles, and history's methodologies such as longitudinal studies, qualitative sources, inductive reasoning, holistic frameworks and narratives. History, in those disciplines, was understood as change and evolution, meanings very close to its definition as the science of change (Bloch 1992).

At the same time, an evolutionary approach came to affect policymaking too. Policy making started to be understood as a collective learning process in which both policymakers and the agents and targets of their policies learn by experience and, consequently, change and/or adapt both the policies implemented and their behaviours (Witt 2003). Over time, an increasing number of scholars adopted an explicit temporal/process approach to the study of policies, reckoning the role of path dependency and irreversibility in the policy process and the need of policy histories to learn from the past (Flanagan et al. 2011; Flanagan and Uyarra 2016). In this

regard, a recent study by the British Academy reviews the history of regional policy in UK and its implications for the present and future of policymaking (The British Academy 2024).

Among the different social sciences affected by this historical turn, evolutionary economic geography (EEG) is perhaps the discipline that has taken the role and importance of history most seriously (Martin et al. 2019). In fact, it has been labelled by two of their most distinguished scholars as an “historical social science” (Martin and Sunley 2022). Indeed, EEG recognizes the importance of both time and history to a scientific understanding of regional development (Henning 2019).

The first significant appreciation by EEG of the role of history and historicity in regional economic development came through the related concepts of lock-in and path dependency that explicitly reckoned the impact and influence of past legacies on current regional paths and on decisions that policymakers and other agents can make. The depth and weight of regional path dependence or the relative strength of a lock-in situation constrain the scope for policymakers and other agents to influence regional economic outcomes and future development paths (Martin and Sunley 2010; Martin 2011). On the contrary, policies to redevelop a region’s economy are more likely to succeed if they build upon the legacies inherited from the region’s previous developmental history (Martin 2011). Eventually, further literature on development paths reinforced this evolutionary and history-sensitive view of regional path development (Grillitsch et al. 2018; Isaksen et al. 2019), and the influence of economic history on EEG can be seen in the increasing number of longitudinal studies and works with an explicit historical perspective (Henning 2019).

This analytical and epistemological perspective became translated to another key concept of EEG, that of regional economic resilience. According to Boschma, the legacy of the past exerts a strong imprint on regional resilience, both in terms of constraints and opportunities (Boschma 2015). Regional economic resilience had a direct relationship with long-run development paths, hence with the capacity of a region to evolve and change, e.g. to escape from path-dependent trajectories and even lock-in situations (Martin and Sunley 2015).

EEG also focuses on the role of agency and institutions in shaping both path development and regional economic resilience. Agency and institutions were considered soft factors difficult to measure and not amenable to quantification, and very sticky to place and, therefore, dependent of the previous trajectory. For these reasons, qualitative in-depth case studies with a longitudinal, e.g., historical perspective, were the main methodological option (Jolly et al. 2020).

From the history side, a few scholars have advocated a new regional history more engaged with the current problems of regional economic development and policy and more related to the social sciences disciplines of regional studies and EEG (Svensson and Molema 2019; Molema 2019). The added value of historians would lie in their “empirical strength and holistic approach”, particularly well suited to the analysis of institutions and multifaceted concepts such as path dependence, resilience and change (Molema and Tomaney 2019). Economic history is particularly important when policymakers face large and uncommon problems, such as shocks

or recessions. To these authors, “making good policy requires an understanding of the past” (Leunig 2018).

More recently, the role and importance of history in policy analysis and policymaking has been addressed from a different hybrid discipline, the so called “applied economic history”, defined by their founders as “the systematic use of historical reasoning to address economic policy problems” (Colvin and Fourie 2026). According to its advocates, economic history does not only provide ready-made lessons to policymakers, but also disciplines the narratives and analogies used by policymakers and the public in general. This new role of economic history in policymaking comes from the experiences of joint work and collaboration between historians and policymakers and practitioners at the Centre for Economics, Policy and History in Belfast and at the History & Policy forum, an applied history forum in Whitehall (Colvin et al. 2026).

Applied history is most useful when understood not as a source of policy lessons but as a way of structuring judgement under uncertainty. Therefore, instead of historians transmitting lessons from the past to policymakers, it is about engaging both historians and policymakers in joint spaces for analysis of policy issues and collaboration. Historians are most effective when they act as facilitators, helping actors articulate and critically examine their own histories rather than importing external lessons. Economic historians would play the role of knowledge brokers, intermediaries between policy and expert communities. Accordingly, “they must be prepared not only as researchers, but also as interpreters and narrators between academic, policy, and public arenas without sacrificing rigour” (Colvin et al. 2026).

Applied economic historians who wish to influence policy must themselves create narratives (without sacrificing rigour); narrative craft is not an optional extra but a central professional competence. Historical arguments that matter for policy almost always reach the public in narrative form. Economic historians who wish to engage with policy must acquire skills in narrative craft, interdisciplinary collaboration, and public communication. In this regard, applied economic history should connect the discipline’s existing strengths in contextual analysis and long-run comparison to present-day decision making (Colvin and Fourie 2026).

## **2. Orkestra and its advisory role for regional and local governments**

The Basque Institute of Competitiveness (later known as Orkestra) was established in 2006 within the University of Deusto by institutional entrepreneurs in the government and university sectors who saw the need for research that could better support the region’s economic development (Aranguren et al. 2016; Aranguren and Magro 2022). With initial financial support from the Basque public administration, the University of Deusto, and several leading Basque firms, and strategic endorsement from Michael Porter and the Harvard Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, the institute was conceived as an independent space that would be capable of connecting knowledge production and real-world challenges. As such, it was established with an explicit aim to contribute to the wellbeing of the Basque population by enhancing the competitiveness of the territory in a sustainable and inclusive way, and its founding principles

stressed the need for co-creation of knowledge and a long-term commitment for researchers to work together with regional stakeholders.

Orkestra is institutionally linked to the University of Deusto (a private, non-profit university) but operates with a high degree of autonomy. Its funding model is diversified, with funding based on medium-term but annually-defined research agendas agreed with a range of public institutions and firms, most notably the Basque Government and the provincial and city councils. Additional income comes from competitive project grants, *ad hoc* contracts and training activities. Its governance model includes a board composed of representatives from the university, from different levels of the regional public administration, and from the business sector. This composition helps to ensure that the research agenda remains aligned with territorial development needs, while safeguarding its academic independence. It also has an international advisory board, composed of leading academic and policy figures, that provides an external perspective that complements the regional agendas shaping its governance.

Stakeholder engagement is central to Orkestra's functioning. Researchers work closely with policymakers from government departments at multiple levels, development agencies, cluster management organisations, firms, community organisations, and academics from other universities, including economic historians. These relationships are built over time through collaborative relationships that combine applied research, policy engagement and capacity-building. Research projects are often initiated through conversations with regional stakeholders and shaped around shared concerns, with engagement in policy processes not limited to producing reports or evaluations. Indeed, Orkestra frequently acts as a facilitator in multi-stakeholder environments, creating spaces for dialogue and supporting long-term processes of institutional learning (Aranguren et al, 2021). This is evident, for example, in its long-term involvement in the Basque Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3) (Aranguren et al. 2012, 2021, 2023), and in a range of other regional and sub-regional policy processes where engaged research has contributed analytical insights and supported participatory governance (see, for example: Arrona et al. 2020; Estensoro and Larrea 2016; Gil de San Vicente and Wilson 2025).

Over its 20-year history Orkestra has gradually become a reference point for regional development research in the Basque Country and beyond, during which time it has been the subject of a Harvard Business School teaching case (Porter et al, 2016). Today it employs over 40 (FTE) people, with a plurality of backgrounds in economics, political science, sociology, geography and management. It has built its identity around the combination of a solid academic base with a strong commitment to policy engagement. This dual role has positioned the institute within national and European discussions on a range of key issues pertinent to regional economic development, including regional innovation systems, smart specialisation strategies, clusters and cluster policies, transformative innovation policies and the use of action research for fostering territorial development.

A core feature of the institute is its commitment to being what Aranguren et al. (2021) label a transformative academic institution. Grounded in the social sciences, this approach seeks to address real-world challenges in close collaboration with territorial actors. Transformative research encompasses a plurality of methodologies that differ in terms of the researcher's

positioning and the degree of interaction with stakeholders. The aim is to produce actionable and context-sensitive insights that support institutional learning and policy adaptation. This model aligns with a broader global trend towards diversifying knowledge sources in research, ensuring that outcomes are not only analytically robust but also meaningful and sustainable in practice. Indeed, perhaps Orkestra's most notable contribution has been to institutionalise a new model of research organisation within the Basque Country, demonstrating that academic institutions can play a constructive role in supporting regional economic development, not by prescribing solutions from a distance, but by facilitating collective reflection and learning around regional competitiveness policymaking that is rooted in scientific analysis (Aranguren et al. 2021; Aranguren and Magro 2022; Porter et al. 2016).

### **3. Interdisciplinary, transformative and collaborative research and policymaking in the Basque Country**

The collaboration between economists and economic historians and their interaction and relations with policymakers and practitioners in the Basque Country will be analysed in this section through three cases of research processes catalysed by Orkestra. Each has a different scale and level of application. In all of them, particular emphasis will be placed on the challenges, outcomes and impact.

#### *3.1. From clusters' historical legacies to the Basque Country Harvard case and the Basque Country Competitiveness Reports: Advisory role for the Basque Government (2007-2025)*

At the very beginning, the Orkestra team, made-up mostly at that time by economists, recruited economic historians from other universities to engage with them in the study of the competitive position of the most important clusters of the Basque Country. The analytical framework envisaged by Porter in his *Competitive Advantage of Nations*' book explicitly acknowledged the role of historical factors and legacies in the current competitive position of clusters, hence the perceived need by Orkestra of having economic historians on board. There were two key challenges in this new project. On the one hand, within the original team of scholars (two economists and two economic historians), a common language, analytical framework and research methodology had to be developed. On the other, the work with cluster management organisations and their affiliated firms made necessary for all the scholars to develop translation capabilities to disseminate academic knowledge across the cluster policy community (cluster managers, government officials and firms).

This work, conducted between 2007 and 2015, delivered four books and two unpublished reports on the clusters of papermaking, electronics & ICT, maritime industries, aeronautics and space, energy and machine tools, alongside several academic papers and publications on clusters, cluster life cycles and their evolution (Valdaliso et al. 2011; Elola et al. 2012; Elola et al. 2017; Elola, Valdaliso and López 2013; Valdaliso, Elola and Franco 2016). The increasing closeness of scholars with the cluster policy community resulting from these sustained collaborations also reinforced Orkestra's role as a relevant actor in the framework of the cluster policy, capable of providing research-based strategic intelligence of use for both cluster management organisations and cluster policymakers. Last, but not least, the economic

historians became involved in a much closer way with clusters and firms, laying the foundations for new projects (see section 3.2 below).

Eventually, this original joint work on the competitive position of clusters became extended to the whole region and engaged with a second project of much wider scope: the study of the industrial policies designed and implemented by the Basque government from its origins in the early 1980s onwards, and the impact of these policies on the region's economic development. Michael Porter, who had been advising the Basque government since the 1990s, had written at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a Harvard Business School case on strategies for economic development in the Basque Country during the 1980s and 1990s that was taught worldwide in universities affiliated with Harvard's Microeconomics of Competitiveness (MOC) network (Porter et al. 2004; Valdaliso 2013). The case needed to be expanded and updated and the Basque Government commissioned Orkestra with the task of collaborating with Porter in that job. Harvard Business School cases are carefully crafted pieces of narrative, full of data and context but with no interpretation, designed to provoke analysis and discussion in the classroom. Although the work behind the case was done jointly by a team of three Orkestra affiliated economists and one outsider economic historian, it was the latter who eventually went to Harvard during 2010 and 2011 to work directly with Porter. The new case updated the old one and extended the analysis until 2009, maintaining a chronological (e.g. historical) structure and perspective (Porter et al. 2014). The case, that was also studied in the MOC postgraduate course regularly taught by Orkestra in the Basque Country, became the official narrative of the Basque Country's regional economic development, and was subsequently extended to cover the decade from 2019 (financial crisis) to 2020 (onset of the Covid pandemic) (Aranguren et al. 2021).

In parallel, the joint work of the aforementioned team on the industrial policies and strategies implemented in the Basque Country brought about a new academic book, published in 2012 (Aranguren et al. 2012) and an academic paper that designed –and explicitly advocated– a holistic approach to study the policies and strategies for economic development in territories (Navarro et al. 2014). This approach was further developed in a book with contributions of foreign scholars too (Valdaliso and Wilson, eds. 2015). In addition to making the case for holistic approaches to territorial strategy, the joint work also supported an explicit dynamic and historic perspective in the study of policies that resulted in new concepts such as policy path dependence and policy life-cycles (Aranguren, Magro and Valdaliso 2012; Valdaliso et al. 2014; Valdaliso 2015). This holistic and historical perspective was, later on, applied to other issues such as the study of regional economic resilience and the role of agency (Magro and Valdaliso 2019; Magro, Uyarra and Valdaliso 2021; Valdaliso et al. 2026).<sup>1</sup>

Last, but not least, the close relationship and collaboration with Porter, Harvard and other relevant international expertise strengthened the reputation and legitimacy of scholars and their work among local policymakers and other actors. The team of scholars also started to be

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the outcomes, concepts and perspectives of this research ended up appearing in the *Basque Country Competitiveness Reports* produced annually by Orkestra for the Basque Government (Orkestra 2008, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2021).

consulted and interviewed by European Commission and OECD experts responsible for conducting different policy reports on the Basque Country region and by actors in other territories around the world looking to understand the Basque experience.

### *3.2. Building on Orkestra's relationships: working for and with firms and policy organisations (2008-2025)*

Thanks to the contacts and closeness provided by the joint work with Orkestra, and, after 2012, to their reinforced reputation as co-authors of the Harvard Basque case, economic historians were commissioned by several firms and policy organisations within the region to write anniversary publications, historical narratives of their past thought to increase their legitimacy in the region's policy community. These included cluster associations such as GAIA to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1983-2008), Innobasque, the Basque Innovation Agency, to commemorate its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary (2007-2017), and the Biscay Technology Park, to commemorate its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1985-2020). In these cases, in addition to their role as researchers and analysts, economic historians played the role of facilitators, helping actors and organisations to re-examine and articulate their own histories, and builders of historical narratives (Colvin and Fourie 2026). The main challenge of this collaboration was to build a shared narrative of the past without sacrificing rigour and objectivity. Economic historians had to develop skills in narrative craft, interdisciplinary collaboration and public communication (Colvin and Fourie 2026). Moreover, the work conducted also helped to change the metrics and methods employed by some of those policy organisations (particularly Innobasque and the Biscay Technology Park) to evaluate their impacts and effectiveness in the system.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, economic historians leveraged their increasing legitimacy to gain access to a wide range of other policy organisations in order to facilitate their research projects and PhD processes. In this vein, the relationship with the Basque cluster association for electronics and ICT (GAIA) facilitated the PhD Thesis of Igor Etxabe and several related publications (Etxabe and Valdaliso 2016; Etxabe 2017 and 2018), and the relationship with SPRI, the regional development agency, is facilitating an ongoing PhD thesis that has recently delivered its first academic paper (Alabort and Valdaliso 2025). In these cases, the historian's role has consisted, above all, but not exclusively, in providing context and historical perspective to examine and evaluate current policymaking issues. The collaboration process with policymakers and practitioners, in turn, has given economic historians new insights and perspectives, some of them not visible nor available in more traditional sources and documents.

In addition to their work for policy organisations, economic historians have also been approached by firms such as Euskaltel (2016) or Nortegas (2020) to write, respectively, business cases (unpublished) or anniversary publications (Valdaliso et al. 2022). In this collaboration between economic historians and the business sector, the former had to develop the same

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<sup>2</sup> Several of these anniversary books were published (López and Valdaliso 2008; Catalán et al. 2021; Valdaliso and Catalán 2021). In the case of Innobasque, while the book itself was not distributed due to the political sensitivity of some issues, the organisation employed its main recommendations in the development of a new strategic plan.

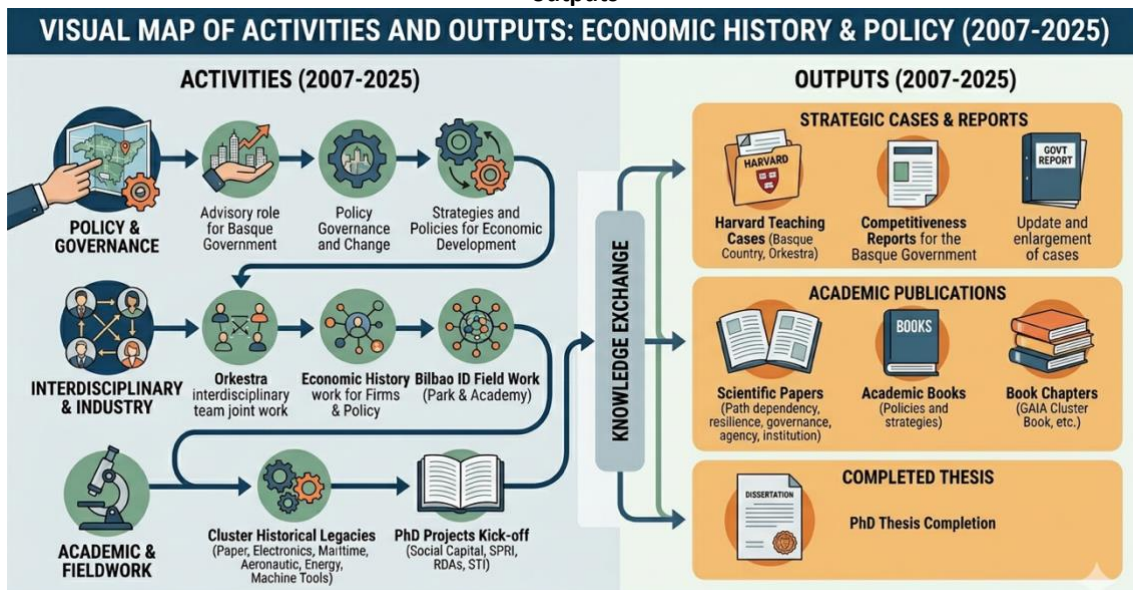
aforementioned skills in narrative craft, interdisciplinary collaboration and public communication (Colvin and Fourie 2026).

### *3.3. Advising local governments: Bilbao City Council, Bilbao Next Lab and the Bilbao urban innovation district (2021-2025)*

This last case of collaboration stemmed from the academic work carried out with the Biscay Technology Park and the contacts established there. The initiative came from the economic historian responsible for that work, who approached one of the park's management team to undertake a joint study on the opportunities and challenges that the Biscay Technology Parks faced when moving to Bilbao downtown to lead the establishment of a new urban innovation district. Like Colvin et al. (2026) indicate, it was about engaging historians and practitioners jointly to analyse a pressing policy issue. At the same time, having a representative from the Technology Park in the research team would also enable the inclusion of the park's vision and narrative of that project and facilitate access to other relevant stakeholders in that policy project, such as the City Council or firms and research and technology centres who planned to set up in the new district.

Eventually, that joint work resulted in a published scientific paper on urban innovation districts (Valdaliso and Andrés 2025), which benefited from insights and feedback from other stakeholders and from Orkestra researchers working on the related Bilbao Next Lab project. The paper uncovered several governance limitations and challenges to be addressed and, thanks to the intermediary role of Orkestra, the findings were presented in two meetings, first to the Bilbao City Council development agency (Bilbao Ekintza), and second to the Bilbao local government, mayor included. The exchange of information between scholars and policymakers in this joint space resulted in the City Council changing the governance system established for running the Bilbao urban innovation district. In parallel, the findings were presented by the Basque Technology Park affiliated co-author in several meetings of the global park policymaking and practitioners' community. This has served to increase the paper's diffusion, being the sixth most read paper of the journal a year after its online publication (<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ceps20>, last accessed 11 march 2026).

Figure 1. Economic history and policy-making in the Basque Country, 2007-2025. Map of activities and outputs



Visual figure separating types of activities and outputs based on the 2007-2025 trajectory.

Source: Gemini generated image from authors' inputs.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper highlights, and explores in the context of a specific case, the relevance of history in regional economic development and related public policy processes. This relevance has been widely recognised conceptually in the evolutionary economic geography literature, where the role of history is central to concepts such as path dependence, lock-in, regional renewal, regional resilience, smart specialisation strategies and institutional change. However, moving from theory to having an impact on policymaking requires collaboration between academia and policymakers on an interdisciplinary and long-term basis. This is not easy for reasons that include the different mindsets and 'languages' used across disciplines and across the academia and policy communities, and the different objectives and time-horizons of scholars and policymakers. Long-term and impactful collaboration requires trust, which in turn requires time spent working together and understanding each other.

In this paper we have shown how the confluence of evolutionary economic geography with economic history has helped to forge a long-term collaboration between economists and economic historians with an impact on policy making, contributing to the creation of both a strong within-region narrative and international (academic and policy) positioning. Concretely, the case highlights the progressive role played by an intermediary agent, Orkestra-Basque Institute of Competitiveness, over the twenty years since its creation. By providing a transformative vision of research, and associated methodologies, this institutional innovation has facilitated a space for collaboration between academia and policymakers. It is in this space where traditional academic history is transformed into "applied economic history", with a more potent and direct influence on regional policy.

In line with the ideas of Colvin and colleagues (Colvin and Fourie, 2026; Colvin et al. 2026), economic historians have played three interconnected and self-reinforcing roles. First, as researchers, providing new concepts such as path dependency, lock-in, policy life cycles and long-term (historical) perspectives, which have contributed to the design and implementation of a holistic territorial strategy. Second, as facilitators and narrative-builders, fostering shared visions and mindsets in the policy community. Third, as knowledge brokers that can connect academic research with decision-making.

The combination of three roles contribute to build regional resilience in an era of complex challenges. Research and analysis are needed to articulate challenge led policies. Building narratives reinforces social capital in the policymaking community, increase regional resilience and help sustaining long-term strategies that go beyond political cycles. Finally, being able to connect academic research with decision-making contributes to overcoming possible policy lock-ins and building new paths through the continuous introduction of novelty (new knowledge) in the system. The case firmly suggests that economic history as a discipline can have an important impact across these three roles, and, in turn, that it can also benefit from this collaboration.

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