Sham process in the development of a socio-economic plan for Busturialdea

On January 22, the then still Lehendakari (Basque President) Urkullu announced that public administrations would take two years to reflect on the viability of the Guggenheim Urdaibai project. This statement caused an uproar and sparked various positions on both sides.

Four days later, in response to the situation, the PNV (Basque Nationalist Party) and PSE (Socialist Party of the Basque Country) had no choice but to present a proposal in the Basque Parliament for the development of an economic plan to regenerate Busturialdea. A plan, they said, whose initial phase would involve social and economic agents of the region.

In the following months, due to elections, there was no further news—until May 9, when journalist Aitziber Atxustegi detailed the plan in the newspaper *Deia*. Among other things, she reported that the same methodology used in the so-called Priority Action Zones (ZAPs) would be applied. That is, a "broad participatory process" would be carried out that "takes into account relevant regional stakeholders."

She also noted:

> "The plan will be developed in seven and a half months through a participatory process involving significant stakeholders from Busturialdea (public institutions, companies, civil society, and knowledge sectors), consisting of several phases. The public company BEAZ, under the Department of Economic Promotion of the Bizkaia Provincial Council, will be responsible for its development."

On June 26, the platform *Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop* received an invitation to participate in the Strategic Plan for Urdaibai. The public company BEAZ entrusted the first-phase work to *Orkestra–Basque Institute of Competitiveness* (an initiative of the University of Deusto, run by the Deusto Foundation). Orkestra contacted our platform.

They proposed an interview based on a six-question script to gather perspectives from "various agents and local authorities." The questions were very general, suitable for any other economically challenged area in the Basque Country. Notably, there was no mention of the Guggenheim Urdaibai project.

In the initial message from Orkestra, there was no explanation of the process steps, who would participate, or what the objectives were—so we asked for clarification.

While awaiting their reply, the Platform's Coordinating Group began an internal reflection process to analyze, among other things, our legitimacy to participate in this type of process and how to respond to Orkestra depending on their answers.

On July 5, we received a second email from Orkestra answering our questions. They explained that it would be a one-phase process: Orkestra would meet only once with each participating agent—meaning no forum for collective discussion or debate.

Regarding participants, all mayors in Busturialdea were to be invited, along with a few organizations and associations (ADR Urremendi, Bermeo's Behargintza, AZTI, local schools in Gernika, Barrutialde, Bermeo, the Bermeo Fishermen's Guild, Tuna World Capital of Bermeo, UBAI Faktoria, and the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve's Board).

The interviews' findings would be compiled into a report for the Bizkaia Provincial Council. The report would list the names of interviewees to prove they had been consulted, and would include a "summary" of their answers—**without direct quotes**.

Initially, they said the report was due by the end of July, but the latest update indicated a new deadline of the week of July 15. That report will serve as the basis for the strategic plan to be drawn up by the Provincial Council.

Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop has analyzed the situation with great responsibility and co-responsibility.

- With *responsibility*, because we have consistently demanded the need for a process to discuss Busturialdea's future.

- With *co-responsibility*, because many local and external actors have entrusted us with the task of **halting** the Guggenheim Urdaibai project, supporting our platform in the streets and financially.

This analysis is also based on two key points from motions we've presented in local councils (also included in point 5 of our public statement):

1. **We request that the local councils ask the Provincial Council of Bizkaia, the Basque Government, and the Guggenheim Foundation to definitively withdraw the Guggenheim Urdaibai project.**

2. **Commit to developing a serious socio-economic revitalization plan for the region, based on a real diagnosis and aligned with the framework of the Biosphere Reserve, prioritizing the people and the environment. Move away from top-down models and adopt a new governance model with local councils as key players, alongside local stakeholders and public participation.**

Therefore, Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop has decided NOT to participate in the process launched by the Provincial Council of Bizkaia via Orkestra.

Here are our reasons:

- **This is not the participatory process that the region is demanding.** Participants include political parties (mayors) and public institutions—but not key actors like labor

unions who understand the region's economic issues, or youth groups who will be most affected by these decisions, or long-standing associations dedicated to Busturialdea's development.
Also, there is no individual citizen participation (as Professor Ramón Zallo recently noted: “the right to be consulted, even if not the right to decide, belongs to those most affected” – *Viento Sur*, 03-07-24).
Plus, the report won’t include verbatim responses, so participants’ views will be anonymized, and **no space is provided for collective reflection**.

- **The interview questions are too vague and generic,** and *not one* refers to the Guggenheim museum. This is baffling.
  Our platform’s mission is crystal clear: **we want to stop the Guggenheim Urdaibai project**. If the interview makes no mention of it, what is our role supposed to be?

- **We’ve repeatedly denounced the non-transparent, authoritarian governance style** of the Provincial and Basque Governments regarding this project.
  Now that we’ve seen the methodology of this participatory process, it’s obvious they’re following the same pattern: the participants were *hand-picked* by the administration—not based on the value of their input, but on how convenient that input would be.

- **The types of questions Orkestra asks already hint at the intended outcome:**
  That the region needs an economic transformation project that “respects the environment and community *as much as possible*” (but not fully)—i.e., give a nod to sustainability while prioritizing profit.
  This line of reasoning does **not** justify building the Guggenheim in the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve.

In our view, the sole purpose of this process is to validate the positions of the Provincial and Basque Governments, and secure the social approval they need to push ahead “no matter what” with the Guggenheim project—ignoring what voters expressed in the elections, and seeking approval for the project through alternative channels.

Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop will not play along.

As we’ve said before: **every socio-economic actor in the region should have the opportunity to participate**, the debate must be open and constructive, and above all, **the Guggenheim project must be explicitly taken off the table before any planning process begins.**

That hasn’t happened—in fact, the opposite has.

If we were to participate in the conversations initiated by the Provincial Council, we would be **legitimizing a flawed and self-serving process**—along with any conclusions drawn from it—and **we are not willing to do that**.

However, if a *truly participatory* process is initiated, and our contribution is genuinely welcomed, we will be there: ready to work, reflect, and debate—building a dignified and sustainable future for Busturialdea, alongside the region's institutions, stakeholders, and citizens.

In the meantime, we will not allow political leaders or public administrations to use the name of Guggenheim Urdaibai Stop to further their own interests.

Note: You can read Orkestra's proposed interview questions **[HERE]**.