Doing Problem Driven Work

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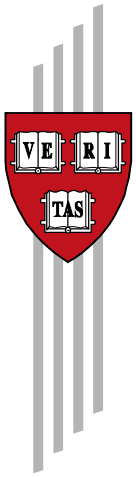

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Abstract

We often observe that more successful efforts to establish complex state capabilities are problem driven; focused relentlessly on solving a specific, attention-grabbing problem. This is the first principle of Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation, which we are introducing in pieces in a series of working papers over the coming months. The current working paper starts with a discussion about why problems matter as entry points to complex state capability building challenges. It then offers practical ideas and tools to help those trying to use problems to foster change (given the need to construct problems, deconstruct problems and then promote problem driven sequencing). The working paper should help readers who wonder why we emphasize problems as entry points and positive motivators of change (we don't agree that problems demotivate or disempower) and how we work practically to define and tackle problems.

Focusing on contextual problems that key change agents care about

Anticorruption Commissions were a common 'best practice' solution for countries wanting to tackle corruption in the 1990s. These countries were following the model of Hong Kong, which started a commission in the 1970s. Malawi is an example. Its Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) was conceived in 1994, when the country underwent democratic transformation and donors pushed for an anticorruption agenda (Anders 2002). It has not been very successful, however, achieving few prosecutions and operating in a time when corruption crises seem to have accelerated (Andrews 2013). Political leaders have not supported the commission or given it the independence needed to operate effectively and tackle the country's entrenched bureaucratic and political corruption. This experience contrasts with that in the Hong Kong 'model', where the commission emerged in response to a corruption crisis in the police force. Political powers supported the commission because they had to address this crisis, and they therefore gave the commission independence to investigate and aggressively pursue prosecutions.

We often observe that more successful efforts to establish complex state capabilities (like anticorruption efforts in Hong Kong) are problem driven; focused relentlessly on solving a specific, attention-grabbing problem. In contrast, many less-successful initiatives (like that in Malawi) often seem to be more solution driven (and do not pay attention to the problem or the context in which the problem is felt). In fact, this seems to be the biggest difference between 'best practice' experiences and those that try to replicate such practices: The best practices emerged as responses to specific problems and this is often why they succeeded, whereas the copies commonly do not have a clear problem focus and ultimately struggle to gain traction or impact behavior in the manner expected. We believe the lack of a problem focus commonly

leads to repeated failure with reforms like the Malawi ACB: every few years someone notes that the commission is not working and tries to improve it by 'doubling down' on the design, and doing it better—only to experience similar frustration. Reflecting on a prior working paper we produced, this is a little like assuming that a 2015 road exists in 1804 America, and insisting that adventurers drive down that road—even though it obviously does not exist and the problem 1804 adventurers face is in getting west without roads (Andrews et al. 2015).

This chapter discusses the importance of focusing on problems that key agents care about when trying to build complex state capabilities. This is the first principle of Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation, which we are introducing in pieces in a series of working papers over the coming months. The current working paper starts with a discussion about why problems matter as entry points to complex state capability building challenges. The next sections use the Malawi example (and others we have researched or engaged in) to show how problems can be used to drive processes of state capability building in practice; given the need to construct problems, deconstruct problems and then promote problem driven sequencing.

Why is a Problem Driven Approach Necessary?

We observed the value of problems as drivers of effective state capability building in a study of 44 health sector projects pursued by the World Bank and Global Fund in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Andrews 2013). In trying to explain why some projects were considered more successful than others, we found evidence pointing towards two crucial dimensions, one of which was the 'problem focus' in project design and implementation: the successful projects pursued locally

defined, specific problems in a demonstrable and continuous fashion. This meant that the projects were initiated as responses to locally defined problems, baseline indicators of these problems were measured in the early stages of the project, project activities were directly determined as solutions to these problems, and progress in solving problems was routinely evaluated and considered in adjusting project content. The problem driven nature of these projects ensured that they focused on actually solving specified problems as the goal (rather than introducing a pre-designed solution). They were adaptive as a result, allowing continuous changes in the design to ensure the problem was effectively addressed.

Various literatures help explain why problem driven processes are important in addressing complex problems like those involving corruption or in the health sector. Management scholars like John Kotter (1990), for instance, are famous for noting the importance of crises in fostering deep organizational change. Another prominent management theorist Kim Cameron (1986, 67) posits similarly that, "Institutional change and improvement are motivated more by knowledge of problems than by knowledge of success." He argues that bureaucratic agents are more likely to support change initiatives aimed at "overcoming obstacles to basic institutional effectiveness" than looking for ways to improve already-effective institutions (Cameron 1986, 69). In the same vein, institutionalist author Christine Oliver (1992, 564) argues that "performance problems" foster political, social and functional pressures for institutional change because they "raise serious questions about the appropriateness or legitimacy" of the status quo. Seo and Creed (2002) similarly posit that a problem driven process forces a reflective shift in collective consciousness about the value of extant mechanisms, which is needed to foster change.

In light of these and other views, we believe that problems force policymakers and would-be reformers to ask questions about the incumbent ways of doing things, and promote a search for alternatives that actually offer a solution (rather than just providing new ways of doing things). Reflecting such view, Sparrow (2008) discusses how getting the right grip on the characterization of the problem can unleash efforts to solve the problem. Beyond this, problems provide a rallying point for coordinating distributed agents who might otherwise clash in the change process. In this respect, coalitions are sometimes defined as groups of strange bedfellows who work together to solve problems that they share but cannot solve on their own (Zakocs 2006; see also Pires 2011).

These arguments suggest that problems provide common windows through which agents are forced to examine their contexts, identify necessary changes, and explore alternatives to find appropriate solutions. The idea of 'problem windows' is reminiscent of Kingdon's (1995) work on policy change. Applications of his 'multiple streams' theory posits that an awareness of problems brings issues onto the change agenda (Barzelay and Gallego 2006, Guldbrandsson and Fossum 2009, Ridde 2009). Faced with problems they can no longer ignore, agents across the social and political spectrum become aware of structural weaknesses they usually do not consider and work together to solve such.

Given this thinking, we believe in taking a problem driven approach to any complex reform or policy initiative like the 1804 capability challenges we frequently encounter in development (Andrews et al. 2015). We do not just mean identifying problems at the start of an intervention, however. Simply saying one is identifying a problem does not mean that the impacts necessary to foster effective change will be felt. Indeed, we find that many reformers claiming to be problem driven are in fact not problem driven at all. They define the problem as

the lack of a preferred solution, rather than a performance deficiency, and their strategy has no real means to draw attention to the need for change, provide a rallying point for coalition building, or offer a 'true north' destination of 'problem solved' to guide, motivate and inspire action. For instance, many donors in Malawi continue to argue that the problem with corruption is that the ACB does not work. This kind of problem definition entrenches the capability trap discussed in earlier chapters (where countries do the same reforms repeatedly but continually face failure) and is unlikely to generate the kind of behavioral change theorists like Kingdon propose. This, we believe, is because such problem definitions do not meet the characteristics of a 'good problem' that motivates and drives change:

- A good problem cannot be ignored and matters to key change agents.
- A good problem can be broken down into easily addressed causal elements.
- A good problem allows real, sequenced, strategic responses.

Constructing problems that matter

We advocate a problem driven process because it provokes reflection, mobilizes attention, and promotes targeted and context-sensitive engagement. In order to achieve these impacts, however, we believe that the focal problem needs to reflect on a performance deficiency that cannot be denied or ignored and that matters to key change agents. Think, for instance, of the kind of problem statement that would draw a skilled team together to go west in 1804—where the challenge was uncertain and risky, and the adventurers' deaths must have been a probability.

Work is often required to craft problems that can motivate such groups, and draw awareness to failures that commonly fester but are routinely ignored or accepted as normal or unavoidable (or too difficult or risky to address)—as is the case with many challenges in

development and in government in general. These challenges resemble what Kingdon (1995) calls ‘conditions’ that agents complain about but also accept—like a nagging hip pain one learns to live with. One does nothing to resolve such pain as long as it is a condition one can endure. When one wakes up and cannot walk, however, the condition becomes a problem demanding attention and individuals find the strength to accept needed change (like a hip operation). Similar to this example, Kingdon notes that many social, political and economic conditions have to be politically and socially constructed to gain attention as ‘problems’ before we should expect any real change. We believe it is similar for many challenges in building state capability, where weaknesses persist for years and never draw the attention they demand. The construction process involves raising the visibility of persistent weaknesses through spectacular ‘focusing events’ like crises, the use of statistical indicators, or manipulation of feedback from previous experiences.

This is the first step in doing PDIA: Constructing problems out of conditions, drawing attention to the need for change and bringing such change onto the social, political and administrative agenda.

The construction process involves gathering key change agents to answer four questions: ‘What is the problem?’, ‘Why does it matter?’, ‘To whom does it matter?’, ‘Who needs to care more?’ and ‘How do we get them to give it more attention?’ It is important—in principle and practice—to think about who answers these questions (and frames the problem). In principle, one should be aware of the power dynamics at play in gathering some agents to do this work and not others, for instance, and include some who are out of power (and potentially more aware of the problems). In practice, it is vital to ensure that agents who can foster necessary next-steps in the change process are engaged in the process. Balancing these tensions requires including both agitators (commonly not in power) and decision-makers (commonly in power) in the problem

construction process. Crucially, these agents are all internal to the context targeted for change (such that this process cannot be done by outsiders but must involve those directly affected by future change).

Answers to the questions should be informed by evidence at all times, to convince agents of their validity and empower the group to have a problem statement that others will find compelling. We provide actual examples in the next chapter, but the following helps to illustrate the principle in practice:

> A would-be reformer in Malawi might be concerned about the failure of Malawi's Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB). She could try to convince others that serious reform is needed, focusing on improving the 'preferred solution' and creating a better ACB (in an example of 'doubling down' discussed earlier). Some might argue that the ACB is emerging, however, and will work one day. Others might note that corruption has always been there and is too politically difficult to address. Noting this, our reformer would recognize the need to turn a condition into a problem, through problem construction. She would need to gather a small (to start) group of agitators and decision-makers and ask the questions listed above. Imagine the kind of conversation that would ensue, and how it would focus the reform agenda:
>
> - "The problem is that the ACB does not effectively address corruption."
> - *Why does it matter?* "Because we still have a lot of corruption in government, which we can show in various indicators."
> - *Why does it matter?* "Because we lose money from the corruption, which we can estimate using basic financial reporting data."

- *Why does it matter?* "Because the lost money leads to reduced services, which we can show in various sectors—including education, health care, and water."
- *Now we have a problem definition that refers to a real performance deficiency that cannot be ignored and that we think will matter to key change agents.*
- *To whom does it matter?* "All those receiving the services, including citizens and the politicians who are meant to represent them. These are key change agents, especially at the local level."
- *Who needs to care more?* "Key government decision makers like the Minister of Finance and local budget and policy officials."
- *How do we get them to give it more attention?* "By providing data showing the loss in money from corruption, and how this translates into service delivery weaknesses. These data could include stock-out statistics in clinics, or textbook access in schools, and could be provided for different constituencies to convince individual politicians that they should care."

This problem construction process helps to steer one away from defining the problem as the 'lack of a preferred solution'. Rather, this kind of conversation focuses would-be reformers on service delivery failures that arise because of corruption, which is a functional problem of performance that many agents are likely to care about; and which is likely to mobilize attention and effort to address festering weaknesses in state capability. Contrast this to talking about the problem of a failing ACB, which was where our would-be reformer began. (Which many agents may not care about and which will probably yield little more than a technical fix to a technical condition. Much like giving our friend with the sore hip a walking stick instead of a more

necessary but demanding operation. He may accept the help but it assists and perpetuates the problem, rather than forcing your friend to actually confront and deal with the problem).

Given the way it focuses attention on the need for change, a construction process like this can help to transform a solution and process-oriented condition into a 'good problem' that fosters real state building (and the broad and deep reflection and change this often requires). We see the importance of this kind of construction exercise in the example of Swedish budgeting reform:[1]

> Technicians in the Ministry of Finance had been trying to introduce technical reforms since the 1960s, looking to improve the management of public monies, clarify relationships between central and local governments, and discipline policy-making processes (to contain the growth in financial commitments). They tried many international best practices between the 1960s and 1980s, including program budgeting, multi-year budgeting, performance and results budgeting, different types of accounting reform, intergovernmental reforms, and management by objectives. These mostly fell flat, and by the early 1990s Sweden still lacked fundamental elements of a modern budgeting, accounting or management system (including a coherent budget calendar, Ministry of Finance responsible for spending, shared accounting system, and more).
>
> This all led to what theorists call a soft budget constraint, where public spending was allowed to grow with very little control. This was a real problem for Sweden, yielding it vulnerable to any shock and warranting far reaching changes in the make-up of government (to provide capabilities for expenditure control). It was treated largely as a

[1] The discussion on Sweden's case draws on work undertaken for Andrews (2015a) and reflecting various sources, including von Hagen (1992), Premfors (1991), Olson and Sahlin-Andersson (1998), Fudge and Gustafsson (1989), Burkitt and Whyman (1994), Brunsson (1995), Lundquist (2001), Molander (2000), Mattisson et al. (2004), Wehner (2007), Pollittt and Bouckaert (2004), Paulsson (2006), Miyazaki (2014), Molander and Holmquist (2013).

technical condition, however, until 1991, when the country was hit by a major economic crisis. The crisis emerged in European financial markets but spread rapidly to Sweden and wrought havoc on public finances, given the vulnerabilities that had worried experts. Welfare commitments could not be adjusted quickly enough to respond to decreased revenues and soon the country faced major deficits (at about 11% of GDP in 1992).

Most observers associated the 'problematic' deficits with the broader European crisis and high spending levels in the country (leading to calls for spending cuts as the solution). A group of budgeting experts started to construct a parallel narrative, however, that associated the soft budget constraint 'condition' with the crisis—in the hope of fostering deeper reforms in the budget system. They worked with a respected German economist to show that Sweden had the second lowest score on a key index of budget system capability, on a par with Italy and Greece (neither of which was considered a desirable comparator), proving that 'we have a problem'. Beyond this, they helped decision makers understand the academic studies showing that countries with higher scores on the index had more capability to control spending (and avoid deficits). This helped decision makers see 'why the problem mattered', associating weak systems with the painful deficits Sweden was enduring. They focused attention on parliamentarians in this effort, knowing that these were the agents whose support was most needed for change. Ultimately, these agents (and others) came to care more—and see the conditions as problems—and a sense of urgency entered the reform process, allowing far reaching reforms.

This is a powerful example of how reformers can energize capacity building efforts to go beyond mimicry and technical fixes and instead address the real problems warranting change. We see problem construction achieve this focus and attention in other engagements as well:

- One country, which we will call Nostria, was struggling to manage the imbalance of demand and supply for justice, which manifest in a large backlog in cases. The country lacked capabilities to manage this backlog, and particularly to allocate public resources to the places where demand was greatest. Donors had supported a project to create a case management system that would help shore up such capability, but after five years the project yielded nothing. Part of the reason was that the reform had been framed as addressing a technical condition ('we do not have a case management system') that did not mobilize enough attention or engagement across a broad section of affected agents whose support was needed for reform. A small set of these agents remained committed to reform even after this experience, however, and tried to reignite a case management system project. Faced with a lack of enthusiasm amongst other agents, they began constructing the problem as we suggest here, asking why the lack of a system mattered, who it mattered to, and how it could be made to matter more. The process was interesting, and went something like this: 'the system matters because we cannot determine where we need new resources (judges, buildings, prosecutors, and more) without the system'; 'this matters because we cannot create effective budget requests without knowing what to ask for (and being able to back our requests up with real evidence)'; 'This matters because we never get the kind of money we need to manage justice, and our budget requests are routinely turned down'. This characterization reflected on a performance problem—rather than a technical condition—that was felt by a number of agents involved in providing justice. It could be framed using real data (showing gaps between budget requests and allocations) and personal narratives (where agencies reflected on the frustration of

repeatedly asking for and not receiving funds). As such, the reform team found this framing very effective in drawing important agents into the reform process, and in gaining support to kickstart a new reform process.

- Another government, in a country to be called Mantio, had been trying to strengthen its capabilities to support private sector development. A small group in the Ministry of Industry was focused on energizing a specific underperforming sector of the economy, and identified the need to improve the business climate faced by firms in this sector. It emphasized policies aimed at improving the Doing Business indicators in this sector (decreasing various kinds of regulatory burdens). This initiative was quite difficult, partly because the group did not have authority over many of the regulations it was trying to change: the regulations were under the control of ministries like Finance and Land Management, and various municipal offices. These other agencies were not part of the reform process, and did not see the need for the regulatory reforms. In essence, they saw the poor performance of the sector as an accepted condition, and not something that warranted major attention (or at least not something that warranted their attention). The Ministry of Industry's would-be reformers initiated a problem construction process to address this malaise. They started by identifying the problem as 'having a weak Doing Business score, given inefficient regulations'. When probed as to why this mattered, however, they started offering new ideas: 'Firms cannot grow in this environment…and if they cannot grow we will not get enough jobs or exports…and jobs and exports are sorely needed.' The group members were asked to provide data showing the gap between where they thought employments levels should have been in their chosen sector and where

> employment levels actually were. These data were then used to convince high-level government ministers and administrators and local officials of the problem. Constructing the problem like this ensured that these agents supported change, which accelerated in pace and deepened over the next few months.

Whereas effectively constructed problems like these are intended to mobilize action, they could have the opposite effect if the groups involved in the construction process dwell only on the problem. There needs to be a positive balance to such reflection; something that inspires and encourages vision. This is a lesson we draw from the work on appreciative inquiry, which often presents itself as the antithesis to problem driven work. It advocates "collective inquiry into the best of what is, in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur" (Bushe 2013, p.1). We do not believe that this approach is in fact antithetical to the problem driven approach presented here, but rather emphasizes the importance of the 'other side of the coin' in doing such work—what will the problem driven work deliver? In reflecting this, groups doing such work should follow their questions about the problem with an extra one designed to foster positive views: 'What will the problem look like when it is solved?' In the Malawi example provided, the group should mention the fact that school and health sector services would be stronger, and money would be flowing to schools and clinics more effectively. The group would focus on specific targets for improved stock access in clinics and textbook provision in schools, once again reflecting on these targets for individual constituencies to ensure the support of individual political representatives. Getting this support allows a start to real action in the change process, which is crucial.

We saw evidence of this in the way the budgeting problem was constructed in early 1990s Sweden. The group of officials who led this construction did not leave decision-makers in a gloomy situation faced with just a problem (of a system that that was prone to deficits). They used the data they had developed to show that while Sweden looked like Greece and Italy at the time (and shared these countries' problems in controlling spending), reforms could help the country produce systems like those in other European countries, where deficits were under control. This allowed them to construct an aspirational goal of 'problem solved'—where the country would not have deficits of 11% of GDP but would rather enjoy low deficits or even surpluses. This communication did not downplay the urgency of the problem, but infused the urgency with hope and vision. Similar visionary 'problem solved' constructs proved vital in the two examples discussed above:

- The Nostrian judicial reform group was quite overwhelmed by the size and scope of the problem they faced (in accessing and organizing case data). Their apprehension was also influenced by the fact that a prior project had failed. This was partially overcome by asking them to construct a vision of what the problem would look like solved, however. This empowered positive discussion, where the group identified exactly what kinds of data would be available, noted that the data would help in determining what resources would be needed, and explained further that the data would help in requesting budgetary funds. Ultimately, they came up with estimates of how much their budgets would expand because of the work, and how many more cases would be passed each year because of these funds. This measure of 'problem solved' became what some leadership gurus would call a 'true north' goal for the group—foundational, motivational, and a true measure of success.

- The Mantian officials also balanced their problem construction with a vision of 'problem solved'. This was done by estimating how many of the missing jobs could be generated in the underperforming sector they were looking at, in six months, a year, and beyond, if reforms were forthcoming. These estimates allowed the identification of a range of new job creation that the group thought was possible from its work. It was the first time that some members of the group actually saw their work impacting something as significant as jobs (given that they tended to see their work as administrative and bureaucratic). It was thus inspirational, and injected some enthusiasm and added purpose into the exercise. The 'problem solved vision' was also crucial in getting support from politicians who were motivated to support a problem driven process but needed a positive vision to frame the initiative.

We find that many efforts to build state capability do not construct problems in this manner. These initiatives assume that problems are accepted and will draw attention, and also that those working in the context have a vision of problem solved. This assumption often proves incorrect, however, and agents in the context lack motivation or disagree on what they should be doing. This frequently plays out in failures to gain and maintain support or change or to provoke the reflection needed to address wicked hard challenges. Given this, we want you would take a few minutes (or more) to construct a problem out of one or more of the 1804 challenges you listed in our prior working paper (on 2015 and 1804 challenges). Use Table 1 as a guide in this process. We suggest doing the exercise on your own first and then asking some involved colleagues or associates to do it as well. Then you can get each others' work together and develop a combined version. This exercise will probably unleash some creative insight that will help all of you better understand what you are dealing with. Good luck.

Table 1. Constructing a problem out of your 1804 challenge

What is the problem? (and how would we measure it or tell stories about it?)	
Why does it matter? (and how do we measure this or tell stories about it?)	
Why does it matter? (and how do we measure this or tell stories about it?) • **Ask this question until you are at the point where you can effectively answer the question below, with more names than just your own.**	
To whom does it matter? (In other words, 'who cares? other than me?)	
Who needs to care more?	
How do we get them to give it more attention?	
What will the problem look like when it is solved? Can we think of what progress might look like in a year, or 6 months?	

Deconstructed problems are manageable problems

Change processes that begin with this kind of problem construction will likely yield immediate questions about solutions to employ. These questions can be difficult to answer, because the problems are complex and 'the right' solutions are hard to identify. Reformers can get stuck at this point, given the intractable nature of the problem: It is often just too big and thorny to make

sense of. This might lead to a push for preferred best practice solutions that reformers are pretty sure will not build real state capability but at least offer something to do. Our reformer in Malawi might still advocate for a stronger ACB as the solution to the defined problem, for instance.

To mitigate this risk, one needs to ensure that would-be reformers break the problems down into smaller components that are more open to localized solution building. This involves deconstructing the problem to reveal its causes and then choosing solutions that address these causes. Deconstruction like this helps to make a 'good problem' (where one can effectively "frame the grievances of aggrieved constituencies, diagnose causes, assign blame" and identify immediate *options* for redress (Snow and Benford 1992: 150)). In essence, it turns a set of unmanageable challenges associated with any given problem into a manageable set of focal points for engagement, where one can ask what is going wrong and why, and look for workable solutions to these problems. Deconstructing problems in this manner also helps one identify multiple points at which to pursue short and medium term successes (or quick wins), which are vital when dealing with a big problem that will likely only be solved in the long run (and which is therefore not likely to attract the needed short and medium term political support).

We propose using tools like the '5-why technique' and fishbone diagrams in such deconstruction. These tools emerged from production process theory, especially from the experience of Toyota (Ohno 1988; Liker 2004). Toyota uses the tools to scrutinize problems encountered in making cars, to ensure that any remedies treat the root causes of these problems and allow production facilities to introduce solutions that are sustainable (and mitigate against the recurrence of the problem). This is how real capability is built in the Toyota corporation (where teams learn to 'encounter a problem, break it down and scrutinize it, solve the root causes, and lock in the solutions so that the problem does not repeat itself'). The tools require

those involved in building state capability to ask, repeatedly, 'why' the problem was caused, and then chart the answers in a visual manner to show its many causal roots. This allows one to identify multiple root causes and to interrogate each cause in depth. Consider Table 2 to see how this might focus the Malawi corruption in service delivery problem (reflecting on just three potential lines of answers to the 'why' questions).

Table 2. An example of '5 why' conversations in action

	Answer 1.	Answer 2.	Answer 3.
Why is money being lost in service delivery?	Funds budgeted for services are disbursed for other purposes.	Procurement costs are inflated, leading to fund leakages.	Local officials divert resources to personal purposes.
Why does this happen?	Loopholes in disbursement systems allow reallocation.	Procurement processes are often half implemented.	Officials feel obliged to redistribute money.
Why does this happen?	Disbursement systems are missing key controls.	Procurement processes are often rushed.	Constituents expect officials to redistribute money.
Why does this happen?	Disbursement system designs were insufficient and have never been improved.	Decisions to procure goods are delayed and delayed again, every year.	Local norms make it appropriate to 'share' in this way.
Why does this happen?	We lack resources and skills to improve system designs.	Budget decisions initiating purchase decisions are delayed.	Local communities are poor and depend on this sharing.

Source: Authors' example, intended for demonstration purposes.

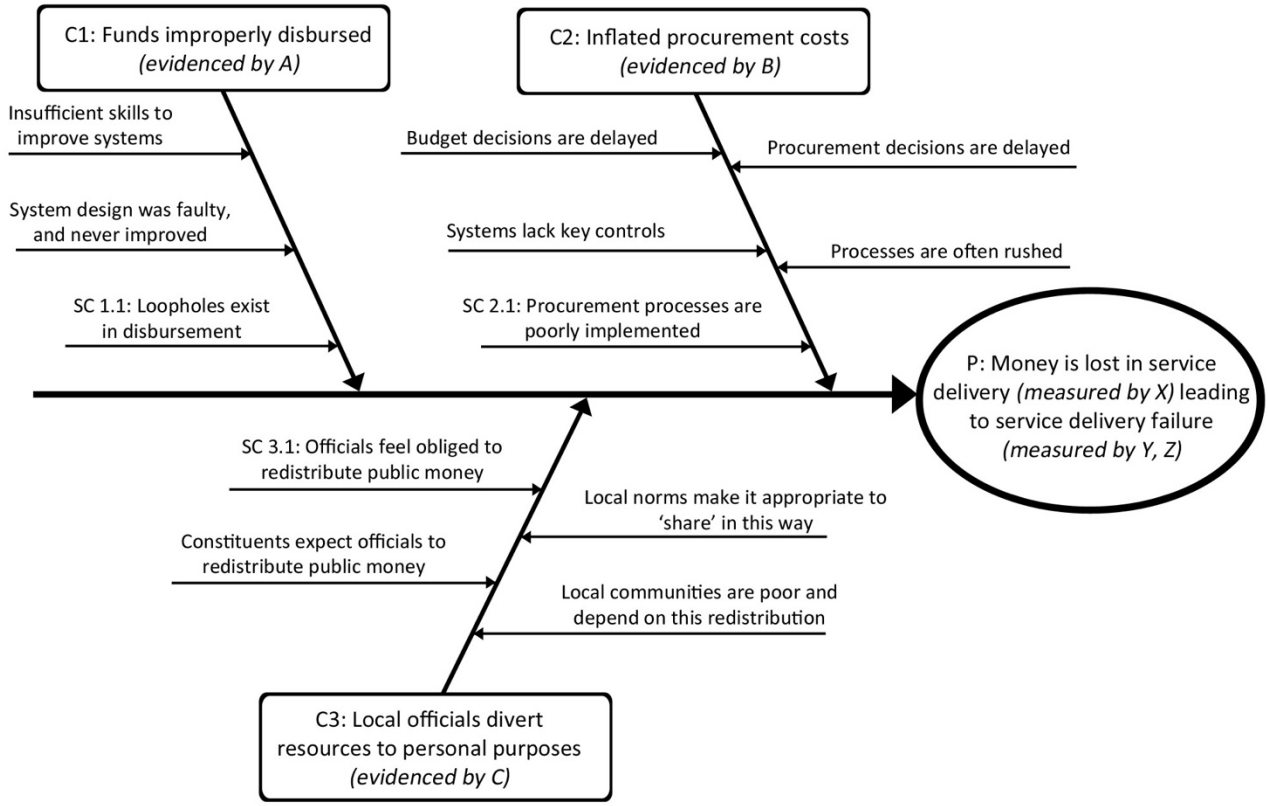
The discussion encapsulated in Table 2 is only partial, of course, and one could expect a number of answers to the leading question, 'why is money being lost in service delivery?' These

strands or causal dimensions might emphasize process failures, political interference in money flows, and more. Each strand breaks down into a variety of sub-causes, which will all need attention if change is to succeed and capability is enhanced. Different agents will initiate different strands of thinking, leading to a more robust deconstruction of the problem when one works in groups rather than just doing the exercise alone. We advocate including as many strands of thinking as the group offers, and challenging those who suggest new 'causes' and 'sub-causes' to provide evidence supporting the inclusion of such. For instance, one might ask if there is evidence to show that 'procurement costs are inflated, leading to cost leakages.' This allows one to inform this dimension of the problem, which is necessary to convince others that it requires attention. We would caution against prematurely excluding any causal issues because they 'don't make sense' or 'we lack evidence', however. This is not an academic exercise but rather a practical one—designed to flesh the problem out as much as possible. If proposed causes seem difficult to defend, include them with an asterisk (suggesting they are pending further evidence) and keep them in sight and mind (they just may end up emerging as important).

The many different strands or causal dimensions can be shown graphically in what some call a fishbone diagram, which provides a visual deconstruction of the bigger problems (as in Figure 1). The fishbone diagram specifies the problem effect at the right, using data that helps stimulate attention. Potential causes and sub-causes are shown as 'bones on the fish', with three illustrated in the example—reflecting problems in fund disbursement processes, procurement processes, and the private use of public funds by officials. Allowing the identification of multiple bones will empower more agents to engage in discussions of solutions, as it breaks often intractable and complex problems down into manageable, bite-size pieces. For instance, it is easier to think of potential solutions to close gaps in the disbursement system than it is to think of

solutions to the larger problem of 'corruption'. This procedure will also dis-abuse many of the notion that there is any one, cover-all solution to a complex problem (as is implied in starting a commission to deal with corruption problems). A real solution to big problems actually comes in the form of many small solutions to the many causal dimensions of the problem.

Figure 1. Deconstructing complex problems in Ishikawa diagrams



We see exactly this kind of thinking in the way Swedish officials pursued their budgeting reforms in the 1990s. As already discussed, a small group of technical experts constructed the problem in a manner that ensured the support of parliamentarians, ministers and managers. Once this support was in place, however, it would have been easy to despair; the budgeting problems were expansive in size and scope and it was difficult to know where to start or what to do. The

officials did not use 5 why methods or fishbone diagrams, but their strategy at the time shows a conscious effort to desconstruct the problem. This involved identifying the main factors considered 'causal' to the soft budget constraint problem (which included weak control over spending decisions, duplication of spending, and confusion over roles in the budget process). The deconstruction process involved various new actors, all contributing their views on 'why' the budget constraint was so soft. The process led to a manageable agenda of action, and a broader constituency committed to make the agenda a reality.

This process proved vital in the Nostrian and Mantian experiences already described above, where '5 why' and fishbone methods were explicitly used:

- The deconstruction activity was a first for many in the Nostrian context, and served to bring new agents into a fledgling team that included members from a variety of affected agencies. These agents all had views on why the justice sector could not create data-driven budgets, all of which led to the identification of various 'bones': 'we do not have some of the data we need'; 'the data we have are not reliable'; 'we do not share the data that exists'; 'we do not know how to analyze the data that we have.' The team members were asked to illustrate each cause with real evidence (showing, for instance, which data was actually missing and which data was simply in different non-sharing agencies). This evidence was often less than perfect but helped to convince everyone that the nominated cause was indeed worthy of attention. The team then went into depth on each fishbone to further interrogate the causes. In discussing 'why' data were not being shared, for instance, the team pointed to communication failures between organizations, which stemmed from political and bureaucratic tensions but also from technocratic issues (like the fact that different

organizations used different statistical software that limited sharing potential). Ultimately, within a few days, the team identified a number of causal strands in which they could start thinking about action. They could see that there was no single solution to the overall problem as well (and hence that the 'case management system' they had initially wanted was not a panacea).

- The Mantian officials were initially convinced that they could kickstart their focal economic sector by addressing regulatory issues embedded in the Doing Business indicators. They decided not to simply assume this 'solution', however, and embarked on a process of asking businesses 'why' employment was lower than it could be. The exercise yielded few responses that related to the Doing Business regulatory issues. Instead, it produced a list of over 42 challenges that businesses in the sector were facing, which the team of officials organized into a five bone fishbone diagram (where bones referred to causal topics like costs of employment, difficulties at the interface with government, costs of engaging in trade, and constraints to innovation). Each major bone represented a major cause of the problem, and additional bones showed the sub-causes (as in the Malawi example in Figure 7.1). The officials were quite amazed at the end of this exercise, especially by what they had learned from asking 'why' the problems were persisting (rather than settling for a ready-made solution). Many of the 42 challenges were new to the officials and had not been on policy agendas before.

We find this kind of problem deconstruction both illuminating and empowering. It forces would-be reformers and policy makers to interrogate the problem that often thing they fully understand. This often leads to a different—and more accurate—understanding of the problem.

Beyond this, the deconstruction process helps would-be reformers break the problem down into smaller, manageable parts. This is encouraging to many reformers and empowers practical thinking about where real reform can begin in the shirt run (the kind of thinking one cannot do when reflecting on overly demanding problems).

We do not want you to take our word on this, however. The value of this approach is appreciated most when actually using the tools in an applied context. Given this, we invite you to go through a basic exercise in deconstructing your 1804 challenge (discussed in Table 1). Once again, we propose working on your own initially and going through a '5 why' process to identify as many causes and sub-causes of the problem as possible (using the next blank page to do so) (Use the full page Box 1 to do this). Then, build your fishbone diagram, showing the causal strands (in blank Box 2). Get affected colleagues to do this as well, and then come together and compare notes. Try and build a common fishbone diagram, learning from each others' ideas and building a fuller narrative of the problem than any of you had at the start (in Box 3).

Box 1. My ‘5 why’ thought sheet

Box 2. My Ishikawa diagram, deconstructing the problem I am facing

Box 3. Our combined Ishikawa diagram

How does your challenge look now, compared with what you wrote down in Table 1? It should be much more fleshed out or broken down than it was before, into causal elements that you can seriously consider addressing. The deconstructed problem should raise immediate questions: Where do I start in trying to solve the problem? What do I do? How do I ensure that all causal strands are addressed? The next steps in PDIA tackle exactly these questions.

Problem driven sequencing orders the engagement

Deconstruction provides the basis for problem driven sequencing in the change process, where sequencing refers to the timing and staging of interventions and engagement. Sequencing matters a great deal in the development process and effective sequencing is key to doing PDIA. A failure to sequence effectively could lead, in principle and practice, to premature load bearing (where change demands are introduced before they can be managed by a targeted country or organization). Most sequencing decisions in the development community are solution-based, however, and involve introducing the 'basics first' of a pre-specified new policy or practice (often identified in an isomorphic way). Such an approach does not ask whether these interventions address the problems in place, however, or if 'basics first' are even possible in the change context (or if the 'basics' are indeed always 'basic' across different contexts) (Andrews 2006).

In contrast, problem driven sequencing involves ordering engagements based on a progressive approach to tackle problems, given contextual opportunities and constraints.

The basic approach to doing this begins with recognizing that most deconstructed problems take the form of meta problems (with many dimensions and indeed many problems making up the larger problem). Solving these problems requires multiple interventions, which

allows multiple entry points for change. Each cause and sub-cause is essentially a separate—albeit connected—point of engagement, and each causal dimension offers different opportunity for change. We refer to this opportunity as the 'space for change', which other authors might call 'readiness'.[i] This change space is contingent on contextual factors commonly found to influence policy and reform success, shaping what and how much one can do in any policy or reform initiative at any time. These factors have been well discussed in the recent literature on politically smart, locally led development (Booth), and in Brian Levy's research on 'working with the grain' (Levy 2013). We simplify the observations from such work into a heuristic that reformers can use in assessing 'space for change' in any causal dimension area. This heuristic is not intended as a scientific approach to assessing readiness for change, but generates a set of important questions that reformers can ask when trying to assess where to start an engagement and what kinds of activities to pursue. The heuristic points to three key factors influencing the opportunity for change, Authority, Acceptance, and Ability (Andrews 2008; Andrews et al. 2010):

- 'Authority' refers to the support needed to effect reform or policy change or build state capability (political, legal, organizational, and personal). Some change needs more authority than other change, and it is always important to assess the extent of authority one already has—and the authority gaps that need to be closed.
- 'Acceptance' relates to the extent to which those who will be affected by reform or policy change accept the need for change and the implications of change. Different types of change require different levels of acceptance (from narrow or broad groups and at different depths) and the key is to recognize what acceptance exists and what gaps need to be closed to foster change.

- ‘Ability’ focuses on the practical side of reform or policy change, and the need for time, money, skills and the like to even start any kind of intervention. It is important to ask what abilities exist and what gaps need to be closed.

We assess these questions with different degrees of rigor, depending on the context and availability of evidence on the status of each ‘triple-A factor’. At the most basic, we will ask—for each sub-causal strand—what the authorizing environment looks like and where authority for intervention will come from, whose acceptance is needed to move ahead, and what kinds of abilities are needed to make real progress. This calls for a descriptive discussion where would-be reformers and policy-makers are forced to reflect on the contextual factors that actually shape what is possible. Various tools can be used in this discussion, with a simple example provided in Table 7.3. This is meant to structure a discussion on these factors amongst would-be reformers and policymakers and solicit estimates of the authority, acceptance and ability realities they face. This kind of discussion is often quite novel for many, and the resulting estimates are seldom if ever fully or even sufficiently informed. Indeed, they require making assumptions about the behavior of others. We believe these assumptions are part of doing complex policy and reform—where we face uncertainty and opacity and do not really know all that we need to know. The goal is to make as good an estimate as possible, in transparent a fashion as possible, so that we allow ourselves to progressively learn more about the context and turn uncertainty into clearer knowledge. As such, we strive to record these assumptions as effectively as possible (to feed into the learning discussed later in this chapter) in the last column of Table 3.

Table 3. A basic triple-A change space analysis

	Questions to help you reflect on the contextual change space	AAA estimation (low, mid, large)	Assumptions
Authority to engage	Who has the authority to engage: • Legal? Procedural? Informal? Which of the authorizer(s) might support engagement now? Which probably would not support engagement now? Overall, how much acceptance do you think you have to engage, and where are the gaps?		
Acceptance	Which agents (person/organization) has interest in this work? • For each agent, on a scale of 1-10, think about how much they are likely to support engagement? • On a scale of 1-10, think about how much influence each agent has over potential engagement? • What proportion of ‘strong acceptance’ agents do you have (with above 5 on both estimates)? • What proportion of ‘low acceptance’ agents do you have (with below 5 on both estimates)? Overall, how much acceptance do you think you have to engage, and where are the gaps?		
Ability	What is your personnel ability? • Who are the key (smallest group of) agents you need to ‘work’ on any opening engagement? • How much time would you need from these agents? What is your resource ability? • How much money would you need to engage? • What other resources do you need to engage? Overall, how much ability do you think you have to engage, and where are the gaps?		

Findings will vary when these ‘triple-A’ factors are considered in respect of each causal dimension in the deconstructed problem. When considering some sub-causes, for instance, reformers are likely to perceive that high levels of authority, acceptance and ability are already in place, which suggests a large change space or readiness for engagement. This is shown in the left Venn Diagram in Figure 2 (which allows an easy way to visualize change space estimates and which shows that it is about having all three triple-A factors in place, not just one). These large

change space areas allow engagements that can be heavily frontloaded, with bold efforts to resolve the causal issue in question. In other words, they are entry points for aggressive reform. Perhaps these are areas related to slow procurement processes in the example we are working through here (as shown in Figure 3), where significant change space is thought to exist to address the key sub-causes: Procurement processes are often half implemented; Procurement processes are often rushed; Decisions to procure goods are delayed and delayed again, every year; Budget decisions initiating purchase decisions are delayed.

Figure 2. Showing the change space graphically

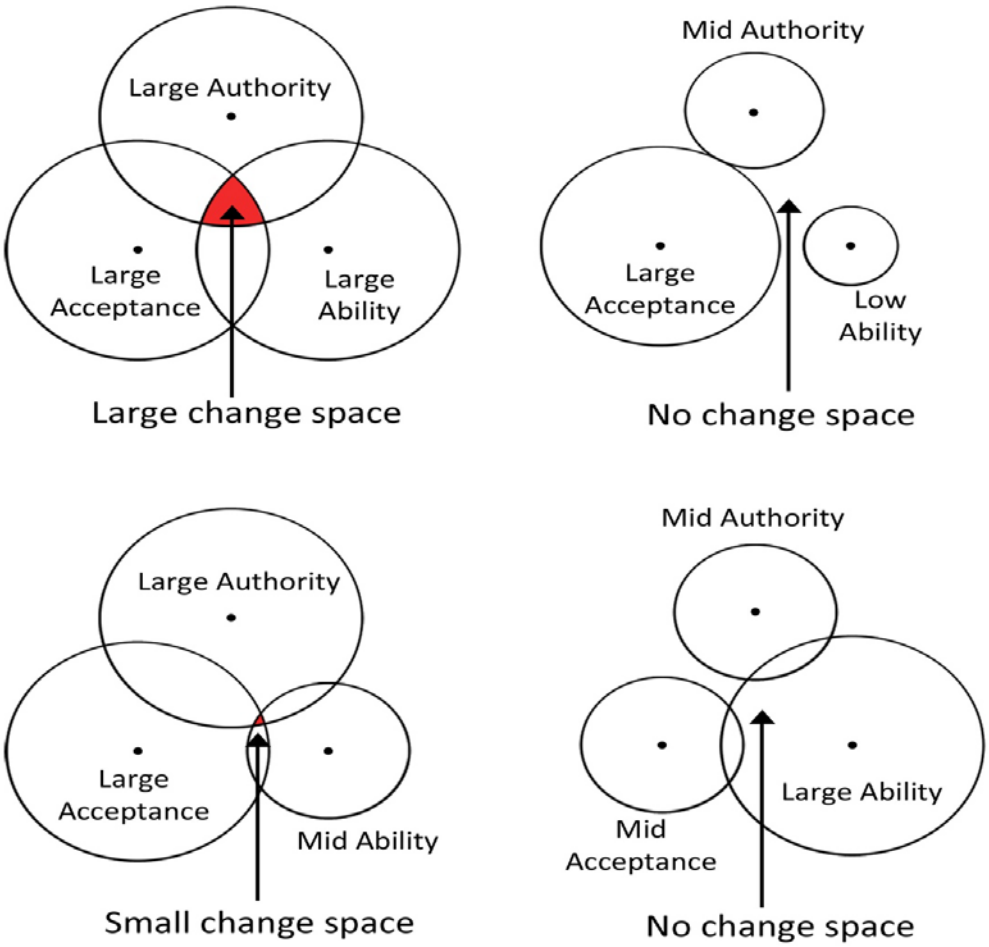
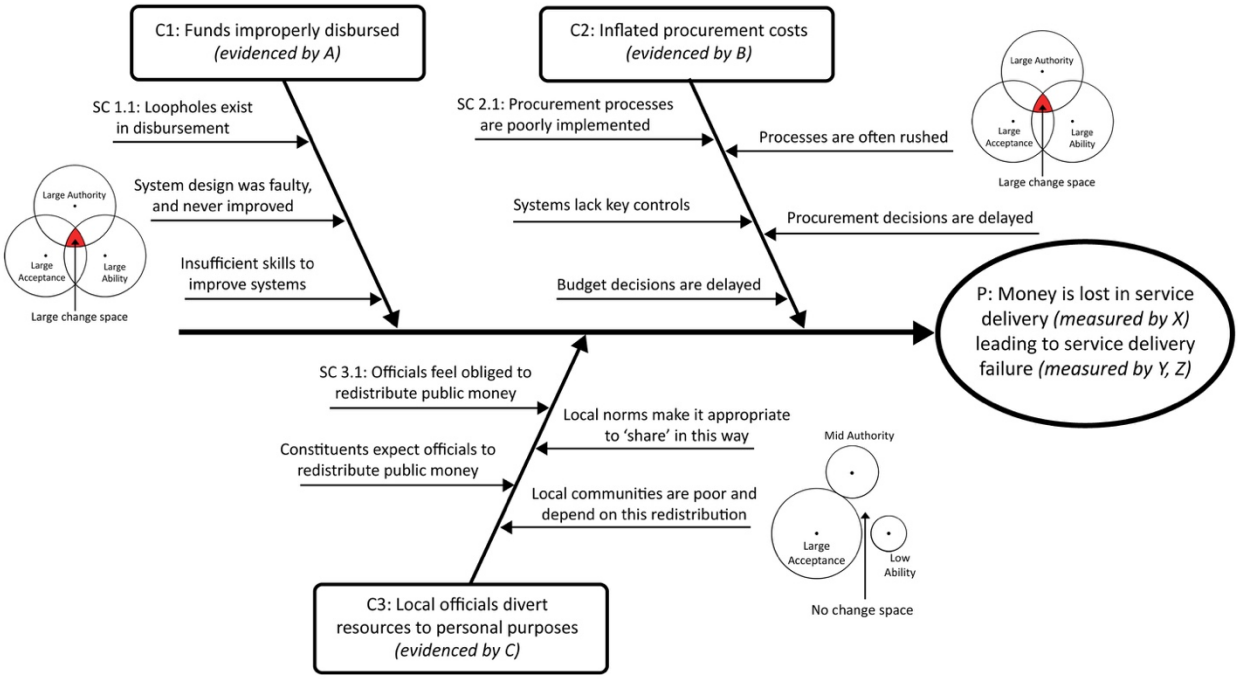


Figure 3. Examining change space in different causal/sub-causal strands of a problem



Reformers will probably find less change space in other sub-cause areas, however, where there are gaps in one or more of the triple-A factors. There may be questions about authority and ability to tackle the crucial sub-causes in strand 3, for instance (as shown in the right hand Venn Diagram in Figure 2 and in the applied Venn Diagram in Figure 3), where it is tougher to engage on the sub-dimensions: Officials feel obliged to redistribute money; Constituents expect officials to redistribute money; Local norms make it appropriate to 'share' in this way. This kind of observation should not lead to reformers dropping the area for reform or policy engagement. Rather, it points to the need for early activities that shore up the change space for more far-reaching second or third phase engagements. These could include initiatives to sensitize local

communities about the costs of local patronage, or establishing coalitions among appropriately located councilors and officials who might authorize some reforms. Essentially, one needs to grow the change space in such areas before filling this space with something new (whether a new policy or idea or process). Growing the change space is itself a key engagement in the reform process, involving specific activities that need to be purposively thought out and introduced.

This approach will help reformers identify the kind of activities they need to pursue in all cause and sub-cause areas of their deconstructed problem. Many of the areas will warrant activities that grow the change space, whereas others will allow more aggressive reform or policy adjustment because the change space is already perceived as sufficient (as in the procurement area, shown in Figure 3). Reformers should look for 'quick wins' in this latter set of engagements, which will be crucial to building the authorization for reform (discussed in more detail in chapter 9) and will likely help to grow the change space in other areas.

We learned about this kind of sequencing when looking at cases like Sweden's budget reforms in the 1990s. While the reformers in this case were not using the exact tools or approaches we recommend (they did not examine the 'triple-A' situation, for instance) they certainly took a similar view to sequencing. They consciously front-loaded their early reforms in areas where they had political acceptance and authorization, for instance, and where they were building on ideas and abilities from past reform initiatives. They began with substantive efforts to re-ignite 1980s initiatives to clarify intergovernmental spending rules, for instance, and introduce a new budget calendar and mechanisms to cut spending (where the calendar and austerity measures had been piloted before). These provided quick wins, and built momentum for the broader reforms. Other areas only saw visible change five to ten years after the initiation however, when new laws shifted budgetary responsibilities from the Parliament to the Ministry

of Finance and introduced fiscal rules and related innovations. The change space was not large enough to accommodate these reforms in the early 1990s—because political acceptance was still only emerging, the reformers needed to bolster their authority to act, and ideas and other abilities had to be proposed, discussed and tried out. Early steps to build acceptance, authority and ability yielded more change space in the mid and late 1990s, and this was when more far-reaching change occurred. While interventions were gradual, the entire reform process was always problem driven and involved constant progression—not periodic innovation.

A similar sequencing approach also guided efforts to build state capability in the other cases were have been discussing—Nostria and Mantia:

- The team working on building judicial capability recognized that some of the causal areas in their fishbone diagram were not accessible for immediate change. They could not, for instance, introduce ideas to improve data sharing across the sector. This required them first building political acceptance for the idea. They could also not immediately work to address data gaps, given a lack of abilities to collect certain kinds of data in the field. They could, however, start building these abilities to expand their change space for future reform. They could also do more immediate visible work identifying what data existed and using that data—even when unshared—to construct a preliminary evidence-based picture of the sector. This first step was intended to build change space in other areas and help set the reform on a path towards solving the bigger problems.
- The Mantian officials went to work immediately on its 5 bone fishbone, identifying the change space in all of the 42 sub-causal areas. It did this by listing the key agents needing to act in each area, noting whether these agents enjoyed authority to act and

would likely accept the challenge, and determining whether policy vehicles already existed to enable action. In a number of areas, this search showed the team that some of the 42 challenges had already been addressed—through past policies or projects—and provided opportunities for 'quick wins'. In other areas policy vehicles existed and the team could push for quick action to allow a second stage of these quick wins. In other areas the team needed to build authority and acceptance to move ahead, which meant starting with careful communications initiatives to engage other parties and draw support to reform. Overall, this exercise helped the team identify hat it was doing in all 42 areas, stage some of these areas for immediate action (and, hopefully, success) and prepare other areas for more aggressive future engagement. The team built a spreadsheet to note their assumptions in each area and to indicate the 'next steps' they proposed for each (which we will discuss in the next chapter).

Problem driven sequencing like this is both strategic and realistic, focused on staging interventions to *progressively* solve the problem, given contextual realities (rather than assuming these away or ignoring them). The focus is, overall, on getting the problem solved—and this should be locked in as an aspirational goal as early as possible, with specified metrics that show what 'problem solved' actually looks like. Every entry point activity is intended to lead to this goal, with some early steps growing the change space needed for future steps and some aggressively filling the already-extant change space with new policy or reform initiatives. These aggressive early steps should yield the 'quick wins' that show the gains of change and point to the promise of more far-reaching change in future. This helps to satisfy the twin need for reform plans that are grounded and practical (addressing 'what's next' and 'what's possible') and visionary (tackling the big picture issues that authorizers often focus on).

Before moving on, take some time thinking about the change space in which you are acting with regards to challenge identified in prior exercises in this chapter. As with past exercises, use Table 4 to work on your own and then with a group or team to reflect on, estimate and note assumptions about the authority, acceptance and ability conditions in each sub-casual dimension of your problem. Then modify your fishbone diagram (as in Figure 7.3) to show the kind of change space you have in each area—and noting the kind of engagement implied by such (aggressive engagement with new solutions in existing space, or more strategic engagements to build space, for instance). Use Box 4 for this.

Table 4. A change space analysis for each sub-cause on your Ishikawa diagram

	Describing your context (use questions from Table 6.5)	AAA estimation (low, mid, large)	Assumptions
Authority to engage			
Acceptance			
Ability			

Box 4. Change space in our group Ishikawa diagram: where should we start, with what kind of engagement in each area?

Where does this leave you?

Adopting a problem driven approach to building state capability is quite different to the normal approach of pursuing a solution from the get-go. It is vital when one does not know what the 'solution' is, however, and where there are no easy or direct routes to building the state capability needed for implementation. We believe that these complex situations demand a different approach, where one identifies problems and finds solutions to the problems and then institutionalizes those solutions. In a sense, this is like finding success before one institutionalizes such (which is the opposite of many efforts to build state capability, which focus on introducing success through a new institutional solution).

We expect that anyone actually pursuing the problem driven approach in this chapter will already find themselves looking at their state capability challenges differently. In many of our engagements with development professionals, we find colleagues enter with challenges that really reflect a missing solution: 'we don't have a state of the art budget process' or 'we don't have modern teacher monitoring mechanisms' or 'we don't have a functional anti-corruption bureau'). Given this view, they tend to enter with some knowledge of the 'right solution' to their challenge: 'we can build state capability by modernizing the budget process/teacher monitoring mechanisms/an anti-corruption bureau.

These colleagues leave the problem analysis phase of this work with a completely different perspective on their challenge. They have constructed the challenge to draw attention to the need for change and for real capacity building, and deconstructed the challenge to make it more manageable, and considered the contextual opportunities and constraints in determining where to start and how to sequence engagements. Typically, this kind of problem analysis empowers participants—especially working in their own countries—to feel as if they can

actually contribute to solving the problem. This empowerment is itself a product of the PDIA state capability building process, in that capability centers on confidence to do—and desire to do well. Participants empowered in this manner are also impatient about what's next, however, and ask where the solutions are and how quickly they can start implementing such. Hopefully this chapter leaves you in a similar place, ready to move onto thinking about iterative processes of finding and fitting solutions that actually work (which we will discuss in a forthcoming working paper).

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