



Making Problem-Driven Governance Possible: The Foundations of Problem-Driven Capability

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Abstract

The state capability literature emphasizes the importance of problem-driven governance. Mayne et al. (2020) identify three capabilities that appear central to such governance: reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities. However, important questions remain regarding the foundations that make these higher-order capabilities possible. This paper explores these foundations—or building blocks—by revisiting an intervention undertaken within Mozambique's public financial management reforms. Using process tracing and interpretive coding of the intervention's case narrative, the analysis identifies and examines how problem-driven behaviors emerged. Such analysis leads to the identification of seven foundations that appear to underpin problem-driven capability, organized in three domains: 1. contextually actionable knowledge, comprising know-how and know-what; 2. the mobilization and empowerment of agents, comprising individual motivation and authorization to change; and 3. the empowered ability to navigate contextual systems, comprising institutional navigation, resource re-mobilization, and strategic time management. The paper argues that these foundations function in ways similar to conversion factors in Sen's capability approach and to the microfoundations approach in the dynamic capabilities literature. State capability—particularly the capability for problem-driven governance—should be understood as a multiplicative combination of these foundations or building blocks, from which higher-order reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities emerge.



Introduction

Governments increasingly face problems that cannot be addressed through predefined solutions, fixed organizational mandates, or linear implementation processes. Problem-driven governance has emerged as an important response to this challenge, emphasizing reflection, learning, collaboration, and adaptation as central governmental capabilities (Andrews et al., 2017). Recent work has identified several higher-order capabilities associated with such governance, including reflective-improvement capability, collaborative capability, and data-analytic capability (Mayne, de Jong and Fernandez-Monge, 2020).

Whereas these studies help identify capabilities that appear important for problem-driven governance, they tell us less about how such capabilities are exercised in practice or what underpins them. The question is not only what capabilities matter, but what their foundations—or building blocks—are. Similar questions have arisen in other literatures. Sen's capability approach distinguishes capabilities from the conversion factors that make them possible (Sen, 1999), while the dynamic capabilities literature has sought to identify the microfoundations underlying organizational capabilities (Teece, 2007).

This paper explores the foundations, or building blocks, of problem driven capabilities as identified by Mayne et al. through a reinterpretation of a case study chronicling an initiative to create an "adaptation window" in Mozambique's public financial management reforms (Andrews et al., 2018). The original intervention sought to foster reflection, adaptation, and problem-driven discussion among reform officials. Revisiting the experience allows examination of the foundations that underpinned these higher-order problem-driven capabilities in practice.

Problem-Driven Governance and Its Foundational Building Blocks

Capability has increasingly been identified as a central determinant of governmental performance (Andrews et al. 2017; Brinkerhoff and Morgan, 2010; Kattel 2022; Kattel et al. 2025; Mazucatto and Kattel, 2026; Morgan 2006). While capacity creates potential through personnel, resources, and organizational arrangements, capability concerns the empowered ability of public agents to transform this potential into performance. State capability can thus be understood as the empowered ability of state agents to transform the potential created by capacity into the achievement of public sector performance.

Early work by Morgan (2006) argued that organizations should be understood not primarily in terms of their resources or structures (capacity), but in terms of the capabilities they possess to give these resources, structures and capacities value. He identified key capabilities related to commitment, adaptation, performance, coherence, and external engagement, noting that these were key to ensuring capacities were well used. Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) similarly emphasize that capable states are those in which agents take actions that advance public purposes, rather than merely complying with rules or reproducing organizational forms. Such states make use of their systems, instead of having these 'for show'. More recent work on dynamic capabilities extends this perspective, emphasizing various important abilities as central to government effectiveness: including the ability of public organizations to sense, adapt, learn, and reconfigure themselves in changing environments (Kattel, 2022; Kattel et al., 2025).

One capability that has become increasingly prominent is the capability for problem-driven governance. This capability underpins approaches such as problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA), which emphasize problem identification, experimentation, learning, adaptation, and coalition building as central features of effective public action (Andrews et al., 2017). Mayne, de Jong and Fernandez-Monge (2020) provide perhaps the clearest specification of this capability. Through a literature synthesis that brings together research from public administration, public management, policy studies, development, and political science, they identify three capabilities that combine to facilitate problem-oriented governance:

- **Reflective-improvement capability** concerns the ability to reflect on problems, revise assumptions, and improve action through feedback.
- **Collaborative capability** concerns the development and management of relationships across organizations and sectors.
- **Data-analytic capability** concerns the collection, interpretation, and use of information to understand problems and guide action.

This work provides an important advance in identifying the higher-order capabilities associated with problem-driven government. Important questions remain, however. What does reflective capability actually involve in practice? What goes into building collaborative capability? What underpins the kinds of analytic capabilities needed to foster problem-driven work? In short, what are the foundations or building blocks that underpin these higher-order capabilities?

Similar questions have emerged in other literatures. Sen's capability approach distinguished the resources available to individuals from their ability to convert those resources into valued functioning. Subsequent scholars responded by identifying the 'conversion factors' that shape this process, emphasizing the personal, social, and environmental conditions that enable capabilities to be exercised (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999). Likewise, the dynamic capabilities literature focused on firm competitiveness moved beyond identifying high-level organizational capabilities towards understanding their underlying 'microfoundations': the lower-level routines, processes, and mechanisms that make dynamic capabilities possible (Teece, 2007).

Related approaches are evident in recent work on collaborative governance. Rather than identifying collaboration as an abstract capability, one of Mayne's co-authors, Jorrit de Jong, co-authored an article that deconstructs collaborative practice and offers a granular view on what it takes to foster multi-agency problem-solving (Waardenburg et al., 2020). Their work examined how participants navigate tensions, adapt their practices, and develop collaborative arrangements over time. While not explicitly concerned with constituent elements, this approach moved beneath high-level capabilities to examine how such are exercised and developed in practice.

This paper adopts a similar strategy. It revisits an intervention undertaken in Mozambique during 2009 that sought to create a problem-driven conversation around weaknesses in public financial management reform. The original intervention was designed to foster reflection, adaptation, and collective problem-solving among reform officials. Reinterpreting this experience provides an opportunity to examine the foundations or building blocks that appear to underpin problem-driven governance in practice.

Methodology

This paper reinterprets a case originally reported by Andrews, McNaught and Samji (2018), which employed an action research methodology to examine efforts to create an "adaptation window" within Mozambique's public financial management reforms (where the adaptation window idea refers to a window where agents are given space and ability to view their problems in a different way, drawing on Kingdon's (1993) three streams approach, as applied in Ridde (2009)). Action research like this combines intervention, observation, and reflection in the study of organizational change (Lewin, 1946; Argyris et al., 1985; Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

Rather than observing actors from a distance, researchers participate in real-world problem-solving processes, introducing ideas, facilitating reflection, and observing how participants respond. The objective is not simply to explain outcomes after the fact but to understand how change processes emerge and develop in practice.

The approach resembles Waardenburg et al's (2020) study on collaborative governance. As already referenced, this research used a quasi-experimental action research design involving workshops, facilitated interaction, and structured reflection among practitioners over time. Researchers introduced concepts, analytical tools, and alternative ways of understanding problems and then observed how these interventions influenced collaboration, learning, and problem-solving behaviors and results. Such studies do not seek to test predetermined hypotheses but rather to understand how capabilities emerge through practice.

The Mozambican engagement followed a similar logic. By 2009, Mozambique had undertaken more than a decade of public financial management reforms, introducing new laws, systems, procedures, organizational arrangements, and a government-wide financial management information system. The government was simultaneously developing a new Public Finance Vision to guide future reforms. Members of the World Bank team supporting these reforms were concerned that important implementation gaps and performance weaknesses remained but were largely absent from official reform discussions. Rather than producing an external technical assessment, the World Bank invited one of the authors of this paper to facilitate a process through which government officials could identify and reflect upon these weaknesses themselves.

The intervention comprised two workshops held during 2009. The first involved senior Ministry of Finance officials responsible for reform leadership, strategic direction, and major policy decisions. The purpose was to encourage reflection among those responsible for the reform agenda and to examine whether existing reform approaches were adequately addressing observed weaknesses and implementation problems. The second workshop involved a broader group of participants, including a much larger number of junior and mid-level officials directly involved in implementing reforms. These participants occupied positions closer to everyday administrative practice and were expected to observe bottlenecks, workarounds, and operational constraints that were less visible to senior leadership. Senior officials also

participated, creating opportunities for interaction between those responsible for policy design and those responsible for implementation.

The workshops combined system diagnosis, structured reflection, and facilitated discussion. Participants were presented with diagnostic evidence regarding the performance of the public financial management system and engaged in exercises designed to identify strengths, weaknesses, implementation gaps, and areas requiring change. Diagnostic work considered both individual reform initiatives and the broader functioning of the public financial management system. Participants completed worksheets, undertook group exercises, engaged in facilitated discussions, participated in polling exercises, and presented findings to other participants. The workshops encouraged participants to identify problems, explore their causes, discuss alternative interpretations of reform performance, propose possible adaptations, and assess the political and organizational feasibility of these responses.

The researcher (this paper's lead author) acted as a participant observer throughout this process. The role extended beyond observation to include presenting evidence, introducing analytical frameworks, posing diagnostic questions, facilitating discussion, challenging assumptions, and providing strategic nudges intended to reorient how participants understood reform performance and reform progress. In this sense, the intervention can be understood as quasi-experimental action research. Participants were exposed to alternative ways of interpreting reform experience, allowing observation of how these ideas influenced discussion, diagnosis, and proposed action.

A case narrative of this initiative was published as a working paper in 2018 (Andrews, McNaught and Samji, 2018). Evidence for this narrative drew upon workshop outputs, participant worksheets, diagnostic materials, facilitator notes, participant presentations, and published workshop reports. The narrative also examined developments following the workshops, including subsequent reform initiatives and reflections regarding the influence of the adaptation window on later reform discussions and activities.

The current study uses this case narrative as the primary source for analysis. The objective was to understand what the problem-driven process looked like in practice and to identify the building blocks that appeared to underpin it. As such, the case narrative was coded to identify the design elements of the intervention and the ways in which these elements appeared to influence participant behavior, discussion, reflection, and proposed action. This was done using

a process-tracing approach (George and Bennett, 2005; Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Process tracing seeks to identify the sequence of events, interactions, and mechanisms through which outcomes emerge. Rather than treating the intervention as a single event, the analysis examined how the adaptation window unfolded over time and how different elements of the intervention influenced participant behavior, understanding, and proposed action:

- The narrative was first broken into a series of periods. Periods refer to relatively distinct phases within the intervention characterized by a common purpose, a dominant question, or a stable set of participants and interactions. Boundaries between periods were identified where the focus of discussion changed, new actors entered the process, or participants began addressing different questions. Examples include the movement from recognizing the existence of implementation problems to comparing experiences across actors to explaining these differences to considering possible adaptations and finally to examining subsequent changes.
- Within each period, the analysis identified moments. These refer to specific events, interactions, exercises, discussions, or decisions that appeared to alter participant understandings, relationships, or proposed actions. Examples include the presentation of diagnostic evidence to draw attention to implementation problems, the comparison of reform assessments between groups, the discussion of implementation constraints, and the identification of new reform priorities. Moments therefore represent the smaller units of analysis through which change occurred.
- Each moment was subsequently coded to identify the strategic functions it appeared to perform in promoting empowered abilities of state agents to engage problems differently (a broad definition of problem driven capability). The coding asked not simply what activity had occurred, but what that activity did. For example, a diagnostic exercise was not coded merely as the presentation of data. Rather, the analysis recognized that the exercise generated new understandings of problems, introduced new ways of approaching problems, authorized new conversations, motivated participants to engage, facilitated interaction across organizational boundaries, encouraged the mobilization of existing resources, or created opportunities for different forms of action.

Coding was undertaken by the lead author, given the fit of a sole coder approach to the study. Papers like Braun and Clarke (2019) note that sole coders bring valuable experiential knowledge

to the work that can foster creative, thoughtful, and contextually rich interpretations of qualitative data, which are key to thematics analyses—their focus—but are also relevant in inductive process tracing work—this paper’s method. The argument is that a coder’s direct involvement in the original intervention provides richer contextual understanding, deeper familiarity with the sequence of events, and greater capacity to interpret subtle shifts in meaning and behavior. Such thick understanding is frequently regarded as an important strength of interpretive and action research traditions (Geertz, 1973; Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

At the same time, sole-coder approaches create potential concerns regarding reliability and bias. To address these concerns, the coding approach drew on best practices for sole coder work (Bowen, 2009; Joffe and Yardley 2004; Kawamoto, Koizumi, and Yoshikane, 2023; Neuendorf, 2010). The coding process was highly structured, for instance (around periods and moments), an audit trail was maintained, especially of iterative adjustments (given that the coding occurred over time in an iterative manner), and the final coding list was subjected to an intra-coder reliability test—where the narrative was coded again after the codes had been finalized, with a time gap separating the initial final coding exercise and the check. Agreement between the two coding rounds exceeded 90 percent, indicating a high degree of intercoder reliability. While this does not eliminate concerns regarding interpretation, it suggests that the patterns identified in the analysis were consistently recognized across independent coding exercises undertaken at different points in time.

Several other methodological concerns accompany this form of engaged research. Researcher participation creates risks of confirmation bias, selective interpretation, and retrospective sensemaking (Argyris et al., 1985; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Established approaches within action research employ several strategies to address these concerns. First, the original intervention generated extensive contemporaneous documentation, including worksheets, workshop outputs, diagnostic materials, presentations, and written reflections. Such thick documentation reduces reliance on retrospective recollection and provides a detailed record of discussions and reactions as they occurred (Geertz, 1973). Second, the intervention involved multiple participants occupying different positions within the reform system, providing a variety of perspectives on the events being studied. Third, the underlying narrative has existed in the public domain for several years, allowing reflection, critique, and response by participants and

observers. These forms of transparency and documentation are widely recognized as important mechanisms for strengthening the credibility of action research and interpretive inquiry (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Waardenburg et al., 2020).

It should also be noted that the purpose of the present study is interpretive rather than evaluative. The study does not seek to determine whether the intervention succeeded or failed, nor does it attempt to establish whether adaptation windows generally work. Rather, it seeks to move beneath the experience of this single intervention to better understand the building blocks or foundations that appeared to underpin problem-driven action in this case. There is considerable value in such interpretive work, especially when the objective is to understand processes that are difficult to observe from a distance. The findings do, however, emerge from a single case and a single coder, and readers must therefore judge the extent to which these interpretations may be relevant in other settings.

Findings

The process-tracing exercise identified five periods in the adaptation window intervention. These periods represent distinct phases in the emergence of problem-driven discussion, reflection, and adaptation. The findings are presented chronologically, through these periods, describing how underlying elements of problem-driven governance were identified in and across each period.

Period 1: Opening the Adaptation Window

The first period concerns the opening of the adaptation window itself. By 2009 Mozambique had completed more than a decade of public financial management reform. New laws had been introduced, financial management procedures had been modernized, and the e-SISTAFE electronic financial management system had been implemented across much of government. International assessments of these reforms were generally positive, and strong performance on international indicators contributed to a growing perception among reform leaders that the reform agenda had been largely successful.

At the same time, members of the World Bank team supporting these reforms became concerned that important weaknesses remained hidden beneath these achievements. They observed that reform discussions increasingly focused on the next generation of reforms rather than the functioning of reforms already introduced. Problems associated with implementation,

local use, compliance, and functionality appeared to receive relatively limited attention. The case narrative describes these concerns in terms of 'weak links' within the public financial management system. The issue was not that reforms had failed. Rather, there was concern that the reform conversation itself had become disconnected from the actual operation of the system.

The first workshop therefore brought together senior Ministry of Finance officials responsible for the reform agenda. Participants included reform leaders, senior decision makers, officials responsible for strategy, and those involved in developing the new Public Finance Vision. These individuals possessed considerable authority within the reform system. They could influence priorities, allocate resources, and redefine reform directions. Importantly, many had themselves designed, managed, or championed the reforms under discussion.

The intervention did not begin with recommendations, external solutions, or reform proposals. Instead, facilitators presented a diagnostic assessment intended to provoke reflection. The diagnostic examined weak links within the system, highlighted implementation gaps, explored differences between central and local experiences, and questioned whether existing reforms were functioning as intended. The findings were presented primarily as questions. Participants were asked whether these represented important problems, whether the Public Finance Vision addressed them adequately, whether implementation actors had been sufficiently involved, and whether weak links in the system had received sufficient attention.

This distinction proved important. Participants were not asked what solutions should be adopted. They were asked what problems existed. The intervention therefore attempted to redirect the reform conversation away from future reforms and toward present performance. Rather than asking participants how to improve the next generation of reforms, it asked whether the current generation was functioning as intended.

The case narrative reports two broad reactions to these questions. One group accepted the concerns raised and argued that the issues deserved broader discussion. Another group defended existing reforms and challenged both the evidence and the interpretation being presented. Importantly, the narrative treats both responses as evidence of progress. Disagreement itself suggested that the adaptation window had begun to open. Participants were no longer discussing reform products, systems, and future plans. Instead, they were discussing current problems. The principal outcome of the workshop was agreement that these

issues warranted wider discussion involving a broader group of participants. This decision directly led to the second workshop.

At the level of higher-order capabilities, this period appears to demonstrate the importance of Mayne et al's (2020) reflective capability and data-analytic capability, and the beginnings of collaborative capability. The coding process, however, sought to move beneath these high-level capabilities and identify the lower-level foundations—or building blocks—that made them possible. Seven were identified:

- **Contextually actionable 'know-how':** The workshop introduced new ways to approach reforms. Rather than beginning with solutions, recommendations, or externally supplied answers (the usual approach), participants were encouraged to ask questions, investigate problems, and reflect collectively and curiously on evidence and experience. The workshop therefore introduced a different way of engaging with reform itself. Participants acquired new, contextually actionable, understandings of 'how' problems could be explored, discussed, and acted upon.
- **Contextually actionable 'know-what':** The workshop offered new ways to look at the problem. The diagnostic generated new understandings of reform weaknesses, implementation gaps, and differences between formal reforms and their actual operation. Participants were exposed to information that challenged prevailing narratives and encouraged them to reconsider 'what' the principal problems facing the system were. The intervention therefore created new forms of contextually actionable knowledge that facilitated cognitive shifts regarding the nature of the problems participants faced.
- **Agent motivation to pursue adaptation:** The fresh identification of problems created the possibility that existing reforms might work better than they currently did. Participants increasingly recognized that weaknesses could potentially be addressed and that improvement was possible. The intervention therefore produced immediate—but soft—results that strengthened participants' willingness to engage with difficult problems and pursue change. This was both exogenous (some agents were motivated to attend and discuss) and endogenous (some agents were motivated by the discussion).
- **Authorization for change:** The workshop created legitimate space for questioning existing reforms—that had not previously been easy to develop (partly because

participants were themselves key actors in past reforms and discussions tended to center on solutions and next steps, with no-one wanting to draw attention to past activities or problems). Senior officials were explicitly encouraged to challenge assumptions, reconsider reform priorities, and discuss weaknesses in reforms that many had themselves designed or led. The intervention therefore empowered participants to engage in problem discussion and critical reflection, focused on improvement.

- **Empowered ability to navigate existing institutions in new ways:** The workshop convened actors from different parts of the Ministry of Finance and encouraged participants to consider problems at the level of the system rather than from the perspective of individual organizational units. Participants began to understand problems as relationships and interactions across the public financial management system rather than as isolated failures within certain departments. They stopped blaming each other and developed a more unified view of the situation. No one changed their institutions or organizational structures, but the process allowed them to look across silos and gaps and constraints.
- **Empowered ability to mobilize existing resources differently:** The workshop started a discussion about how existing finances, information, personnel, and other resources were being deployed. The officials were aware that new reforms would not bring the same financial or consulting resources they had enjoyed in the past. The emerging question was therefore not how to acquire additional resources but how existing resources might be used and allocated differently to address the identified gaps and problems. This element is vital for problem driven work.
- **New ways of viewing and organizing time and timing:** Finally, the workshop created protected time for reflection and signaled that discussing implementation problems constituted legitimate work for senior officials. Participants also began to recognize that the sequencing and timing of reform efforts may have contributed to some of the weaknesses being observed and that future adaptation would require prioritization and careful attention to timing.

The coding suggested that the visible activities of holding a senior workshop around a formal diagnosis performed deeper functions in the problem driven process. It introduced new ways of thinking about problems, generated new understandings of reform performance, motivated and

authorized participants to engage with difficult issues, and started to encourage different ways of navigating institutions, resources, and time. These behavioral impacts form the basis of the constitutive elements identified in the analysis and illustrate how higher-order problem-driven capabilities like Mayne et al's (2020) reflective capability, data-analytic capability, and collaborative capability may emerge from combinations of the building blocks.

Importantly, not all these elements appeared with equal influence during this first period. Contextually actionable know-how, contextually actionable know-what, and authorization for adaptation emerged particularly clearly. Motivation, institutional navigation, resource mobilization, and new approaches to time and timing appeared less frequently but were evident and fed the others. This suggests two things: 1. the seven building blocks of problem-driven governance emerge with different strengths as the adaptation window unfolds; but 2. all seven elements are always present in some form and strength.

Period 2: Broadening the Conversation

The second process tracing period begins with the decision to expand the discussion beyond senior reform leaders. The reactions to the initial diagnostic had convinced participants that a wider conversation was necessary. Whereas senior officials had become willing to discuss the possibility of implementation problems, it remained unclear whether these problems were experienced similarly throughout the public financial management system. The second workshop therefore brought together a much broader set of participants, including provincial officials, district officials, line ministry representatives, municipal actors, and officials directly involved in implementing reforms at different levels of government.

The first important intervention involved the composition of the workshop itself. Many of these actors did not normally participate in reform discussions. The reform conversation had largely occurred among central reform agencies, while implementation experiences remained relatively disconnected from policy discussions. Simply bringing these actors together therefore represented an important intervention. Participants entered the discussion with different responsibilities, experiences, and understandings of the reform process. For a limited period, the workshop temporarily loosened many of the organizational and administrative boundaries that normally separated these actors.

Participants were asked to assess various aspects of the public financial management system in a rapid paper-based approach. The resulting scores revealed substantial differences between

groups. Central ministry officials generally evaluated reforms positively, while provincial and local officials provided considerably lower assessments. The case narrative describes these differences as resembling central officials awarding their reforms an 'A' while implementation actors awarded them a 'C+'. The significance of these findings was not simply that disagreement existed. Rather, participants discovered that they were discussing different experiences of the same system.

At the level of Mayne et al. (2020), this period again appears to demonstrate reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities. Different actors shared information, reflected on contrasting experiences, and generated new evidence regarding reform performance. The coding process, however, suggested that many of the same underlying foundations or building blocks identified in the previous period continue to emerge, although with somewhat different emphases:

- **Contextually actionable know-how:** The workshop provided participants with new ways of discussing disagreement and difference. Anonymous scoring exercises, facilitated discussion, and comparative assessments offered practical methods through which conflicting experiences could be expressed without assigning blame. Participants learned not only 'how' to identify problems but also 'how' to engage with differing interpretations of those problems.
- **Contextually actionable know-what:** The introduction of implementation actors significantly expanded participants' understanding of reform performance. Provincial and district officials described difficulties associated with infrastructure, connectivity, training, organizational incentives, and implementation conditions. Line ministries discussed tensions between financial management requirements and service delivery responsibilities. The system's understanding of 'what' the problem involved therefore became richer, more complex, and more contextualized. Participants increasingly understood that apparently successful reforms could produce very different experiences across different parts of the system.
- **Motivation to change** also became more visible during this period. Participants increasingly recognized that implementation problems were shared rather than individual. Local actors discovered that others experienced similar difficulties, while senior officials became aware that implementation problems reflected broader patterns

rather than isolated failures. This strengthened willingness to engage with the issues being discussed.

- **Authorization to change** also grew. While the first workshop primarily authorized senior officials to question reform assumptions, the second workshop extended this authorization to implementation actors who often had little or no opportunity to participate in reform discussions. These participants were given legitimate space to describe operational realities and challenge official narratives regarding reform performance.
- **Empowered ability to navigate existing institutions in new ways** was the most important shift during this period. Organizational boundaries that normally separated central and local actors were temporarily weakened. Participants increasingly understood problems as relationships between organizations, levels of government, and administrative actors rather than as failures within individual units. What initially appears as collaboration may therefore reflect a deeper capacity to work across institutional boundaries. It is vital to again note that these boundaries did not change (and there was no official organizational or institutional adjustment). Instead, the behavioral impact here related to empowerment of existing agents to better navigate existing institutions.
- The remaining building blocks continue to emerge but remain somewhat less visible. Discussions increasingly emphasized how existing systems, personnel, and relationships might be used differently, suggesting the beginnings of a broadened 'empowered ability to mobilize existing resources differently'. Similarly, the workshop itself continued to provide protected time for discussion and reflection and demonstrated the value of creating time for interaction between actors who rarely engaged with one another (evidence of a **'time and timing'** element).

The dominant contribution of this period lay less in the generation of new information than in the recognition that different actors experienced the same system differently. The intervention expanded both the knowledge base and the range of actors participating in the conversation. The coding work thus suggested that the same constitutive elements identified in the previous period continue to operate, but with institutional navigation, expanded know-what, and broader authorization becoming particularly important. What could be construed simply as an example of high-level 'collaboration capability' therefore appears to rest upon deeper elements involving

the creation and sharing of new forms of knowledge, expanded participation, and new ways of engaging with organizational difference.

Period 3: Explaining the Differences

The third process tracing period begins as participants move beyond the recognition that different actors experienced the public financial management system differently and begin asking why these differences exist. The previous period had revealed substantial variation in how central officials, provincial actors, district officials, and line ministries assessed the reform process. The task now became understanding the sources of these differences.

The discussions that followed demonstrated that implementation problems could not be explained simply by weak compliance or insufficient commitment. Participants described a range of contextual factors that shaped how reforms operated in practice. District officials discussed unreliable electricity supplies and connectivity problems that limited their ability to use the e-SISTAFE electronic financial management system consistently. Others described difficulties associated with staff turnover, training, and the uneven distribution of technical expertise. Line ministry representatives emphasized that their organizations remained primarily focused on service delivery objectives and often viewed financial management requirements differently from central reform agencies.

These discussions revealed that actors were not simply performing reforms differently. They were operating within different environments, facing different constraints, and pursuing somewhat different objectives. Problems that had initially appeared to reflect implementation failure increasingly came to be understood as products of context. The issue was no longer whether reforms had succeeded or failed but why apparently successful reforms produced such different experiences across the system.

This shift proved important because the conversation moved beyond diagnosis toward explanation. During the earlier periods participants had developed new understandings of weaknesses and differences. During this period, they began constructing explanations for those differences. The workshop increasingly became a setting for collective inquiry.

At the level of Mayne et al. (2020), this period appears particularly associated with reflective capability and collaborative capability. Participants collectively examined their experiences, reflected upon differences, and developed shared understandings of implementation problems.

The workshop increasingly functioned as a space for collective learning. The coding process again suggests that the same building blocks identified in the earlier periods continued to underpin these capabilities, however, again with somewhat different emphases:

- **Contextually actionable know-how** was again evident. During the earlier periods participants learned 'how' to identify and discuss problems. During this period, they learned 'how' to investigate and explain them. The discussions demonstrated that understanding implementation required inquiry, comparison, questioning, and reflection rather than the application of predetermined solutions. Participants learned to ask why different actors experienced reforms differently and to explore the mechanisms that produced these differences. The intervention therefore contributed to practical knowledge regarding 'how' to engage with uncertainty, complexity, and variation.
- **Contextually actionable know-what** was also evident given that participants developed a much richer understanding of 'what' the system itself involved. Weak links in the public financial management system were no longer simply observed but explained. The causes of implementation gaps became clearer, and participants developed more detailed understandings of the circumstances that shaped performance. Problems became increasingly contextualized. The workshop therefore generated not merely additional information but deeper knowledge regarding 'what' it took for the public financial management system to function in practice.
- **Motivation to change** became more visible during this period. As participants increasingly gained a collective understanding of the causes of implementation problems, their problems appeared less as evidence of failure and more as opportunities for improvement. The discussion shifted from blame toward explanation. Participants increasingly recognized that many of the problems identified could potentially be addressed. This appears to have strengthened willingness to continue the discussion and pursue adaptation.
- **Authorization to change** similarly continued to expand. Participants became increasingly willing to discuss weaknesses, constraints, and failures that may previously have remained hidden. This was because the workshop's momentum provided continued legitimacy for questioning reform assumptions and discussing operational realities.

Officials responsible for implementation increasingly appeared willing to share concerns that might otherwise have remained unspoken.

- **Empowered ability to navigate existing institutions in new ways** was the most important shift during this period. Many of the explanations for reform failure offered by participants involved relationships between organizations, levels of government, and groups of actors. Central officials began to understand the circumstances facing local implementers, while local actors gained insight into the priorities and constraints confronting reform leaders. Problems increasingly came to be understood as products of interactions between institutions rather than failures located within specific organizations. Participants therefore began to navigate institutional boundaries cognitively, seeing the system as a network of relationships rather than a collection of separate organizations.
- **Empowered ability to mobilize existing resources differently** also mattered. Many implementation difficulties reflected the deployment of existing resources rather than their absence. Participants discussed staffing, training, information systems, organizational arrangements, and technical capabilities that already existed but were not functioning effectively. The conversation increasingly shifted from acquiring additional resources toward utilizing existing resources differently.
- The importance of **time and timing** was also increasingly emphasized. Participants recognized that implementation problems had often developed gradually and reflected sequencing decisions made earlier in the reform process. Some reforms had advanced more quickly than supporting capacities, while others had not been given sufficient time to mature. Adaptation therefore appeared to require prioritization, sequencing, and recognition that not all problems could be addressed simultaneously. Participants increasingly developed new ways of viewing time and timing in the reform process.

The principal contribution of this period was therefore in helping develop a common basis to explain problems. Participants moved from identifying problems to understanding why those problems existed. In doing so, they developed richer knowledge of the system, stronger capacities for collective inquiry, and a more contextual understanding of reform performance. The coding suggests that the same building blocks identified in the earlier periods continued to operate, but with particularly strong emphasis on know-how, know-what, institutional

navigation, and motivation. Problem-driven governance increasingly appeared to depend not simply upon recognizing problems but upon developing the capability to investigate, explain, and understand them collectively.

Period 4: Reframing Reform

The fourth process tracing period begins as participants moved from explaining implementation problems to considering the implications of these problems for future reforms. Earlier discussions had demonstrated that different actors experienced the public financial management system differently and that many implementation problems reflected contextual conditions, organizational relationships, and gaps between reform design and reform use. The question increasingly became what these observations meant for the future direction of reform.

One of the most important developments during this period was the growing recognition that many existing reform priorities did not directly address the problems participants had identified. The discussions increasingly questioned whether future reforms should focus primarily on introducing additional systems, laws, and procedures or whether greater attention should instead be given to improving the functioning of existing arrangements. Participants began discussing issues like program budgeting, service delivery, implementation support, internal control, communication between central and decentralized actors, and the practical operation of existing systems. Problems were increasingly framed not as technical deficiencies requiring new solutions but as weaknesses in the operation of existing arrangements.

A first important shift involved the relationship between problems and solutions. Participants increasingly recognized that many reform discussions had historically begun with solutions. New systems, procedures, organizational arrangements, and externally supported initiatives had often been introduced before there was clear agreement regarding the problems they were intended to address. The workshop discussions encouraged participants to reverse this sequence. The question increasingly became not what reforms should be introduced but what observed problems required attention and what adaptations might address them.

The emerging Public Finance Vision became an important object of discussion. Participants questioned whether it adequately reflected the implementation challenges, weak links, and local realities that had emerged during the workshops. This did not imply rejection of earlier reforms. Rather, it suggested that future reforms might require different priorities, different sequences, and different methods. The discussion moved from reform design toward reform adaptation.

A second important development concerned the growing emphasis on existing systems and existing capacities. Participants increasingly discussed what could be done using current organizations, information systems, staff, and relationships. Attention shifted toward communication, support, coordination, implementation, and learning. Adaptation therefore became associated less with acquiring additional resources and more with improving the use of existing resources.

At the level of Mayne et al. (2020), this period again demonstrates reflective and collaborative capabilities. Participants collectively reconsidered assumptions, reflected on reform experience, and discussed alternative approaches to future reform efforts. The coding process, however, suggests that the emphasis among the foundations building blocks shifts noticeably during this period:

- **Contextually actionable know-how** became particularly important. Earlier periods focused on understanding problems and explaining differences. During this period participants increasingly developed practical understandings of 'how' adaptation might proceed. The discussions focused less on what the problems were and more on 'how' future action might be organized. Participants increasingly learned 'how' to prioritize, sequence, and approach adaptation itself.
- **Contextually actionable know-what** remained important but changed in character. The problem had become substantially clearer during earlier periods. The emphasis now shifted toward understanding 'what' problems mattered most and 'what' appeared most amenable to action. Knowledge increasingly became practical and strategic rather than purely diagnostic.
- **Individual motivation to pursue change** also appeared to strengthen. As participants moved from explanation toward possible responses, problems increasingly appeared manageable. The discussion shifted from understanding constraints toward identifying opportunities for improvement. Participants could increasingly imagine actions that might improve performance.
- **Authorization for change** likewise continued to deepen. The workshop increasingly legitimized discussion not only of implementation problems but also of possible changes to existing priorities and reform trajectories. Participants became increasingly willing to question assumptions underlying the reform agenda itself.

- **Empowered ability to navigate existing institutions in new ways** was the most visible shift during this period. Many proposed adaptations involved improved relationships between organizations, better communication between central and local actors, and stronger engagement with those responsible for implementation. Problems increasingly appeared to exist between organizations rather than within them. Adaptation therefore depended upon working differently across institutional boundaries.
- **Empowered ability to mobilize existing resources differently** also became especially prominent. By this stage, participants increasingly recognized that substantial investments had already occurred. Systems existed, laws existed, organizations existed, information systems existed, and significant external support had already been provided. The challenge increasingly became how existing people, organizations, relationships, and resources might be deployed differently. Resource mobilization therefore shifted from acquisition toward reconfiguration.
- Finally, **new ways of viewing and organizing time and timing** became increasingly visible. Participants recognized that adaptation would require prioritization, sequencing, and attention to timing. Not all weak links could be addressed simultaneously, and some problems appeared more important than others. The discussion increasingly focused on where reform efforts should begin and which interventions might create momentum for subsequent change. Time therefore became understood not simply as a constraint but as a strategic resource.

The principal contribution of this period lay in the movement from explanation to adaptation. Earlier discussions had established that implementation problems existed and had explored why these problems occurred. This period focused on what these observations implied for future action. The coding suggests that the same foundations or building blocks identified in earlier periods continued to operate, but with particularly strong emphasis on know-how, institutional navigation, resource mobilization, and strategic time and timing management. Problem-driven governance increasingly appeared to depend not simply on recognizing and understanding problems but on developing the capacity to redirect existing relationships, resources, and reform efforts toward the problems that matter most.

Period 5: Adaptation and Aftermath

The final process tracing period concerned what happened after the workshops and whether the adaptation window translated into changes in reform practice. In this light, the case narrative does not present the intervention as yielding significant 'success' in any narrow way. It did not produce a new reform program, for instance, or a comprehensive set of recommendations, or a major restructuring of the public financial management system. Many of the larger reforms remained largely unchanged. The Public Finance Vision continued to develop, major systems remained in place, and many of the broader reform priorities (and problems) persisted. In this sense, the intervention could be interpreted as having produced modest impact.

Several developments nevertheless suggest that the workshops altered important aspects of the reform conversation with the clearest example concerning internal audit. During workshop discussions, participants repeatedly identified weak links between formal financial management requirements and actual practice. Questions emerged regarding whether procedures were operating as intended and whether implementation could simply be assumed because systems had been introduced in form. In response, one reform unit initiated an internal audit exercise to examine actual transactions occurring within the e-SISTAFE electronic system. This represented an important shift. The objective was no longer simply to assume compliance because systems existed but to investigate whether those systems were functioning in practice.

A second development concerned the increasing emphasis placed on implementation. Earlier reform discussions had frequently focused on the design and introduction of systems, procedures, and organizational arrangements. The workshops repeatedly highlighted the experiences of provincial, district, and sector actors. Problems involving training, communication, support, incentives, and implementation conditions became more visible. Participants increasingly recognized that successful reform depended not only on introducing systems but also on understanding how those systems functioned outside central ministries.

A third development involved relationships within the reform process itself. The intervention temporarily connected actors who rarely discussed reforms together. Central officials became more aware of local implementation conditions, while local actors gained greater visibility within reform discussions. Although these relationships were not formally institutionalized, the

workshops demonstrated the value of broader engagement and more regular communication across administrative boundaries.

At the level of Mayne et al. (2020), this period again demonstrates reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities. Reflection increasingly became institutionalized through internal audit and investigation. Collaboration became visible through changing relationships between actors and growing attention to implementation experiences. Data and evidence increasingly became tools for understanding actual practice rather than merely reporting formal compliance.

The coding process suggests that the same building blocks identified in earlier periods continue to operate, although the emphasis shifts again:

- **Contextually actionable know-how** was visible through participants' changing understanding of 'how' reform should proceed. The intervention appears to have strengthened practical understandings regarding investigation, implementation support, reflection, and adaptation. Participants increasingly understood that reform required continuing inquiry rather than simply implementation of predetermined solutions.
- **Contextually actionable know-what** likewise remained important. New forms of evidence, including internal audit and investigation of actual practice, generated additional knowledge regarding 'what' was needed to create a functional system. Participants increasingly sought to understand what it took for reforms to operate rather than merely whether they had been formally introduced.
- **Individual motivation to pursue change** also appears to persist. Participants continued to engage with implementation problems and increasingly recognized that improvements could emerge from understanding and addressing weak links. The discussion of problems became less threatening and more closely associated with opportunities for improvement.
- **Authorization for change** similarly remained visible. Participants increasingly appeared formally able (and permitted) to question existing assumptions, discuss implementation weaknesses, and investigate the functioning of existing reforms. The adaptation window had helped legitimize these forms of inquiry.
- The strongest elements during this final period, however, concerned the '**empowered ability to navigate existing institutions in new ways**', '**the empowered ability**

to mobilize existing resources differently’, and ‘new ways of viewing and ‘organizing time and timing’. Many of the changes that occurred involved relationships between actors and organizations. Participants increasingly understood implementation problems as crossing organizational boundaries and requiring communication, coordination, and engagement between different parts of the system. Institutional navigation therefore became central to subsequent adaptation. Resource mobilization also became particularly important. The intervention did not produce substantial new resources. Instead, participants increasingly focused on existing systems, existing organizations, existing information, and existing personnel. Internal audit itself represents an example of this. Rather than creating a new reform instrument, existing capacities were redeployed to investigate implementation problems. Finally, participants increasingly recognized the importance of time and timing. Adaptation appeared to require ongoing reflection, continuing investigation, and gradual adjustment. Problems could not all be addressed simultaneously, and improvements would necessarily occur unevenly. Time increasingly became understood as a strategic resource that allowed learning, prioritization, and adaptation.

The principal contribution of this period therefore lay not in the introduction of major reforms but in the persistence of changed understandings and changed conversations. Problem-driven governance does not necessarily produce immediate outputs, new organizations, or large reform programs. Its contribution may instead have centered on changing how actors understood problems, how they engaged with one another, how they used existing resources, and how they thought about the process of reform itself. The coding suggests that the same building blocks identified throughout the earlier periods continued to operate, but with particularly strong emphasis on institutional navigation, resource mobilization, and strategic time and timing management. The adaptation window therefore appears to have created conditions for continued reflection and adaptation, even though the resulting changes were necessarily partial, uneven, and constrained by the broader institutional environment.

Conclusion

This paper's introduction noted that 'capability' has increasingly emerged as a critical concept in efforts to understand why investments in state capacity often fail to produce improvements in performance. Governments frequently invest in people, resources, organizations, and institutions, increasing the potential for effective public action. Yet this potential is not always translated into results. Capability can be understood as the empowered ability of public agents to transform potential created by capacity into performance (sitting in the gap between capacity and results).

Among the many capabilities identified in the literature, problem-driven governance has received increasing attention as vital to closing implementation and performance gaps because of its emphasis on learning, reflection, collaboration, and adaptation. Mayne et al. (2020) identify three capabilities that appear particularly important for problem-driven governance: reflective capability, collaborative capability, and data-analytic capability.

The Mozambique adaptation window case provides substantial support for these arguments. Participants in the initiative on which the case narrative is based increasingly questioned existing assumptions, reflected on implementation experiences, engaged with actors from different parts of the system, and used evidence to reconsider reform priorities. Reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities were this all visible during the intervention.

The analysis presented here suggests, however, that considerable detail lies beneath these higher-order capabilities. This suggestion draws on two influential attempts to move beneath visible capabilities in other literatures. Within the capabilities approach associated with welfare economics, Sen and subsequent scholars argue that individuals require 'conversion factors' that allow resources to be transformed into valued functionings. Within the dynamic capabilities literature, Teece argues that visible organizational capabilities rest upon underlying 'microfoundations' that enable firms to sense, seize, and transform opportunities. In both traditions, visible capabilities emerge from deeper enabling conditions. The present analysis suggests that problem-driven governance may operate in a similar manner. Looking across five periods of the Mozambican intervention, the study identified a set of seven lower-level foundations or building blocks that appear to make problem-driven governance possible. These seven elements fall into three broad domains shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Building Blocks of Problem Driven Governance Capability

Building Blocks of Problem Driven Governance Capability	Constitutive domain
1. Contextually actionable know-how 2. Contextually actionable know-what	New contextually actionable knowledge facilitating cognitive shifts
3. Motivation to change 4. Authorization to change	Mobilization and empowerment of agents
5. Empowered institutional navigation 6. Empowered resource re-mobilization 7. Strategic time and timing management	Empowered navigation of the contextual system

Source and Notes: Based on author's analysis.

The first domain concerns the development of new '**contextually actionable knowledge that facilitates cognitive shifts**' across agents and groups. Findings suggest that participants required not only new understandings of the problems they faced but also new understandings of how such problems might be investigated, discussed, and addressed:

- **Contextually actionable know-how** thus refers to practical understandings regarding how actors engage with problems, uncertainty, inquiry, other actors, their context, and the challenges of adaptation. The workshops repeatedly encouraged participants to ask questions, investigate weak links, compare experiences, and collectively explore explanations rather than search immediately for solutions. Participants therefore learned not only about the problem but also how to engage with the problem.
- **Contextually actionable know-what** refers to new understandings of the problems and potential solutions themselves. Participants developed increasingly rich understandings of implementation gaps, weak links, differences between reform design and reform use, the diverse realities experienced by actors operating in different parts of the system, contextual constraints and opportunities, and ideas for improvement. Problems increasingly became contextualized and understood as products of relationships, constraints, and implementation conditions.

The second domain concerns the '**mobilization and empowerment of agents**'. Problem-driven governance requires actors who are both willing and able to engage with difficult problems:

- **Individual motivation to change** emerged as participants increasingly recognized that identified problems were understandable and potentially addressable. Weaknesses increasingly became opportunities for improvement rather than evidence of failure. Participants began to believe that existing systems and organizations could potentially function better than they currently did.
- **Authorization to change** emerged as participants were given legitimate space to question assumptions, discuss weaknesses, challenge prevailing narratives, and raise concerns that may previously have remained unspoken. The workshops created permission to engage with difficult issues and allowed participants to question reforms that many had themselves designed or implemented.

The third domain concerns the ‘***empowered navigation of the contextual system***’ within which action occurs:

- **Empowered institutional navigation** refers to the ability agents have to work across existing organizational boundaries, understand relationships between actors, and recognize that many implementation problems arise between organizations rather than within them. In the case analyzed, participants were empowered to increasingly view the public financial management system as a network of relationships rather than a collection of separate organizations and to navigate this network.
- **Empowered resource re-mobilization** involves reconsidering how existing people, organizations, information systems, relationships, and investments might be deployed differently. This is an important element because many change processes are held up by agents looking for or waiting on new resources (that often do not come). In the case at hand, discussions increasingly shifted from acquiring such new resources toward improving the use of existing resources. This empowered agents.
- **Strategic time and timing management** refers to the recognition that the problem driven work itself takes time and that change and adaptation arising from problem driven work requires prioritization, sequencing, protected space for reflection, and attention to the timing of reform interventions. Time increasingly became understood not simply as a constraint but as a strategic resource.

Importantly, these seven foundations or building blocks appear to contribute to all three of the capabilities identified by Mayne et al (2020). Rather than corresponding directly to individual capabilities, the elements combine in different ways to support reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities:

- Reflective capability depends upon contextually actionable know-how that enables actors to investigate problems, contextually actionable know-what that reveals weaknesses and implementation gaps, motivation to engage with difficult issues and focus on problems instead of solutions, authorization to look critically at problems, institutional arrangements that permit reflection across boundaries, the mobilization of existing information and relationships, and sufficient time and space for reflection.
- Collaborative capability depends upon shared understandings of problems and knowledge regarding collective engagement, participants motivated to work together and share the challenges and rewards associated with such work (instead of blaming and specializing), authorization to participate and contribute across power and responsibility domains, the ability to navigate institutional boundaries and mobilize inter-organizational relationships and resources, and time for interaction, trust-building, and joint problem solving.
- Data-analytic capability depends not simply upon the availability of information but upon the production of contextually actionable knowledge, the ability to interpret evidence collectively, motivation to engage with uncomfortable findings, authorization to question official narratives, institutional mechanisms that allow information to move across organizational boundaries, the mobilization of existing analytical resources, and sufficient time to collect, interpret, and discuss evidence.

The findings therefore suggest that the higher-order capabilities identified by Mayne et al. may best be understood as emergent properties arising from combinations of these lower-level elements. The relationship between such elements appears to be multiplicative:

$$\text{Capability} = \text{KH} \times \text{KW} \times \text{M} \times \text{A} \times \text{I} \times \text{R} \times \text{T}$$

where:

- KH = contextually actionable know-how
- KW = contextually actionable know-what
- M = motivation to change
- A = authorization to change
- I = empowered institutional navigation
- R = empowered resource re-mobilization
- T = strategic time and timing management

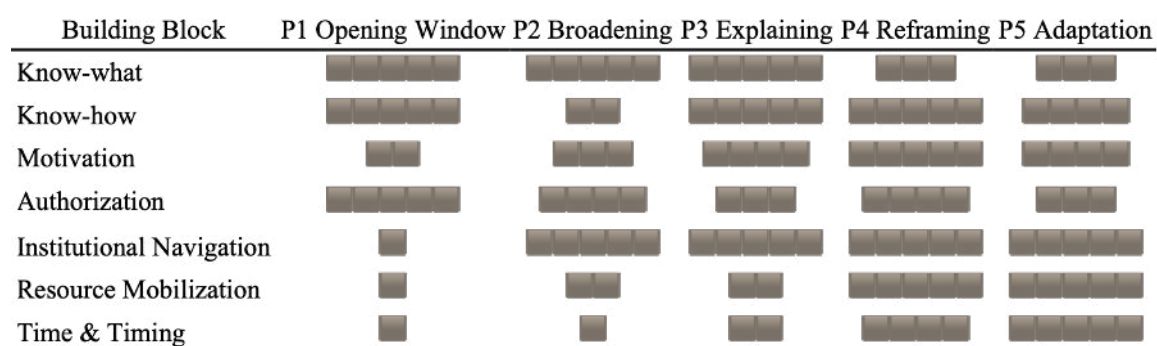
This formulation suggests the potential of a weakest link concern with capability building—where all seven building blocks are always needed to create capability and ‘the weakest link’ element determines how much capability exists. This could explain common situations where capacities do not translate into performance because only some building blocks are put in place:

- where expanded knowledge (either know-how or know-what) about change is not met with authorization to change and produces frustration instead of capability
- or where state agents are motivated to change but lack the new know-how or know-what to foster change, generating more-of-the-same activity instead of expanded adaptive capability
- or where agents are empowered to navigate their institutional context in new ways but not given the time for such, creating an appetite for collaboration that never translates into real capability for such.

Essentially, the absence of one foundational element or building block may constrain the effectiveness of the others. Figure 1 illustrates this argument by showing the relative prominence of each building block across the five periods of the adaptation process. While all seven foundations are evident throughout, their importance shifts as learning and adaptation unfolds. Early stages are dominated by the development of new know-what, know-how, and

authorization to question existing approaches. As the process progresses, institutional navigation becomes increasingly central as participants work across organizational boundaries, while resource mobilization and strategic attention to time and timing become more prominent as actors move from diagnosis to implementation and sustained adaptation. The heat map therefore suggests that adaptive capability develops through changing combinations of the same seven foundational elements. Every building block remains necessary throughout the process, but different elements become the critical 'weak link' at different stages of capability development.

Figure 1. A Heat Map Showing How the Building Blocks Manifest Across Periods



Source and Notes: Based on author's analysis. Each block indicates the degree to which the building block was evident in a period.

The seven building blocks closely resemble the conversion factors identified within Sen's capabilities approach and the microfoundations identified within the dynamic capabilities literature. In Sen's work, individuals transform resources into valued functionings only when the relevant conversion factors are present. In Teece's work, organizations develop dynamic capabilities only when underlying microfoundations enable sensing, seizing, and transformation. In both cases, visible capabilities emerge from combinations of deeper enabling conditions. This paper's findings suggest that problem-driven governance may operate in a similar manner. Reflective, collaborative, and data-analytic capabilities appear to emerge from combinations of lower-level constitutive elements that enable public agents to transform existing capacity into improved performance.

The contribution of this paper is not to replace the capabilities identified by Mayne et al. (2020), nor to evaluate adaptation windows as an intervention. Rather, it is to move beneath the high-level capabilities Maine et al. and others (including Kattel, 2022; Kattel et al., 2025 and

Mazzucato and Kattel, 2026) and identify the building blocks or foundations that appear to make problem-driven governance capability possible. Future research may usefully examine whether these building blocks appear in other settings, how the building blocks combine in practice (if they are really multiplicative, for instance), whether particular building blocks prove especially constraining, and whether they provide a useful foundation for understanding the broader challenge of building state capability and closing the gap between the potential created through investments in capacity and the performance ultimately achieved.

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