



# Building administrative capacity for development: limits and prospects

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## Introduction

There is an established cross-disciplinary intellectual tradition of studying state capacity, especially in political science and political sociology (Cingolani, 2013, 2018). The concept has recently shifted more toward the administrative dimension of state capacity, that is, administrative capacity, which is being widely used in public administration and policy studies (El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019). The practical significance of this capacity is highlighted in terms of its necessity for economic performance, industrial growth, policy implementation, and overall national development (Cingolani, 2013; El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019). In this age of globalization, administrative capacity needs to be expanded to deal with the worldwide context of intensive competition, complexity, and uncertainty (Farazmand, 2009), and to effectively address financial crises, security threats,

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natural disasters, and pandemics (Christensen, 2012). In addition, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) brings new significance for developing administrative capacity (Glemarec and Puppim de Oliveira, 2012).

Nonetheless, the very concept of capacity remains quite controversial, as there are cross-disciplinary variations in its interpretation and its research-driven applications (Hanson and Sigman, 2013). It has been emphasized by Whittle and Rafferty (2012: 24) that with the proliferation of models and methods, capacity has increasingly become a “contested term.” For Williams (2020: 1), “Capacity is a convenient shorthand term and is appropriate for some purposes, but it achieves this convenience by abstracting away from the mechanisms that determine bureaucratic performance and policy implementation.” On the other hand, the practical initiatives undertaken by many governments to build capacity are not generalizable, as these initiatives or measures are often randomly prescribed by international organizations (El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019).

Regarding the aforementioned intellectual and practical concerns related to the state’s administrative capacity, it is time for the administrative sciences to advance further debates by analyzing and identifying appropriate administrative knowledge, resources, and institutions needed for effective policymaking (Wu et al., 2015) under the given historical, political, economic, and sociocultural contexts (Haque, 1996). The central question to explore here is how and why the similar initiatives for building capacity lead to divergent outcomes in social and economic development. What factors may account for such cross-national and cross-regional variations in outcomes? What are the major challenges to the articulation and adoption of appropriate new capacities?

This special issue’s main objective is to develop an adequate understanding of the conditions and actions required for governments to build and deploy capacities to achieve developmental goals. This introductory article offers some conceptual clarification. It starts with the overall concept of state capacity, explores its major dimensions, and highlights the centrality of the administrative dimension (administrative capacity). It then explores the major contextual factors affecting administrative capacity and examines some contemporary challenges to capacity building. The last section briefly illustrates the main contribution of each of the five articles of the special issue.

## **Concepts and dimensions of state capacity**

### *Conceptual clarity*

As there are conceptual controversies, it is important to reach a clearer connotation of state capacity underlying the current debate on administrative capacity. Some scholars put greater emphasis on *what* can be achieved by building such capacity. For El-Taliawi and Van der Wal (2019: 246), capacity implies the ability to “develop programs; attract, absorb, and manage resources; evaluate activities;

and apply lessons to future activities.” This definition puts greater emphasis on programs, resources, and lessons. Cardenas (2010: 2) highlights property rights and revenue collection. Some other authors focus on the state’s ability to effectively formulate and implement policy decisions and goals (Cingolani, 2018). As Pires and Gomide (2014: 6) suggest, the capacity of the state is its capacity “to make policy decisions and execute implementation actions.” Similarly, for Centeno, Kohli, and Yashar (2017: 3), state capacity means “the organizational and bureaucratic ability to implement governing projects.”

On the other hand, some scholars tend to give greater priority to *how* state capacity can be built. In this regard, Cingolani (2018) highlights the centralization of coercive power, autonomy of bureaucracy, and reinforcement of state–society interactions. Some other scholars draw attention to the processes of professionalizing state bureaucracy and developing human skills and capabilities (Cardenas, 2010; Whittle and Rafferty, 2012).

However, it is necessary to take into account both the *what* and the *how* questions: (1) *what* state capacity can achieve (e.g. effective policy decisions, resource utilization, revenue generation, property protection, and law and order maintenance); and (2) *how* this capacity can be built (e.g. professionalization of bureaucracy, centralization of authority, interactive network with society, etc.). However, the concept of capacity may become more easily comprehensible by disaggregating or unpacking it into its major dimensions or domains.

### *Dimensional configuration*

There are tendencies to list the dimensions of capacity quite randomly, without explaining their mutual distinctions and linkages. For instance, Cingolani (2013, 2018) presents a relatively long list of capacity dimensions, such as coercive (military), infrastructural, legal, fiscal, and administrative. Hanson and Sigman (2013) categorize them into extractive, coercive, and administrative, whereas Cardenas (2010) divides them into military, administrative, and political. Although Pires and Gomide (2014) start with similar multiple dimensions of capacity, they come up with two main subcomponents, including: (1) the administrative-technical dimension (professionalized bureaucracies and financial and technological resources); and (2) the political dimension (multiple stakeholders and their interactions).

Overall, the random listing of capacity dimensions involves overlaps, for example, between the coercive and the defensive, between the legal and the administrative, between the extractive and the fiscal, and so on. Regarding the linkages among these dimensions, Cardenas (2010: 5) highlights that even the state’s defensive or coercive domain depends considerably on its fiscal or extractive capacity to build military, and the political domain is a “determinant” rather than a component of state capacity. In addition, for exploring the importance of capacity for economic development, there is hardly any direct role played by the defensive, legal, and territorial dimensions. Such confusion arising from this interdimensional configuration can be resolved by the broadness of the administrative dimension

(Hanson and Sigman, 2013), which is embedded in the legal, fiscal, and infrastructural domains. Is it possible to use mainly the broad administrative dimension to measure state capacity? This leads to further rethinking about the centrality of the administrative dimension.

### *Centrality of administrative dimension*

Among the major dimensions of state capacity, the administrative dimension remains particularly crucial because of its importance for other dimensions. Some authors emphasize that in most developing countries suffering from weak implementation capability, progress in administrative capacity is essential for carrying out functions related to some other dimensions, such as tax collection (extractive), policing (coercive), and delivering services (interactive) (El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019). Williams (2020: 4) suggests that the concept of state capacity “has been increasingly applied to [administrative] questions of service delivery and policy implementation.” Cingolani (2013: 22) also emphasizes that capacity can be “equated to the implementation power of the state, a task that falls inherently under the bureaucracy.” This is called the “quality of bureaucracy” approach, which is preferred by Centeno, Kohli, and Yashar (2017: 6).

For most developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, it is the administrative domain of capacity that is directly involved in implementing development policies. An advanced level of administrative capacity is most crucial for rapid economic development in high-performing countries compared to low-performing countries with weak administrative systems (El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019). Thus, for capacity *building*, most government initiatives are focused on reforming bureaucratic organizations, designing administrative programs, training administrative officials, and strengthening their commitment. However, in building administrative capacity, it is essential to consider the contextual factors affecting each country’s administrative system.

### **Administrative capacity in developing nations: contextual determinants**

It was emphasized earlier that although administrative capacity represents a central part of overall state capacity, its appropriateness and effectiveness are considerably affected by its historical, political, economic, and sociocultural contexts, which vary cross-nationally and cross-regionally. One widely recognized historical factor is the colonial legacy that emerged in postcolonial developing countries through generations of colonial rule. For instance, among the postcolonial countries in Southeast Asia, British colonial rule in Singapore and Malaysia instituted a relatively Weberian mode of administration, with greater administrative capacity compared to Dutch rule in Indonesia, Spanish rule in the Philippines, and French rule in Vietnam (Gonzalez and Mendoza, 2009).

Another contextual factor affecting administrative capacity is the nature of state formation, of which the administrative system is an integral part (Vom Hau, 2012). Among the diverse modes of state formation (capitalist, welfare, communist, post-colonial, and developmental), it is the developmental state that actively encourages the emergence of a high-capacity public bureaucracy. In addition to other features of the developmental state (economic development goal, interventionist state, and state–business collaboration), a central tenet is its highly meritocratic and technocratic bureaucracy, as found in Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan (Cingolani, 2013; Regnier, 2011; Ricz, 2015). Thus, compared to other postcolonial countries, developmental states are more compatible with administrative capacity building.

In addition, the political context of a country has significant implications for building its administrative capacity. In particular, such political features as the form of government, mode of governance, alliance of the ruling elites, and political culture have considerable impacts on administrative capacity to implement public policies (Cingolani, 2013). In this regard, Gomide (2021) emphasizes the Weberian features of public administration (e.g. meritocracy, neutrality, hierarchy, and impersonality), and explores 10 countries in Asia and South America to evaluate the divergences in administrative Weberian-ness caused by political factors, such as colonial background, the emergence of democracy, party institutionalization, electoral competition, and ethnic politics.

Another important contextual factor affecting administrative capacity is the economic conditions of a country, including its resource endowment, national income, and the market system, as well as economic ideological position. Countries without adequate natural resources require stronger administrative capacity; those with high national income are in a better position to invest in capacity building; and those with advanced market institutions are less dependent on state bureaucracy. In addition, the shifting economic ideological perspective—for example, from state-centric developmentalism to neoliberal pro-market principles—has implications for administrative capacity. For instance, under the influence of international financial institutions and transnational corporations, most Asian countries moved away from a strong state-centric position and adopted market-driven public sector reforms, such as deregulation, downsizing, and privatization, which considerably affected the state’s administrative capacity (Cingolani, 2013; Ricz, 2015).

## **Administrative capacity building for development: major challenges**

There are some major common challenges to capacity building that should not be overlooked. First, it is crucial for policymakers and academic experts involved in capacity-building initiatives to reach clear conceptual understanding about administrative capacity, unbundle it into specific components, and evaluate their feasibility and likely consequences (Whittle and Rafferty, 2012). This learning phase

should go beyond externally prescribed capacity tools and indicators (El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019), and be based on a bottom-up approach involving adequate public consultation and debate.

Second, as there are considerable external pressures on developing countries to adopt some packaged capacity-building models and strategies prescribed by international donor agencies, it is crucial to explore context-based alternatives that are more appropriate for local contexts, needs, and expectations (El-Taliawi and Van der Wal, 2019). It is widely known that “capacity-building began in earnest in the 1970s with donor-funded technical assistance programmes” (Williams, 2020: 5), which did not produce effective administrative capacity and usually led to adverse consequences for developing countries.

Lastly, there is also a challenge created by using the same capacity-building measures at all levels and sectors of government (Whittle and Rafferty, 2012), without paying much attention to the uniqueness of each level and sector. It should be noted that the capacity-building measures adopted at the central or federal level might not be suitable for the state or provincial level, and they could be even more inappropriate at the local or community level. There are contextual differences among provincial administrative systems and among local government units with divergent resources, capabilities, and needs. Similarly, health sector measures may not be appropriate for the education or housing sectors—each sector has its unique sets of strengths and weaknesses, specialized human and technological resources, and own groups of clients with specific needs.

## **Special issue articles and their contribution**

There are five articles in this special issue that contribute to the existing literature on the theme, with specific reference to some Asian countries. In their article, titled “Building administrative capacity under developmental states in Chile and Singapore: A comparative perspective,” Haque and Puppim de Oliveira examine the importance of administrative capacity building shaped by the nature of state formations. They explore the nature of developmental states in two cross-regional cases (Chile and Singapore), and the divergences between these two states caused by differences in contexts and changes brought about by recent neoliberal reforms. The article offers an assessment of how these variations in state formation, their contexts, and recent reforms affected these countries’ administrative capacity with divergent outcomes.

The article on “The change of administrative capacity in Korea: Contemporary trends and lessons” (Ko, Park, Shim, and Kim) attempts to examine the varying interpretations of administrative capacity in the Korean context. It explores these conceptual variations in administrative capacity under different regimes and stakeholders by using three types of textual sources. The authors provide interesting findings about how administrative capacity is defined differently under these three textual sources. They also offer a useful conclusion that different types of administrative capacity are appropriate at different developmental stages in Korea.

Moving away from such a state-focused analysis, the article on “Governance capacity and regulatory enforcement: Street-level organizations in Beijing’s food safety reform” (Yee and Liu) examines the capacity of street-level organizations (SLOs) in relation to food safety regulations in Beijing. It explores the different modes of governance on regulatory enforcement requiring relevant capacities for SLOs. The authors evaluate the existing legal-hierarchical governance currently used by these SLOs, which requires the development of specific capacities through regulatory enforcement programs. They take note of some recent initiatives undertaken by the Chinese government to collect information related to citizens’ concerns, and they recommend a greater degree of social participation.

The next two articles are focused on the needed capacity-building initiatives for sector-specific programs. In their article on “Governing healthcare in India: A policy capacity perspective,” Bali and Ramesh evaluate India’s national health insurance program, launched in 2018. They suggest that although there has been adequate political capacity to design the program, there are deficits in operational capacities to implement it. In particular, India’s generalist public officials are not appropriate for using the operational strategies—such as inter-agency coordination and partnership with private insurers and providers—needed for effective program implementation. This article offers some lessons to be considered by other middle-income countries.

The last article, “Policy capacity matters for capacity development: Comparing teacher in-service training and career advancement in basic education systems of India and China” (Yan and Saguin), offers an interesting argument that the government agencies involved in designing capacity development (CD) initiatives require having adequate policy capacity themselves. Focused on the CD initiatives for teachers’ training and careers in basic education in Delhi (India) and Beijing (China), the authors use a survey of teachers to evaluate these initiatives. They find variations in the effectiveness of such CD initiatives caused by the inadequate policy capacities of those involved in designing and implementing these initiatives, especially their lack of understanding of the actual needs of target groups (teachers). These findings highlight the need for public agencies and officials themselves to have adequate policy capabilities to implement capacity-building initiatives for others at the field level.

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