Introducing the Concept of "State Capability"

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To be honest, when I first heard the term "state capability" I was confused. The question immediately arose, "state capability to do precisely what?" Nations such as North Korea, India, and Pakistan now have the capability to launch nuclear weapons, yet their capacity to feed their own people or to eradicate the legacy of poverty is limited. By contrast, countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and New Zealand now boast low poverty rates, but they cannot (and likely do not wish to) deploy nuclear weapons. So what does "state capability" actually mean?

Perhaps the best way to discover the meaning of this term is to explore the context in which it arose. Although Google N-Gram is a rather unreliable database, it does suggest the term "state capability" was virtually unused until the 1960s. Even today this phrase appears with less than 0.00002% frequency within the N-Gram corpus.

The first reference I was able to pinpoint for this term was a 1988 article by Bowman and Kearney about the capacity of governments to achieve their goals. This term has other, vastly different meanings in fields such electronics and physics. Following the publication of Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock's *Building State Capability* (2017) this term has become more widely used. Today the Harvard University Law School's Centre for International Development employs it frequently. In a 2012 article in the *Journal of Development Studies,* Pritchett, and Woolcock, and Andrews suggest:

> In many nations today the state has little capability to carry out even basic functions like security, policing,
> regulation or core service delivery. Enhancing this capability, especially in fragile states, is a long-term task:
> countries like Haiti or Liberia will take many decades to reach even a moderate capability country like India,
> and millennia to reach the capability of Singapore. (p. 1)

Those authors identify two things that often hinder the development of state capability.

The first is *isomorphic mimicry,* a term from evolutionary biology. Isomorphic mimicry refers to "a superficial resemblance of one organism to another or to natural objects among which it lives that secures it a selective advantage (such as protection from predation)" (Webster Online Dictionary). For instance, many hoverflies - which cannot sting - mimic bees that can, thus evading birds and other predators. Pritchett, and Woolcock, and Andrews note that isomorphic mimicry also frequently occurs in governmental agencies. In many countries today, for instance, there is an outward semblance of democratic controls when in fact democracy has become a vestige that has essentially vanished, resulting in what Crouch (2000) describes as "post-democracy." Hence Pritchett, and Woolcock, and Andrews point out isomorphic mimicry involves, "the outward forms (appearances, structures) of functional states and organisations ...adopted to camouflage a persistent lack of function."

A second impediment to state capability, according to Pritchett, and Woolcock, and Andrews, is *premature load bearing*. As Woolcock (2105) makes it clear, it is essentially attempting to perform tasks before being able

to do so. An example of this would be trying to enforce safety code regulations in countries where the written regulations vary widely from those that are actually enforced. Such cases often occur where bribery is rampant and "special connections" are needed for government permits. In many countries there is a wide gap between the *de jure* and *de facto* laws. In other words, what some governments claim to do and what they actually do are often quite different. Hence in many parts of the world the laws existing on paper have little resemblance to those that are actually enforced.

According to Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2012) isomorphic mimicry and premature load bearing frequently result in what they term "capability traps. " In such scenarios, they remark how "governments constantly adopt 'reforms' as signals to ensure ongoing flows of external financing and legitimacy." However, the promised reforms amount to mere window-dressing and there is little or no actual improvement.

As a case in point, to obtain loans, many developing countries agree to adopt policies suggested by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, or New Development Bank. However, the ability of some governments to impose their will throughout a nation is limited. The result is often a set of "paper rules" that bear little resemblance to how business is performed in many parts of a country. Conditions such as this result in what is widely termed "fragile states" or even "failed states" (Chomsky, 2007; Howard,2016). In such cases, the most powerful actors are not the nominal governments themselves, but rather multinational corporations or perhaps even criminal groups. For example, in places such as Mexico or Afghanistan powerful drug cartels sometimes wield more power than the elected governments. Indeed, the distinction between government leaders and criminal syndicates appears to be blurred at times.

After defining what state capability is, a natural question would be "How can it be developed?" Traditional methods of fostering state capability tend to focus on ideology or income redistribution. Public education can be interpreted as an attempt to instill a specific type of state-sanctioned ideology. Controlling television, radio, and printed material and internet are other ways many governments manipulate the ideology of the general public. Moreover, through skillful use of disinformation, monitoring of all information channels, and suppression of undesirable information, some governments have become quite adapt at "educating" the public in the ways they wish.

A second approach to building state capacity is through some form of income redistribution. For example, Seelkopf and Lierse (2020) suggest that the progressive tax system in some countries has made them more amenable to democracy. Conversely, regressive tax systems can be found in places such as Alabama make it harder for the poor to achieve much power. State taxes for the poorest 20% of Alabama citizens are 10.2%, yet those for the richest 1% of the are merely 3.8% (Fischer, 2013).

Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock (2012) believe that the best way to enhance state capacity is through a technique that they term *Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation* (PDIA). The concepts behind PDIA appear to be similar to what is known as Adaptive Reasoning and Problem Solving. In Japanese it might be translated as "問題に基づて反復適応." Incidentally, the Project Management Institute of Japan has also developed their own, slightly different trademarked term for this concept.

The BEAM Exchange describes PDIA as "a process of facilitated emergence" and notes how it is a group-driven reflective procedure. PDIA rejects the notion of simplistic pre-packaged solutions for all problems. Instead, it embraces four basic principles: (1) local solutions for local problems, (2) scaling through diffusion - in which advocates of an idea spread that idea by sharing it with others, (3) pushing for "positive deviance" to create solutions to existing problems by challenging the status quo norms, and finally (4) constant iterative adaptation to changing situations - in which responses are modified based on changing environmental conditions.

Can something like PDIA actually help promote "state capability" so that impoverished nations achieve goals such as rising out of poverty? The few case studies offered by Andrews, Pritchett, Samji, and Woolcock (2015) are encouraging. However, in my view the ideas behind PDIA are not yet widely understood or utilized. Perhaps it is time for all of us to learn more.

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