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Introduction to the Special Section on policy capacity framework in implementation analysis across different contexts in the world

This special section brings together four articles that offer significant advances in the application of the Policy Capacity Framework (PCF) to implementation analysis across diverse global contexts. The PCF is employed as a set of variables to demonstrate how and why capacity can be associated with distinct policy factors and dynamics concerning the implementation process. In a similar way, all papers emphasize the political dimension of capacity, using terms cush as legitimacy, trust and consensus-building. They are regarded as relevant policy factors shaping policy success or failure, usually considered to be more important than technical and analytical capacity. In distinctive manners, the articles call attention to the need to approach the decision-making processes from a multi-level and multi-agency perspective, when employing the PCF.

Collectively, articles broaden the use of PCF in various important ways. First, they bring a normative dimension by approaching the question of "Capacity for What?", stressing that political intent and public value issues should be associated with technical competencies. Second, they emphasize the importance of studying specific characteristics across levels of governance, such as the relationship between strategic capacity at the macro level and operational capacity at the meso level, showing that capabilities that are closest to service delivery can lead to effective implementation. Third, they explore how institutional arrangements can enable the construction of policy capacity, particularly in contexts characterized by fragmented state structures, multi-level governance, constitutional constraints and the need for state actors to work in limited decision-spaces. Finally, they highlight the key role of "integration capacity" — the ability to coordinate state and societal actors in the generation of co-production — particularly in crisis contexts and point to public trust as a critical state resource.

The first article, "Capacity for what? Elon Musk's DOGE, public value destruction and the darkside of policy capacity" by Adam Wellstead and Michael Howlett, provides a critical expansion of the PCF by challenging the assumption that higher capacity leads to effective policies. The authors argue that capacity must be evaluated not only in terms of effectiveness but also in relation to public values and normative approaches. Drawing on a review of the policy capacity literature, they demonstrate that existing approaches usually overlook the question of the purposes toward which capacity is directed. Introducing the concept of the "darkside" of policy capacity, they show how high levels of analytical, managerial, and political skills can be employed to both create and undermine public value. They analyse the United States Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), under the Trump administration, illustrating how advanced policy capacities can be deliberately stablished to destabilize administrative systems through deregulation and the dismantling of expert networks. The authors call for a more comprehensive evaluative approach that includes ethical and democratic considerations, emphasizing the importance of associating capacity with substantive public outcomes and democratic legitimacy.

The second article, "Regional policy capacity for environmental governance: institutional dynamics in Brazil's subnational context" by Vanessa Elias de Oliveira, Klaus Frey, Ana L. Mafra Salla, and Marcio Anderson Kontopp, examines how regional policy capacity is developed and sustained within a multi-level governance and constitutional framework that gives priority to municipal autonomy over regional coordination. The authors also show that institutional actors can impact the implementation process across complex governance and

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multi-institutional contexts. Through an empirical analysis of two governance arrangements in the state of São Paulo: the ABC Intermunicipal Consortium (bottom-up) and the PCJ River Basin Committee (top-down), the authors demonstrate that regional capacity emerges from the strategic alignment of local interests and state-level incentives. The study focuses on conditions of "limited statehood" where the state's inability to enforce uniform regulations necessitates collaborative governance. The findings reveal that regional capacity is characterized by the ability to mediate conflicts and consolidate technical expertise, reducing transaction costs for individual municipalities. The authors conclude that effective arrangements have to combine political legitimacy with operational capacity to manage complex environmental changes, bringing regionalization as a central strategy for addressing contemporary governance gaps and addressing institutional constraints.

In the third article, "Using the policy capacity framework to evaluate New Zealand's primary health care policy implementation" by Tim Tenbensel, Lesley Middleton, Pushkar Silwal, and Jacqueline Cumming, the PCF is used to assess the implementation of primary health care (PHC) policies in Aotearoa New Zealand between 2010 and 2020. Drawing on interviews with 55 key informants, the authors study why certain "valued policy objectives" (VPOs) advanced while others stalled. Their analysis highlights the importance of different configurations of analytical, operational, and political capacities across governance levels. A key finding was the existence of a "decoupling" between national policy design and local implementation. Although the macro level usually lacked the operational mechanisms necessary to drive change, it showed strong analytical capacity to deal with diverse system challenges. The study demonstrates that the translation of policy into practice is frequently constrained by political and institutional factors, and not by technical limitations, revealing the critical mediating role played by political capacity in complex and multi-actor systems.

The fourth article, "Policy capacity and co-production in crisis response: a comparative analysis of COVID-19 management in Hong Kong and Singapore" by Lei Shi, Xihan Dong, and Xun Wu, investigates how policy capacity shaped state-society co-production during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although both city-states constitute high levels of analytical and operational capacity, their differing outcomes highlight the importance of political capacity. The findings indicate that Singapore's high-trust environment enabled effective co-production influencing widespread public compliance with vaccination and contact-tracing measures. In contrast, Hong Kong experienced lower levels of trust and greater social fragmentation resulting in weaker alignments between government directives and societal response. The authors argue that operational capacity is not a sufficient criterion in crises contexts. They need to be associated with the political legitimacy required to mobilize collective action. By introducing the concept of "integration capacity", defined as the ability to align state and non-state actors, the study advances the PCF and demonstrates its relevance for understanding crisis governance.

We thank all contributing authors for their insightful work and the anonymous reviewers for their rigorous and constructive feedback which significantly strengthened the contributions to this special section.

Fabiana C. Saddi, Stephen Peckham and Nagina Khan
Guest Editors

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