

Research Briefing

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Researching capacities to sustain social protection in protracted crises

Part 1: The Capacity Cube

This research briefing introduces the Capacity Cube framework – a new tool for thinking about how capacity to deliver national social protection programmes and systems might be sustained in times of crisis. Its three-dimensional approach is specifically designed to analyse the particular capacities needed to deliver resilient programmes in protracted crises and to identify strategies to address any deficits. This briefing explains the Cube framework and its development and application. An accompanying briefing (Slater 2024) presents early findings using the Cube in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

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Key messages

The Capacity Cube approach:

- Enables a more nuanced and granular view of capacities that allows policymakers and practitioners to identify not only deficits in technical competencies but also shortcomings in functional (or ‘real world’) capabilities and performance. This in turn allows improved understanding of what is driving any deficits and the investments and improvements that might overcome them.
- Builds on the (1) orthodox distinction between individual, organisational, and institutional levels of capacity, (2) to include a temporal element that explores how approaches to sustaining capacity change processes over time, plus (3) a third dimension which explores how crises affect capacity in terms of what people can do in principle, what they can do in practice, and what they actually do.

Box 1: BASIC Research questions for crisis-resilient social protection

Q: How can existing national social protection systems be sustained in conflict-affected situations, and how can international agencies support them to be more resilient?

- What **capacities** are most important for enabling business continuity and overcoming capacity deficits? What are the gender dimensions of staff capacity?
- What **coordination** features and roles of external agencies support continuity?
- What are the **political economy dimensions** of programme continuity and the incentives to sustain delivery?
- Where, when and why are some **instruments** more resilient than others? For example, subsidies versus social transfers. What are the **financial, administrative, and political dimensions** of sustaining different programming types?

Why is BASIC researching capacity?

At the heart of the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research agenda is an attempt to plug a knowledge gap about existing social protection programmes. Our inception phase scoping work demonstrated that, in the midst of massive interest in shock-responsive social protection (Longhurst and Slater 2022), little attention is paid to what happens to existing social protection in situations of protracted crisis (Slater, Haruna and Baur 2022; Slater 2022). By placing substantial emphasis on how to flex and expand programmes vertically and horizontally, the shock-responsive social protection agenda has tended to take attention away from if and how existing programmes are able to sustain delivery to existing beneficiaries in situations of climate and/or conflict crisis.

To address this knowledge gap, BASIC Research is delivering a programme of work on **crisis-resilient social protection** that asks:

- If and how national social protection programmes and systems that pre-exist a specific crisis can be sustained and used to maintain business continuity during or after said crisis.
- How external actors can support the resilience of those systems and programmes (Box 1).

The programme's inception phase work found that although it is rare to read a report on social protection without reading the word capacity, very limited serious attention is paid to capacity in the literature on social assistance

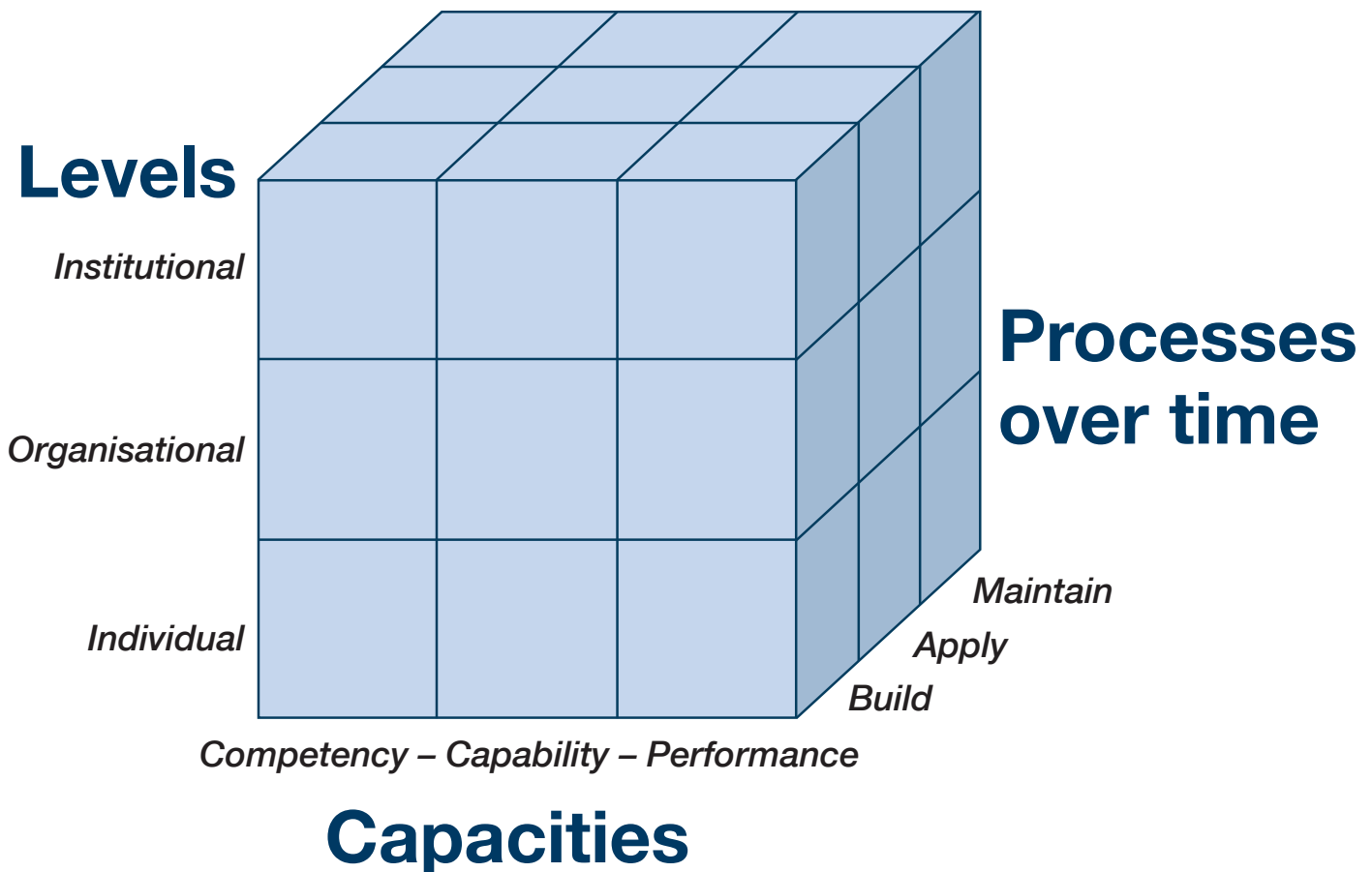
in crisis situations. Furthermore, stakeholders in international development and humanitarian agencies regularly make assumptions about capacity – notably, that there is not any in situations of protracted crisis, in either national governments or in sub-national departments.

If policymakers and practitioners want to improve capacity, a more nuanced and granular perspective is needed that takes us beyond assumptions that there is no government capacity to sustain programme delivery in situations of protracted crisis, especially at the local level. It is important to break down capacity in the social protection sector into different elements, ones that capture the varied and often challenging environments in which social protection is designed and delivered, and to include a stronger temporal dimension.

How is BASIC researching capacity?

Addressing the lack of understanding of prevailing capacities and the threats to sustaining them requires a combination of two things: (1) a clear analytical framing for researching capacity in situations of protracted crisis, and (2) the collection of empirical data to analyse and assess. BASIC Research has developed a 'Capacity Cube' – a three-dimensional approach to investigating capacity to deliver social protection that is specifically designed to capture the particular requirements to deliver programmes in protracted crises.

Figure 1: The Capacity Cube



Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

The Capacity Cube (see Figure 1) draws on John Gaventa's view of power (2006) across three dimensions to allow a more systematic and structured analysis of where we find capacity and capacity deficits. This briefing explains the Cube in more detail and its further refinement and application. An accompanying briefing (Slater 2024) presents early findings using the Cube in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

- 1. The first dimension in the Cube is the orthodox distinction between individual, organisational, and institutional capacity.** The individual level is about people, specifically staff, in organisations and their capacity as individuals to deliver their roles. The organisational level is focused on processes and systems, including elements of system architecture and assets, such as management information systems (MIS), registries or payment systems, or the existence of an algorithm to support targeting. The institutional level switches the focus to the values and norms that underpin what organisations and individuals do. These

are often, but not always, articulated in laws and regulations, mandates and obligations, and policies and strategies.

- 2. The second dimension is temporal and differentiates between building capacity, applying it, and maintaining it.** As TRANSFORM highlights: 'To gain a complete picture it is necessary to look not only at an entity's ability to create or acquire capacity (for example, through training, recruitment or the introduction of new systems), but also its ability to utilise this newly developed capacity, and finally to ensure it is retained' (2017: 7). Mismatches between building, applying, and maintaining capacity include, for example, where new equipment goes unused because staff do not know how to use it, or where targeting effectiveness declines because data about poverty and vulnerability are not routinely updated, or where staff turnover is high.

3. The third dimension brings something different: a focus on what people can do in principle, what they can do in practice, and what they actually do. Drawing on analysis from the health sector (Holsbeeke *et al.* 2009), this dimension breaks down capacity into competency, capability and performance, as follows:

- Competency – what a person can do in a standardised, controlled environment;
- Capability – what a person can do in their daily environment; and
- Performance – what a person actually does in their daily environment.

In a protracted crisis setting, staff delivering social assistance might be competent but not capable because, for example, they experience such frequent power and communications outages that although they know how to do their task, they cannot send monitoring reports to head office, or complete paperwork to expedite transfers of funds. During the Covid-19 pandemic, staff with children found themselves juggling work and childcare. Similarly, a climate shock or violent conflict might also affect staff's capability to work. Finally, especially in situations of protracted crisis, competent and capable staff may lose motivation and enthusiasm, becoming fatigued in a difficult environment, so they do not perform well.

The three dimensions are captured in the wider capacity development literature. The hierarchy of capacities that differentiates between individuals, organisations, and institutions is common. David Watson describes capacity as the 'emergent combination of attributes, capabilities and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt and perform' (2006: vi).

The first and second dimensions have been used in capacity assessments in relation to the social protection sector (for example, see Kardan *et al.* 2017).

The principle of the third dimension can be discerned in some research outputs. For example, Caravani *et al.* (2021) argue for a focus on capacities on the ground where all manner of complications arise that must be navigated, which are not simply technical. They also argue for a focus on uncertainty and

flexibility, rather than assuming predictability and stability. However, there is no guidance on how to capture these elements in capacity assessment, or any serious, explicit treatment of them in research to date. Moreover, these three dimensions have not been explicitly applied, together, to the social protection sector.

Why is the Capacity Cube helpful?

The Cube helps us identify what to look for when seeking to understand capacity deficits, and what might be done about them in situations of protracted crisis. There are a number of further advantages to using the dimensions articulated in the Cube to research how we sustain existing programmes. The Cube:

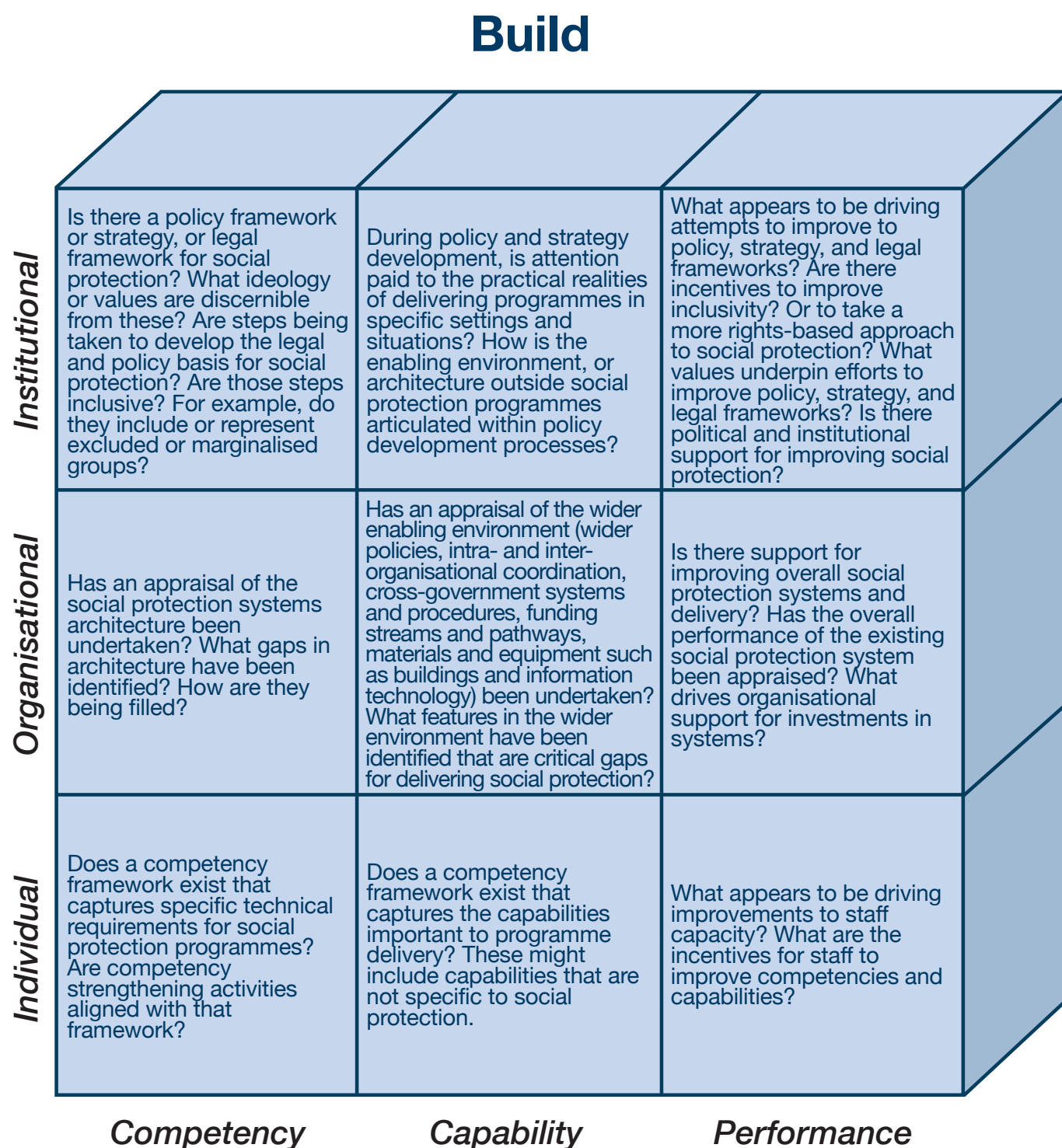
- Helps to move beyond the predominant focus on individual competencies and technical skills (which tend to narrow down or limit capacity strengthening options to individual technical training) to focus on what drives capability and performance deficits, and the functional and soft skills – and systems investments – that might overcome them.
- Provides more scope to understand how gender and other social norms and values underpin capacities; for example, by identifying if men's and women's capabilities and performance are substantially different because of the differentiated impacts of violent conflict, domestic work at home, or travel safety and access to remote communities.
- Enables a more granular view of capacity deficits so it is possible to understand whether, for example, staff know how to do something in theory, whether they know how to do it in practice, and whether they actually do it.

The Capacity Cube provides a visual, heuristic tool explaining one approach to thinking about capacity that draws on a wider set of different but intersecting elements. Beyond this it also provides a tool for researching or assessing capacity in situations of protracted crisis. In the real world, the lines between the dimensions of the Cube, and between individual elements of the Cube are not straight and solid but uneven and fuzzy. Nevertheless, breaking the Cube down into 27 individual cubes allows a research framework for exploring capacity to emerge.

Applying the Capacity Cube in research – questions to ask

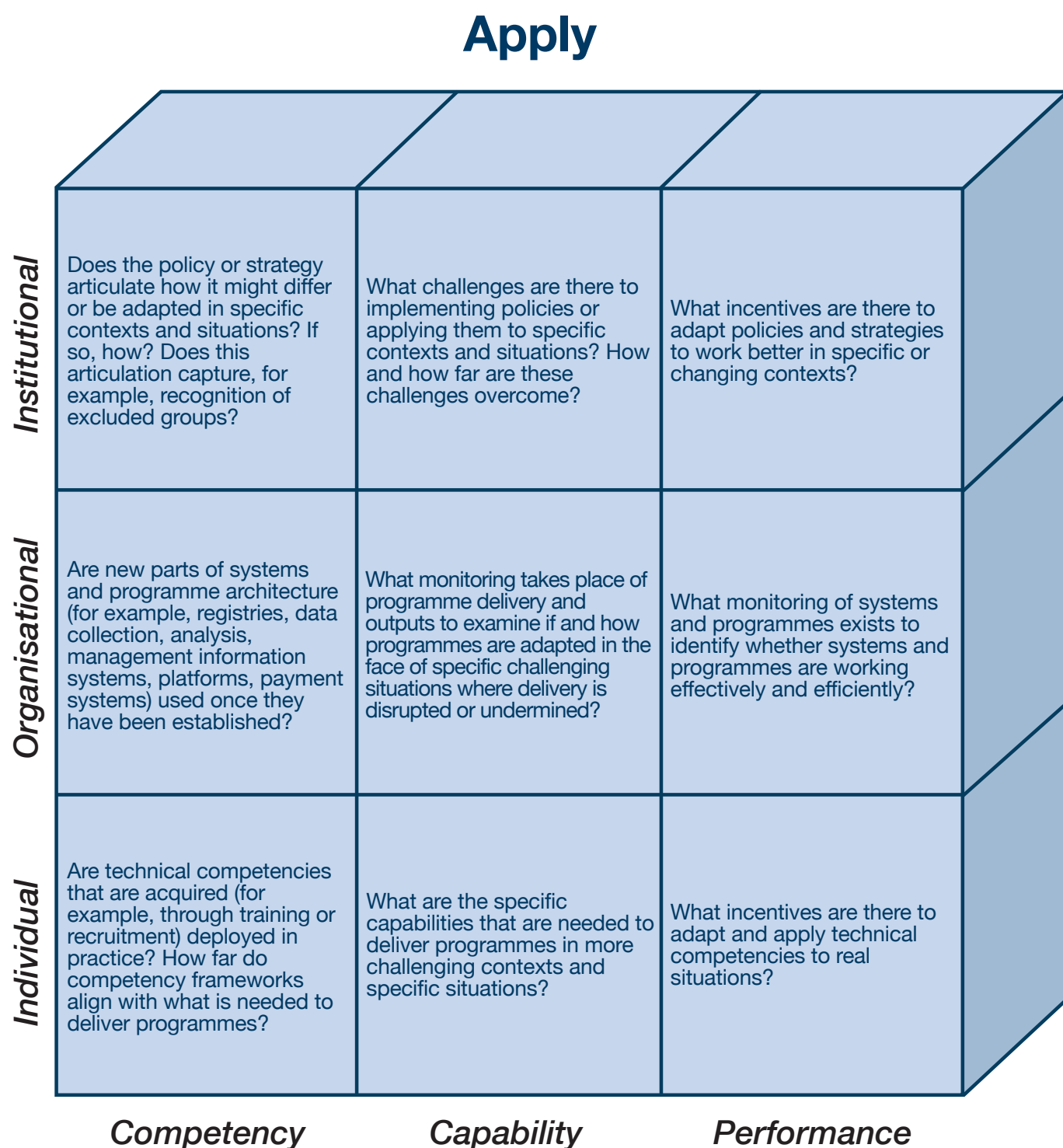
A range of questions for researching capacities, broken down by capacity dimensions, is provided in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 2: The Capacity Cube – Build



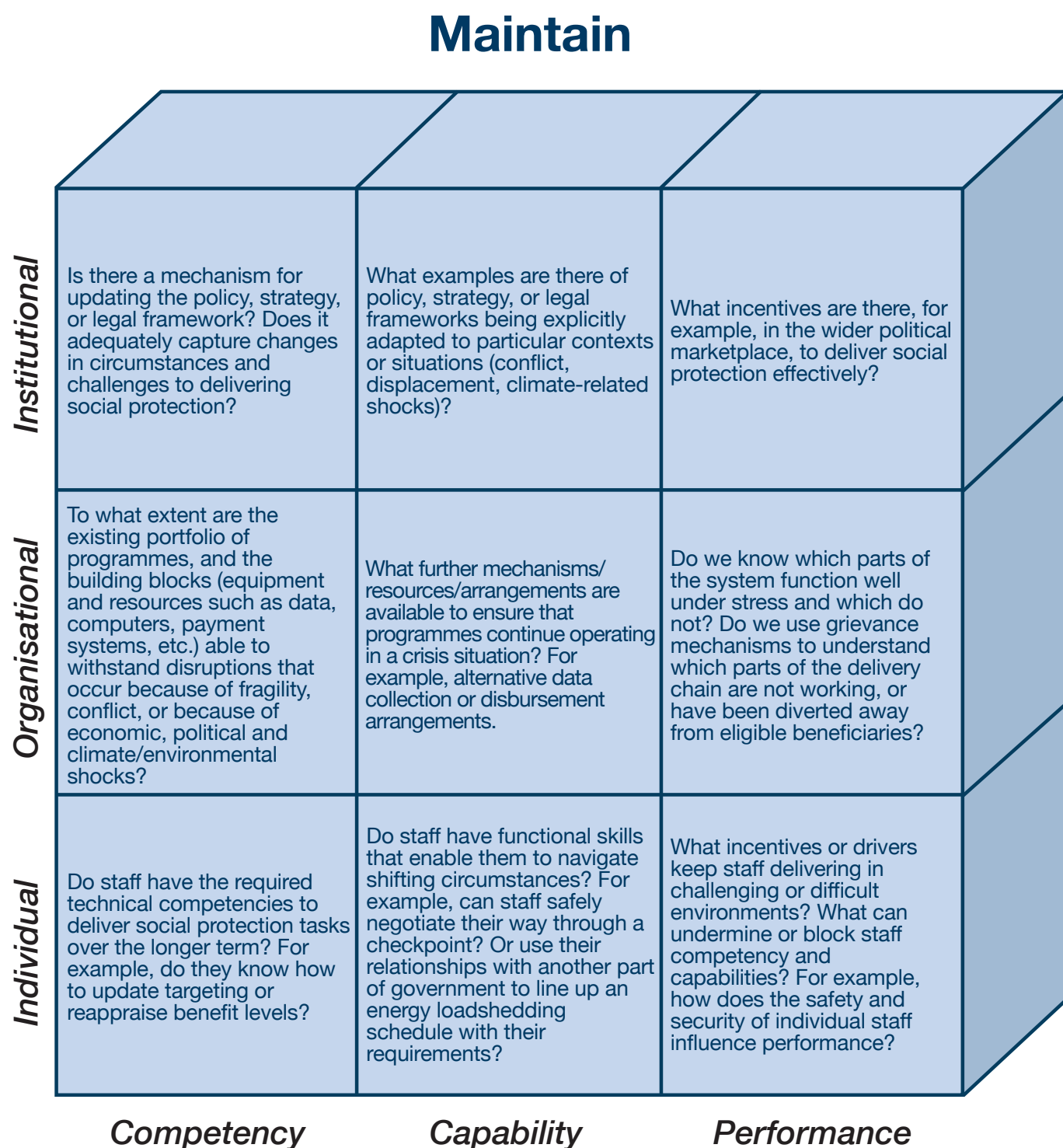
Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

Figure 3: The Capacity Cube – Apply



Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

Figure 4: The Capacity Cube – Maintain



Source: Author's own. Adapted from Gaventa (2006).

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