Building the capability of states to implement increasingly complex and contentious tasks will be a central development issue in the coming decades. Much of the initial work of providing basic infrastructure and inputs has been attained – school buildings and health clinics are to be found throughout most developing countries. The challenge now is to improve the quality of services (i.e., ensuring real learning, facilitating actual healing) and to acquire the capability to implement, at scale, the more difficult tasks for which modern states are responsible (such as effective regulation, taxation and justice). Many institutional reforms designed to enhance ‘good governance’, however, merely change what implementation systems look like rather than improve what they can actually do. Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), which builds on a distinguished history of previous efforts by applied scholars and reflective practitioners, is one pragmatic strategy for responding to these challenges. It provides much of the analytical foundations for the evolving global social movement on ‘Doing Development Differently’ and the new Global Delivery Initiative (jointly overseen by the World Bank and the Government of Germany).

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