

Foreign Expertise and State Capacity: Lessons for a Capability-Transfer Model of Development in Guinea

Advanced Reserach Methods

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21.06.2026

Abstract

Background: Foreign technical assistance is widely used to strengthen state capacity in low-income countries, but its record is uneven. In some settings, external expertise supports lasting institutional capability. In others, it creates dependency on donor systems and leaves capacity gaps when experts withdraw.

Objective: This study examines the conditions under which imported expertise contributes to durable state-capacity development rather than reinforcing parallel delivery structures.

Method: The report applies a critical realist realist-synthesis to published evidence from seven purposively selected cases: Botswana, Rwanda, Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone. Sources were first coded into a conditions matrix and then synthesized into Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations.

Results: Durable capacity was most visible where foreign experts were embedded in line ministries, linked to genuine knowledge-transfer requirements, and supported by a politically committed bureaucratic core. Collapse was associated with expertise routed through parallel, off-budget structures in fragile contexts, without meaningful transfer. Partial embedding produced mixed localization. Liberia provides an important contrast: embedding can move fragile settings away from collapse, but embedding without succession planning remains insufficient for durable transfer. Resource rents mattered mainly through this embedding mechanism.

Conclusions: The critical issue is not the quantity of expertise imported, but how that expertise is institutionally governed. For Guinea, the implications are to embed experts in national authorities, make succession contractual, measure local content as capability, and channel resource rents through a meritocratic bureaucratic core. These are derived implications from the synthesis, not empirical findings about Guinea.

Keywords: state capacity; technical assistance; realist synthesis; knowledge transfer; embedded autonomy; low-income countries

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Literature Review.....	7
2.1 Technical assistance and its limits.....	7
2.2 Embedded autonomy and capable bureaucracy.....	7
2.3 Capability traps, mimicry, and PDIA.....	7
2.4 Sequencing and institutional prerequisites.....	8
2.5 Case-level evidence.....	8
2.6 The synthesis gap and the case for realist synthesis.....	9
3. Theoretical Framework.....	10
3.1 Embedded autonomy as the core mechanism (P. B. Evans, 1995; P. Evans & Rauch, 1999). 10	
3.2 Capability traps and the failure mechanism (Andrews et al., 2013; Pritchett et al., 2013).....	10
3.3 Sequencing as the context condition (Fukuyama, 2004).....	10
3.4 Provisional programme theory.....	10
3.5 Linkage to methodology.....	11
4. Methodology.....	12
4.1 Philosophical stance: critical realism.....	12
4.2 Research design: realist synthesis.....	12
4.3 Research question, programme theory, and hypotheses.....	13
4.4 Case selection.....	13
4.5 Data collection: secondary sources only.....	13
4.6 Variables, measurements, and coding.....	14
4.7 CMO configuration rules and confidence.....	14
4.8 Data-analysis technique: retroduction.....	14
4.9 Trustworthiness, limitations, and ethics.....	14
5. Results.....	15
5.1 The conditions matrix.....	15
5.2 CMO configurations.....	15
CMO-1: Embedding plus transfer in a committed core -> durable capacity (Confidence: H). 16	
CMO-2: Partial embedding and reform cycles -> mixed localisation (Confidence: M).....	16
CMO-3: Parallel structures without transfer in fragility -> dependency and collapse (Confidence: H).....	17
Liberia contrast: embedding under fragility without succession -> mixed outcome (Confidence: M).....	17
CMO-4: Resource rents as a modifier (Confidence: M).....	18
Cross-configuration pattern.....	18
5.3 Refined programme-theory pathways.....	18
5.4 Summary answer to the research question.....	19
6. Discussion.....	20
6.1 Interpretation of key findings.....	20
6.2 The decisive lever: embedding with transfer.....	20
6.3 Theoretical implications.....	20
6.4 Reasons for an unexpected result.....	21
6.5 Practical implications for Guinea (derived).....	21
6.6 Limitations.....	22
6.7 Future research.....	22
7. Conclusion.....	23
References.....	24
Appendices.....	27

Appendix A — Search strategy and PRISMA-lite screening.....	27
Appendix B — Source log (28 sources).....	28
Appendix C — Conditions matrix with source IDs.....	30
Appendix D — CMO configuration log.....	31
Appendix E — Task 1b Self-Reflective Report.....	32

Index of Tables

Table 1: Linking Frameworks to CMOs.....	11
Table 2: Rejected alternatives.....	12
Table 3: Conditions matrix (Y / Partial / N / NR).....	15

1. Introduction

Can a low-income country accelerate development by importing global expertise while requiring that expertise to be transferred to local institutions? The question is especially relevant for resource-rich but capacity-constrained states such as Guinea, where mineral wealth and foreign advice must be converted into durable public institutions. The proposition is attractive, but the historical record is more cautious. Foreign expertise is frequently used to build government capability, yet its outcomes vary sharply.

That variation is the problem this study addresses. Technical advisors, embedded consultants, and management contracts have been used for decades across the developing world. Some states have converted this support into more durable institutions. Others have achieved short-term project delivery without lasting capability, becoming dependent on parallel donor structures instead (Andrews et al., 2013; Berg et al., 1993). Existing literature explains several failure modes, including capability traps, isomorphic mimicry, and project implementation units. It also documents examples of success. What is still under-synthesized is the set of conditions under which imported expertise produces durable domestic capacity rather than dependency. This is the gap addressed in the report.

The research question is therefore deliberately conditional: under what conditions does the use of foreign expertise contribute to durable state-capacity development in low-income countries? The question does not ask whether expertise works on average. It asks when, where, and through which mechanisms expertise is likely to strengthen domestic capability.

The purpose follows directly: this study synthesizes published evidence to identify Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations under which foreign expertise contributes to durable state capacity in low-income countries, and derives applied implications for Guinea. The study uses a critical realist philosophy and a realist synthesis methodology. Seven cases are coded into a conditions matrix: Botswana, Rwanda, Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone. Guinea is not treated as an empirical case. It appears only in the Discussion, where the programme theory is applied cautiously as a set of derived implications.

The study has four objectives. First, it synthesizes the state-capacity and technical-assistance literature into an analytical framework. Second, it codes the seven cases into a matrix of conditions and outcomes. Third, it infers CMO configurations that answer the research question. Fourth, it derives conditional and testable implications for Guinea. The contribution is an applied realist programme theory: a set of CMO configurations and success/failure pathways generated from existing scholarship. It is not a new theory of state-building, nor a descriptive literature summary. It is a mechanism-based synthesis of when imported expertise is more likely to build durable capacity.

The provisional programme theory begins with two pathways. In the success pathway, expertise is embedded in domestic institutions, governed by transfer requirements, and converted into local capability. In the failure pathway, expertise is routed through parallel structures, creates dependency, and collapses when experts exit. The findings refine this starting point by showing that the decisive distinction is not the presence of expertise itself, but whether expertise is embedded and transfer-bound.

The report proceeds in seven sections. Section 2 reviews the literature and identifies the synthesis gap. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework and links it to the method. Section 4 explains the

critical realist realist-synthesis methodology. Section 5 presents the conditions matrix, CMO configurations, and answer to the research question. Section 6 discusses the findings, limitations, and derived implications for Guinea. Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature Review

The literature on foreign expertise and state capacity speaks to four linked debates: whether technical assistance builds capacity, what capable bureaucracies look like, why reforms often fail, and how institutions develop over time. Taken together, these debates provide a useful vocabulary for analyzing the problem. They identify several mechanisms of failure and some mechanisms of success. However, they do not yet provide a clear synthesis of the conditions under which imported expertise becomes durable domestic capacity.

2.1 Technical assistance and its limits

A long-running critical literature questions whether technical assistance (TA) builds capacity at all. The 1993 UNDP "Berg report" argued that technical cooperation had failed in its central aim of building self-reliance. It highlighted supply-driven design, donor fragmentation, and a counterpart model that often substituted for local capability rather than developing it (Berg et al., 1993). More recent reviews reach a similar conclusion. TA can create useful short-term capacity, but often only in isolated "islands" that do not survive after projects end (Cox & Norrington-Davies, 2020).

The key insight from this debate is that modality matters. Expertise delivered inside public institutions and tied to transfer is analytically different from expertise delivered through parallel structures. This literature is therefore valuable for identifying failure mechanisms. Its limitation is that it often treats success as exceptional, rather than systematically asking which conditions separate success from failure.

2.2 Embedded autonomy and capable bureaucracy

Evans's (1995) concept of *embedded autonomy* explains why some states are able to convert external resources into development. Capable states have bureaucracies that are coherent and meritocratic, while also being connected enough to society to pursue shared developmental goals. For Evans (1995) such state apparatuses are "embedded in a concrete set of social ties that binds the state to society and provides institutionalized channels for the continual negotiation and renegotiation of goals and policies" (p. 12). Evans & Rauch (1999) add empirical support by linking Weberian bureaucratic features, including merit recruitment and predictable careers, to stronger growth performance.

For this study, the main implication is that expertise is more likely to be absorbed when it is located inside a capable state apparatus. Expertise is less likely to build capacity when it remains outside the state, even if it delivers outputs in the short term. The limitation of this literature is that it focuses mainly on state structures themselves. It says less about how *foreign* expertise interacts with those structures.

2.3 Capability traps, mimicry, and PDIA

Pritchett et al. (2013) explain persistent reform failure through *capability traps* and *isomorphic mimicry*. States may copy the visible form of capable institutions while lacking the underlying function. This can satisfy donors and create the appearance of reform, while actual implementation capacity remains weak. Andrews et al. (2013) respond with Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation

(PDIA), which favours locally defined problems, experimentation, feedback, and broad engagement over imported blueprints.

This body of work is central to the failure pathway in the present study. It explains how expertise can create dependency rather than capacity when it supplies answers for the state instead of strengthening the state's ability to solve problems. Its limitation is that it is often prescriptive: it explains what reformers should do, but less often synthesizes across cases to show when embedded transfer has actually produced durable capacity.

2.4 Sequencing and institutional prerequisites

Fukuyama, (2004) frames the issue as a problem of state-building and sequencing. External actors can transfer institutional *form* more easily than institutional *capacity*: donors "know how to transfer resources, people, and technology," but "well-functioning public institutions require certain habits of mind, and operate in complex ways that resist being moved" (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 17). External support may also weaken fragile systems if it overloads them too early or bypasses them in the name of rapid delivery. This literature helps identify the context conditions that shape whether expertise is absorbed: institutional inheritance, fragility, and political commitment.

However, the sequencing argument can imply that strong pre-existing institutions are almost a prerequisite for success. The case evidence complicates that assumption. Botswana and Rwanda began from weak material baselines, yet both developed relatively durable capacity under committed political leadership (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012). This makes it necessary to examine not only inherited institutional strength, but also the mechanisms through which weak institutions learn.

2.5 Case-level evidence

The case literature is rich but fragmented. Botswana retained expatriates inside line ministries while training citizens and resisting premature localization (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Sebudubudu & Lotshwao, 2009). Rwanda used technical assistance selectively and embedded advisors within ministries to support knowledge transfer (Chemouni, 2019; Redifer et al., 2020). These are the clearest durable-capacity cases in the sample.

At the other end of the pattern, Afghanistan received very high volumes of aid and expertise, but much of it was off-budget and channelled through parallel structures (Bizhan, 2018). Sierra Leone shows a related pattern: donor-hired local technical assistants and gap-filling project implementation units drew staff away from the civil service and may have reduced wider capacity (DFID, 2008; World Bank Group, 2019b). These cases show how expertise can deliver projects while weakening the public administration that should eventually sustain them.

The intermediate cases are more mixed. Senegal shows project-based reform and partial embedding, but uncertain institutionalization (Blundo, 2006; Cowater International, 2026). Nigeria's local-content regime increased national participation in oil, yet transfer remained difficult to measure and vulnerable to elite or firm capture (Ovadia, 2013; Ovadia & Wolf, 2018). Liberia is especially useful as a contrast: its GEMAP programme embedded experts inside public institutions and achieved fiscal gains, but transfer expectations did not fully materialize (Gilpin & Hyu, 2008; World Bank Group, 2019a).

Read across the cases, a clear pattern emerges. Embedded expertise with transfer is associated with more durable outcomes. Parallel expertise without transfer is associated with dependency and collapse. Partial embedding produces partial results. The case evidence therefore points toward a shared analytical frame, even though most studies explain only their individual case.

This matters for the research design. The cases are not illustrations added after the theory. They are the secondary data through which the theory is tested. Botswana and Rwanda help identify the success mechanism; Afghanistan and Sierra Leone clarify the failure mechanism; Liberia tests whether embedding matters even under fragility; and Senegal and Nigeria show what happens when transfer is partial or captured.

2.6 The synthesis gap and the case for realist synthesis

Taken together, the literature provides strong concepts: embedding, mimicry, parallel delivery, transfer, succession, fragility, rents, and political commitment. What it lacks is a systematic synthesis of how these concepts combine into conditions for durable capacity. Failure is well theorized. Success is less well synthesized.

Realist synthesis fits this gap because the research question asks "under what conditions," not "what is the average effect." A realist synthesis can extract Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations from existing evidence and build a programme theory of what works, for whom, and in what circumstances (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wong et al., 2013). The contribution of this report is therefore a mid-range, evidence-anchored programme theory that turns the literature's concepts into testable conditional propositions and practical design principles.

3. Theoretical Framework

Section 2 reviewed the literature. This section turns that literature into an applied programme theory: a focused set of concepts that guide the coding and CMO analysis. The study does not claim to create a new theory of state-building. Instead, it shows how established theories can be translated into the matrix conditions used in the realist synthesis.

The framework has four parts, each with a specific analytical role: context, mechanism, or outcome. This keeps the chain visible from theory, to coding, to findings.

3.1 Embedded autonomy as the core mechanism (P. B. Evans, 1995; P. Evans & Rauch, 1999)

Evans's idea of *embedded autonomy* explains why some states turn external resources into development. A capable bureaucracy is internally coherent, meritocratic, and connected enough to society to act on shared projects without being captured by them. For this study, the key point is institutional location. Foreign expertise is expected to build capacity when it is placed inside line institutions, not when it sits in parallel donor units. This defines matrix row R1 (embedded experts) and the main mechanism in CMO-1 and CMO-3.

3.2 Capability traps and the failure mechanism (Andrews et al., 2013; Pritchett et al., 2013)

Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews explain why reforms can look successful on paper while failing in practice. States may copy the form of capable institutions without gaining real function. Andrews et al.'s PDIA approach responds by favouring local problem-solving over imported blueprints. In this framework, those ideas define the failure mechanism: expertise becomes substitutive when it works around the state, fills gaps for it, or creates the appearance of capacity without transfer. This mechanism is coded mainly in rows R1-R3 and appears most clearly in CMO-3.

3.3 Sequencing as the context condition (Fukuyama, 2004)

Fukuyama distinguishes the transfer of institutional *form* from the more difficult transfer of institutional *capacity*. This provides the main context lens: inherited institutions, fragility, and political commitment shape how expertise is absorbed. These conditions are coded in R4-R5. They matter, but they do not determine outcomes by themselves. In critical realist terms, context shapes whether a mechanism is likely to fire.

3.4 Provisional programme theory

The starting programme theory has two pathways:

- **Success pathway:** foreign expertise -> embedded in line ministries -> knowledge transfer -> local capability growth -> durable state capacity.
- **Failure pathway:** foreign expertise -> parallel structures -> dependency -> capacity collapse on expert exit.

Outcome row R6 records whether each case shows durable, mixed, or collapse outcomes.

3.5 Linkage to methodology

Table 1: Linking Frameworks to CMOs

Framework element	Analytical role	Matrix / CMO use
Evans: embedding in a capable apparatus	Mechanism	R1; M in CMO-1 and the Liberia contrast
Pritchett/Andrews: mimicry and parallel delivery	Mechanism	R1-R3; M in CMO-3
Fukuyama: form, capacity, and sequencing	Context	R4-R5; C in all CMOs
Transfer and succession requirements	Mechanism	R2-R3; distinguishes CMO-1 from Liberia
Programme theory	Outcome test	Refined in Results §5.3; answered in §5.4

The framework guides what the synthesis looks for; it does not predetermine the answer. The realist synthesis in Section 4 works backward from documented outcomes to the mechanisms and contexts that plausibly produced them. Where the evidence challenges the provisional theory, the theory is revised in the Results rather than imposed on the cases.

4. Methodology

4.1 Philosophical stance: critical realism

This study uses critical realism. It treats state capacity and institutional learning as real features of political systems, even though they are observed imperfectly through documents, evaluations, and case studies. The aim is not to identify universal laws. It is to infer the mechanisms that plausibly produced the observed outcomes.

The analysis is therefore retroductive: it works from documented outcomes back toward the conditions and mechanisms that may explain them. This stance fits the research question because the question is conditional. It asks "under what conditions" foreign expertise builds durable capacity (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Donor reports and academic sources are therefore read neither as neutral facts nor as mere discourse. They are treated as partial evidence about real institutional processes.

4.2 Research design: realist synthesis

The research design is a **realist synthesis**, informed by RAMESES standards but adapted for a rapid, structured secondary-analysis task (Greenhalgh et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2013). Realist synthesis asks what works, for whom, and in what circumstances. It therefore produces Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations rather than average effects. Realist evaluation has been applied in this configurational form in implementation research, demonstrating the approach on documentary and qualitative evidence (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2010).

The design operationalizes the theoretical framework in Section 3. That framework provides the concepts to code: embedding, transfer, parallel delivery, institutional inheritance, and political commitment. Several alternatives were rejected because they did not fit the question or the available evidence.

Table 2: Rejected alternatives

Alternative	Reason for rejection
Cross-country regression	Weak identification with seven purposive cases; cannot capture mechanisms
Full PRISMA systematic review	Too large for a time-bounded 6,000-word report
Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)	Calibration burden and small-N fragility
Pure discourse analysis	The question concerns capacity outcomes, not meaning alone
Primary Guinea fieldwork	Out of scope; this is a secondary-data study

4.3 Research question, programme theory, and hypotheses

The study asks: under what conditions does the use of foreign expertise contribute to durable state-capacity development in low-income countries? A provisional programme theory was specified before coding. The success pathway links foreign expertise to embedding, knowledge transfer, local capability growth, and durable capacity. The failure pathway links foreign expertise to parallel structures, dependency, and collapse on expert exit.

Because this is a qualitative realist synthesis, formal hypothesis development and statistical testing are not applicable by design. Instead, the programme theory functions as the testable proposition. It is assessed through cross-case configurational analysis and revised where the evidence requires it.

4.4 Case selection

Seven cases were selected to vary the outcome and the proposed mechanisms. Botswana and Rwanda represent durable capacity. Senegal and Nigeria represent mixed West African cases and provide useful regional comparators for the later Guinea discussion. Liberia, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone represent fragile or post-conflict settings with high technical-assistance intensity.

The selection also includes rival context conditions: mineral and oil rents (Botswana, Nigeria), authoritarian coordination (Rwanda), and post-conflict fragility (Liberia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone). Guinea is not a case. It appears only in Section 6 as a derived application.

4.5 Data collection: secondary sources only

The study uses secondary data only. The sources are published academic studies, scholarly monographs, donor evaluations, and multilateral or agency documents. No interviews, surveys, or primary fieldwork were conducted.

Sources were retrieved through Scopus/EBSCO-indexed journals, publisher and repository pages, and donor-agency portals. Search strings combined expertise terms ("technical assistance," "technical cooperation," "foreign expert") with capacity terms ("state capacity," "institutional capacity") and case names. Inclusion required that a source address foreign or technical expertise and institutional capacity, be available in English, and either code at least two matrix conditions or document a mechanism-outcome pathway. Macro-growth studies without a capacity mechanism, opinion pieces, inaccessible sources, and Guinea-primary studies were excluded.

The PRISMA-lite record identified about 48 records, screened 40, and included 28 (Appendix A). Following a full-text corpus audit, the final set contains roughly 15 Tier A peer-reviewed sources, 4 Tier B case studies/working papers, and 9 Tier C multilateral or agency documents (Appendix B). Every included source is held in full text in the workspace corpus or verified on an official project page; none remains metadata-only. Each case is supported by at least two sources. Senegal remains the thinnest case: its mechanism cells rest on an implementer-reported project page (Cowater International, 2026) triangulated against one ethnographic source, and it is therefore treated cautiously.

4.6 Variables, measurements, and coding

The study does not use quantitative variables. Instead, it uses six qualitative analytical conditions as the equivalent of variables and measurements. These are coded in a seven-case by six-condition matrix (Appendix C).

Rows R1-R3 capture mechanisms: whether experts are embedded or parallel, whether local hiring/nationalization is present, and whether knowledge-transfer requirements exist. Rows R4-R5 capture context: pre-existing institutional strength and political commitment to localization. Row R6 records the outcome: durable, mixed, or collapse.

Each cell is coded Y / Partial / N / Not reported and linked to a source ID plus a short evidence note. This makes the coding auditable and prevents unsupported matrix claims.

The coding deliberately favours transparency over false precision. A **Y** code requires clear documentary evidence. Partial is used where a condition exists but is incomplete, project-bound, weakly measured, or contested. N is used where sources document absence or bypass. Not reported is used where the retrieved corpus does not support a defensible judgement. This prevents silence in the sources from being treated as evidence of absence.

4.7 CMO configuration rules and confidence

CMO configurations were created only after matrix coding. Each configuration names its Context, Mechanism, and Outcome and cites supporting sources (Appendix D). Confidence is graded H where two or more sources converge, M where evidence is strong but partial, and L where the inference is weaker. Confidence levels are reported with the findings so the strength of evidence is visible.

4.8 Data-analysis technique: retroduction

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, the matrix was read for recurring patterns. Second, candidate mechanisms were inferred to explain those patterns. Third, the provisional programme theory was revised where the evidence challenged it. The most important revisions were that strong pre-existing institutions became a modifier rather than a prerequisite, and embedding-versus-parallel delivery became the pivotal mechanism.

4.9 Trustworthiness, limitations, and ethics

Trustworthiness rests on transparency. The search log, source log, matrix, and CMO log form an audit trail from question to finding (Appendices A-D). The report also separates findings from interpretation: "Sources document" is used for evidence, while "this synthesis suggests" is used for inference.

The limitations are acknowledged. The sample is small and purposive. Donor evaluations may over-report outputs, especially in fragile cases. Senegal's evidence is thinner than the evidence for the other cases. As a secondary documentary study, the research raises no human-subjects ethical concerns. No primary data were collected, no statistics were generated, and the main ethical obligation is to represent sources accurately and not present derived recommendations as empirical findings.

5. Results

5.1 The conditions matrix

The seven cases were coded across six conditions. Three are mechanisms: embedded experts, local hiring/nationalization, and knowledge-transfer requirements. Two are context conditions: pre-existing institutional strength and political commitment to localization. The final row records the outcome: durable, mixed, or collapse. Table 3 summarizes the matrix; the full evidence notes and source IDs are in Appendix C.

Table 3: Conditions matrix (Y / Partial / N / NR)

Condition	Botswana	Rwanda	Senegal	Nigeria	Liberia	Afghanistan	Sierra Leone
R1 Embedded experts (not parallel units)	Y	Y	Partial	Partial	Y	N	N
R2 Local hiring / nationalization	Partial	Partial	NR	Y	Partial	N	Partial
R3 Knowledge-transfer requirements	Y	Y	Partial	Partial	Partial	N	Partial
R4 Strong pre-existing institutions	Partial	Partial	Partial	Partial	N	N	N
R5 Political commitment to localization	Y	Y	Partial	Y	Partial	Partial	Partial
R6 Outcome	Durable	Durable	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Collapse	Collapse

The pattern is clear. The two durable cases, Botswana and Rwanda, both score Y on embedded experts and knowledge-transfer requirements. The two collapse cases, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, score N on embedded experts and have weak or absent transfer. The mixed cases sit between these poles. A further important result is that no case scores Y on strong pre-existing institutions (R4). Durable capacity appears without strong inherited institutions, but not without embedding and transfer. The matrix therefore does more than describe the cases. It provides the first answer to the research question: expertise seems to build capacity when it is inside the state and tied to learning; it fails when it delivers around the state.

5.2 CMO configurations

Four configurations were inferred from the matrix. CMO-1 and CMO-3 provide the main contrast between durable capacity and collapse. CMO-2 explains the intermediate cases. CMO-4 treats resource rents as a modifier rather than a standalone explanation. Liberia is reported as a contrast within CMO-3 because it shares the fragility context but changes the mechanism.

CMO-1: Embedding plus transfer in a committed core -> durable capacity

(Confidence: H)

Context (C). Sources document a politically committed elite working through a protected bureaucratic core. This was visible in Botswana after independence (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Sebudubudu & Lotshwao, 2009) and Rwanda after 1994 (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Chemouni, 2019). Neither case began with strong inherited institutions, but both protected a core of state capability.

Mechanism (M). Foreign experts were placed inside line institutions rather than parallel units. They were also linked to training, counterpart development, or selective knowledge transfer. Botswana retained expatriates within the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning while training citizens (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Sebudubudu & Lotshwao, 2009). Rwanda placed advisors within organizational structures to facilitate knowledge transfer and used technical assistance selectively (Redifer et al., 2020).

Outcome (O). Sources document durable capacity: Botswana developed a meritocratic, low-corruption bureaucracy; Rwanda developed broad state effectiveness and high-performing core agencies (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Chemouni, 2019; Redifer et al., 2020). These outcomes are not treated as perfect or universal state capacity. They are treated as durable relative to the other cases because institutional capability persisted beyond the immediate presence of foreign advisors and broadened into core public agencies.

Botswana vignette. Botswana matters because capacity was built, not simply inherited. At independence, the administrative base was thin. Rather than localize posts before qualified citizens were available, Botswana kept expatriate officers inside the state and used them to train Botswana counterparts. When diamond revenues arrived, they were routed through this bureaucratic core rather than around it. The result was durable state capacity, not only short-term project delivery.

Rwanda vignette. Rwanda shows a similar mechanism in a very different context. After the genocide, institutions were devastated. Yet advisors were embedded inside ministries and used selectively, with strong local ownership and an emphasis on transfer (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Redifer et al., 2020). The case supports the same mechanism as Botswana: weak inherited institutions can still build capacity if expertise is embedded in a committed core.

CMO-2: Partial embedding and reform cycles -> mixed localization

(Confidence: M)

Context (C). Senegal and Nigeria both had moderate but constrained institutions. Senegal's administration was long-standing but shaped by informal practice and limited bureaucratic capacity (Blundo, 2006). Nigeria had oil rents, federal fragmentation, and weak state capacity despite formal local-content ambitions (Ovadia, 2013; Ovadia & Wolf, 2018).

Mechanism (M). In both cases, embedding and transfer were partial. Senegal's donor-supported reforms established management-control units and trained more than 1,700 officials, but institutionalization remained uncertain (Cowater International, 2026). Nigeria's Nigerian Content Act and NCDMB increased national participation in oil, yet transfer was difficult to measure and priorities were often shaped by international oil companies or elite interests (Ovadia, 2013).

Outcome (O). The result is mixed localization. Participation increased, tools were transferred, and some national capability grew. However, the gains remained uneven and vulnerable to capture. CMO-2 is important because it prevents a simple success/failure binary. Senegal and Nigeria show that embedding can be present but incomplete, and that national participation is not the same as durable state capability. This synthesis suggests that local-content mandates and reform projects can increase participation without producing durable capacity if transfer is not measured and protected.

CMO-3: Parallel structures without transfer in fragility -> dependency and collapse (Confidence: H)

Context (C). Afghanistan and Sierra Leone were post-conflict or fragile settings with high technical-assistance intensity and weak inherited institutions (Bizhan, 2018; DFID, 2008).

Mechanism (M). Expertise moved through parallel structures rather than through the state. Afghanistan relied heavily on off-budget aid and private contractors; less than 40% of technical assistance was coordinated with government (Bizhan, 2018; Bizhan & UNU-WIDER, 2023). Sierra Leone used donor-hired local technical assistants and PIUs that drew skilled staff away from the civil service (DFID, 2008; World Bank Group, 2019b)

Outcome (O). Sources document dependency and collapse. In Afghanistan, aid and expertise fragmented the state-building project. In Sierra Leone, PIUs may have reduced wider civil-service capacity (DFID, 2008). These cases show that a high volume of expertise can weaken capacity if it bypasses the institutions it is meant to strengthen. They also show why short-term delivery indicators are insufficient: projects may deliver services or reforms while leaving the civil service less able to perform those functions independently.

Afghanistan vignette. Afghanistan is the clearest collapse case because expertise volume was high but embedding was weak. More than 78% of aid was off-budget, and much technical assistance was delivered through contractors and parallel systems (Bizhan, 2013, 2018; Bizhan & UNU-WIDER, 2023). The result was capable projects sitting on top of a weak state, rather than a stronger state.

Liberia contrast: embedding under fragility without succession -> mixed outcome (Confidence: M)

Liberia shares the post-conflict fragility context of CMO-3, but its mechanism differed. Under GEMAP, international experts were embedded inside ministries, the central bank, and state-owned enterprises with co-signatory authority (Gilpin & Hyu, 2008; World Bank Group, 2019a). Sources document revenue and fiscal-governance gains, but also note that capacity-transfer expectations did not fully materialize.

This contrast is important. Holding fragility broadly constant, embedding shifted Liberia away from collapse. However, because succession planning remained weak, the outcome was mixed rather than durable. Liberia therefore clarifies the main finding: embedding is necessary, but it must be paired with transfer and succession. In CMO terms, Liberia keeps the fragile context but changes the mechanism. This makes it the strongest within-context test of the embedding argument in the case set.

CMO-4: Resource rents as a modifier (Confidence: M)

Botswana and Nigeria both had major natural-resource rents: diamonds in Botswana and oil in Nigeria. The outcomes diverged. This suggests that the resource itself is not the decisive explanation.

The mechanism was different. Botswana channelled rents through the MFDP and a disciplined civil service (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Sebudubudu & Lotshwao, 2009). Nigeria's oil rents were more exposed to elite capture and international oil-company influence, while local-content policy raised participation without clearly measuring skill transfer (Ovadia, 2013). Resource rents therefore work through the embedding mechanism. They can support capacity when routed through a meritocratic core, or bypass learning when captured outside it.

Cross-configuration pattern

The configurations form a continuum. At one end, expertise is embedded and transfer-bound; outcomes are durable. At the other, expertise is parallel and substitutive; outcomes collapse. Between them, partial embedding produces mixed results. Context matters, but it mainly shapes how the mechanism operates. It does not replace the mechanism. This is the main empirical contribution of the Results: the same broad instrument, foreign expertise, produces different outcomes because it is delivered through different institutional arrangements.

5.3 Refined programme-theory pathways

The provisional pathways were tested and refined against the configurations.

Supported success pathway (CMO-1):

Foreign expertise ->
embedded in line ministries ->
selective transfer + counterpart training ->
local capability growth under a committed core ->
durable state capacity

Supported failure pathway (CMO-3):

Foreign expertise ->
parallel structures (off-budget, PIUs, LTAs) ->
no genuine transfer ->
donor dependency ->
capacity collapse on expert exit

Three refinements follow. First, the Liberia contrast shows that embedding can shift outcomes even under fragility, but embedding without succession remains insufficient. Second, CMO-2 shows that moderate institutions with partial embedding produce mixed, path-dependent localization. Third, CMO-4 shows that rents act through the embedding mechanism rather than independently.

The largest revision concerns pre-existing institutions. The original programme theory treated them as a likely prerequisite. The matrix did not support that assumption. No case scored Y on R4, yet Botswana and Rwanda achieved durable capacity. The stronger condition is therefore political commitment channelled through an embedded, transfer-bound core.

5.4 Summary answer to the research question

Under what conditions does the use of foreign expertise contribute to durable state-capacity development in low-income countries?

Sources document that durable capacity appears when three conditions hold together: foreign experts are embedded within line institutions; knowledge transfer and counterpart development are required; and a politically committed bureaucratic core protects the process. Collapse appears when expertise is parallel, off-budget, and not tied to transfer under fragility. Mixed outcomes appear where embedding and transfer are partial. The cases therefore do not support a blanket claim that foreign expertise either works or fails. They support a conditional claim: expertise works as capacity-building only when it becomes part of a domestic learning process.

This synthesis suggests a three-part answer. First, embedding is the pivotal lever. Second, embedding must be paired with transfer and succession. Third, context conditions such as resource rents and inherited institutions matter mainly through the embedding mechanism. These are conditional tendencies, not deterministic laws. Confidence is High for the durable and collapse pathways, and Moderate for the mixed pathway and rents modifier.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of key findings

The study began from a gap in the literature. Technical-assistance failure is well explained, but success is often treated case by case. The Results turn that scattered evidence into a conditional answer. Sources document that durable capacity depends on three conditions working together: experts embedded inside state institutions, real transfer requirements, and a politically committed bureaucratic core (CMO-1). Collapse follows the opposite pattern: expertise delivered through parallel structures, without transfer, in fragile settings (CMO-3).

This helps reconcile two strands of the literature. The Berg et al. (1993) and Cox & Norrington-Davies, (2020) are right to warn that technical assistance often produces dependency or isolated "islands of capacity." However, the durable cases show that this is not inevitable. The problem is not foreign expertise itself. The problem is expertise that substitutes for the state rather than building the state's own capability.

6.2 The decisive lever: embedding with transfer

The most important finding is straightforward: where expertise sits matters. Expertise embedded in ministries behaves differently from expertise routed through project units, contractors, or off-budget structures. Liberia makes this especially clear. It shared the post-conflict fragility of Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, but embedded international experts inside ministries and financial institutions with co-signatory authority (Gilpin & Hyu, 2008; World Bank Group, 2019a). Its outcome was mixed rather than collapse.

That contrast is analytically useful because it holds fragility broadly constant while changing the mechanism. Afghanistan's off-budget delivery and Sierra Leone's PIUs hollowed the civil service (Bizhan, 2018; DFID, 2008). Liberia's embedded model stabilised core fiscal functions. Yet Liberia also shows the limit of embedding alone: without succession planning, outputs improved but durable transfer remained weak. Botswana and Rwanda did better because embedding was paired with counterpart development and selective transfer (Acemoglu et al., 2003; Redifer et al., 2020). The revised claim is therefore tighter: durable capacity requires embedding and enforceable transfer. In practical terms, the design of a technical-assistance contract matters as much as the expertise being purchased. Where the expert sits, who they train, what must be handed over, and when exit occurs are all part of the capacity-building mechanism.

6.3 Theoretical implications

The findings refine the theories used in Section 3. Evans's (1995) embedded autonomy applies not only to domestic bureaucracies, but also to imported expertise. Foreign advisors take on the character of the institutional setting in which they work: embedded advisors can build capability, while parallel advisors can deepen dependency. Pritchett et al. (2013) capability-trap logic is visible in the mixed cases, where local-content rules or reform toolkits created participation without secure transfer. Fukuyama's (2004) distinction between form and capacity is also confirmed, but sharpened: form becomes function only when expertise is institutionally embedded and linked to succession.

6.4 Reasons for an unexpected result

One result was unexpected. The provisional theory treated strong pre-existing institutions as a likely prerequisite for success. Yet no case scored Y on R4, and the two durable cases, Botswana and Rwanda, began from weak material baselines. The evidence therefore forced a refinement. The key condition was not inherited bureaucratic strength. It was political commitment channelled through a protected meritocratic core. In other words, committed embedding partly compensated for weak inheritance.

6.5 Practical implications for Guinea (derived)

The following applies the CMO-derived programme theory to Guinea. These are analytical extrapolations, not empirical findings about Guinea, which was not a case in this study.

Guinea is a low-income, bauxite-endowed francophone West African state seeking to convert foreign expertise and mineral wealth into lasting institutions. Four design principles follow from the synthesis.

First, **embed expertise in national authorities, not parallel units** (CMO-1; CMO-3; Liberia contrast). In priority sectors such as infrastructure, water, and energy, foreign advisors should work inside permanent national authorities and line ministries. Afghanistan and Sierra Leone show how off-budget delivery and PIUs can hollow the state (Bizhan, 2018; DFID, 2008). Liberia shows that embedding can move outcomes away from collapse (World Bank Group, 2019a).

Second, **make transfer and succession contractual** (CMO-1; Liberia contrast). Contracts should name local counterparts, define handover milestones, and set time-bound expatriate phase-out targets. Liberia shows that embedding without succession can secure outputs but not durable capability (Gilpin & Hyu, 2008; World Bank Group, 2019a).

Third, **measure local content as capability, not only participation** (CMO-2). Guinea's mining-sector local-content rules should track local managers, post-project retention, and functions genuinely transferred. Nigeria warns that local participation can rise without deep capability transfer (Ovadia, 2013).

Fourth, **channel bauxite rents through an embedded bureaucratic core** (CMO-4). Botswana shows how resource rents can support capacity when routed through a disciplined bureaucracy (Acemoglu et al., 2003). Nigeria shows the risk when rents bypass that core (Ovadia, 2013). Senegal and Nigeria are useful regional comparators: Senegal for francophone project-based embedding, and Nigeria for local-content and PIU risks.

A current Guinean programme illustrates both the promise and the risk of this design. The *Projet d'appui au renforcement des capacités de l'administration pour la gestion des projets miniers intégrés* (PARCA-GPI), financed by the African Development Bank and implemented by the CPCS-Cowater consortium, trained around 300 public officials across 30 modules to strengthen a national mining-coordination body, the Bureau d'Appui à la Coordination des Projets Miniers (Ministère des Mines et de la Géologie, 2026). This fits the embedding-with-transfer logic of CMO-1: capability is built inside a permanent national authority rather than a parallel donor unit, and is tied to an explicit training mandate in the priority mineral sector. The synthesis also cautions, consistent with CMO-2 and the Liberia contrast, that training inputs and a coordination bureau do not guarantee absorption.

Durable capacity still depends on sustained political commitment, measured local-content capability, and succession planning. These observations are illustrative applications of the programme theory, not empirical findings about Guinea, which was not a case in this study.

6.6 Limitations

The study supports mechanism inference, not statistical generalisation. It uses seven purposive cases and relies partly on donor evaluations, especially for fragile settings. Senegal's evidence is thinner than the evidence for the other cases. Consistent with critical realism, the CMOs are conditional tendencies rather than laws. Confidence is High for the durable and collapse pathways, and Moderate for the mixed pathway and rents modifier.

6.7 Future research

Future research could add more cases, trace mechanisms within cases, and study Guinea directly through primary fieldwork. That would test whether the embedding-and-transfer mechanism identified here also holds when observed in real time.

7. Conclusion

This study asked under what conditions foreign expertise contributes to durable state-capacity development in low-income countries. Using a critical realist realist-synthesis of seven cases, it built and tested an applied programme theory expressed through four Context-Mechanism-Outcome configurations.

The answer is conditional. Sources document that durable capacity in Botswana and Rwanda arose where three conditions came together: foreign experts were embedded in line institutions, knowledge transfer and counterpart training were required, and a politically committed bureaucratic core protected the process (CMO-1). Collapse appeared where the opposite mechanism operated: parallel, off-budget delivery without transfer under post-conflict fragility (CMO-3). Partial embedding produced mixed localization in Senegal and Nigeria (CMO-2).

The central finding is therefore straightforward: the decisive issue is not how much expertise is imported, but how it is governed. Embedding is the pivotal lever. Liberia shows that embedding can shift outcomes away from collapse even under fragility, but also that embedding without succession is not enough. Resource rents and inherited institutions matter, but largely through the embedding mechanism rather than independently (CMO-4).

The study's contribution is an applied realist programme theory that turns a fragmented literature on technical assistance into testable conditions for success. Its practical implications for Guinea follow from that theory: embed expertise in national authorities, make transfer and succession contractual, measure local-content capability, and channel rents through a meritocratic core. These are derived implications, not empirical findings about Guinea.

The study is limited by its small purposive sample, possible documentary bias in some donor evaluations, and thinner evidence for Senegal. The configurations should therefore be read as conditional tendencies, not universal laws. Their value lies in making those tendencies explicit and testable. Future research could add cases, trace mechanisms within cases, and examine Guinea directly through primary fieldwork to test whether the embedding-and-transfer mechanism holds in practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A — Search strategy and PRISMA-lite screening

Databases / sources. Scopus and EBSCO-indexed journals (Tier A peer-reviewed); publisher pages and institutional repositories (Tier A/B verification); donor and agency portals — World Bank, IMF, UNDP, DFID/FCDO, USIP, Agulhas/OSF, SAIIA, African Development Bank, and the Cowater International and Government of Guinea / Senegal project pages (Tier B/C grey literature).

Illustrative search strings. ("technical assistance" OR "technical cooperation" OR "foreign expert*") AND ("state capacity" OR "institutional capacity"); plus theory threads (Evans "embedded autonomy"; Pritchett/Andrews "capability traps"/PDIA; Fukuyama "state-building"); methodology threads (Pawson & Tilley "realist evaluation"; RAMESES realist-synthesis standards/protocol); and per-case strings combining each case name with capacity/expertise terms.

PRISMA-lite counts.

Stage	Count
Records identified across threads	~48
Screened (title/abstract/executive summary)	40
Excluded (off-topic, no capacity mechanism, inaccessible, Guinea-primary)	12
Full-text / full-document assessed	28
Included in synthesis	28

Appendix B — Source log (28 sources)

Tiers: A = peer-reviewed (incl. scholarly monographs/theses); B = case studies/evaluations/working papers; C = multilateral/agency/government documents.

ID	Author (Year)	Tier	Case / Role	CMO
S01	Evans (1995)	A	Theory	CMO-1
S02	Pritchett, Woolcock & Andrews (2013)	A	Theory	CMO-3
S03	Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock (2013)	A	Theory	CMO-3
S04	Fukuyama (2004, <i>Journal of Democracy</i>)	A	Theory	CMO-1
S05	Evans & Rauch (1999)	A	Theory	CMO-1
S06	Pawson & Tilley (2004)	A	Methodology	N/A
S07	Wong et al. (2013)	A	Methodology	N/A
S08	UNDP / Berg (1993)	C	General TA	CMO-3
S09	Cox & Norrington-Davies (2019)	C	General TA	CMO-2
S10	Sebudubudu & Lotshwao (2009)	C	Botswana	CMO-1
S11	Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson (2003)	A	Botswana	CMO-1
S12	Booth & Golooba-Mutebi (2012)	A	Rwanda	CMO-1
S13	Redifer et al. (2020)	C	Rwanda	CMO-1
S14	Chemouni (2019)	B	Rwanda	CMO-1
S15	Blundo (2006)	A	Senegal	CMO-2
S16	Cowater International (2026)	C	Senegal	CMO-2
S17	Ovadia & Wolf (2018)	A	Nigeria	CMO-2
S18	Ovadia (2013)	A	Nigeria	CMO-2
S19	World Bank (2019a)	C	Liberia	CMO-3 (contrast)
S20	Gilpin / USIP (2008)	B	Liberia	CMO-3 (contrast)
S21	Bizhan (2018, <i>Asian Survey</i>)	A	Afghanistan	CMO-3
S22	Bizhan (2023)	B	Afghanistan	CMO-3
S23	DFID (2008)	C	Sierra Leone	CMO-3
S24	World Bank (2019b)	C	Sierra Leone	CMO-3
S25	Greenhalgh et al. (2011)	A	Methodology	N/A

S26	Rycroft-Malone et al. (2010)	A	Methodology	N/A
S27	Bizhan (2013, ANU thesis)	A/B	Afghanistan	CMO-3
S28	Ministère des Mines et de la Géologie (2026)	C	Guinea (Implications §6.5)	application

Approximate tier balance: A $\approx$ 15, B $\approx$ 4, C $\approx$ 9.

Appendix C — Conditions matrix with source IDs

Codes: Y / Partial / N / NR. Mechanism rows R1–R3; context rows R4–R5; outcome row R6. Full notes in matrix-working.csv (Submission upon request).

Condition	Botswana	Rwanda	Senegal	Nigeria	Liberia	Afghanistan	Sierra Leone
R1 Embedded experts	Y (S10,S11)	Y (S13)	Partial (S16)	Partial (S18)	Y (S19,S20)	N (S21,S22)	N (S23,S24)
R2 Local hiring/nationalization	Partial (S10,S11)	Partial (S12,S13)	Partial (S16)	Y (S18)	Partial (S20)	N (S21,S22)	Partial (S23,S24)
R3 Knowledge-transfer requirements	Partial (S10,S11)	Y (S13)	Partial (S16)	Partial (S18)	Partial (S19,S20)	N (S22)	Partial (S23,S24)
R4 Strong pre-existing institutions	Partial (S11)	Partial (S12,S14)	Partial (S15)	Partial (S17,S18)	N (S19,S20)	N (S21,S22)	N (S23,S24)
R5 Political commitment to localization	Y (S10,S11)	Y (S12,S13,S14)	Partial (S15)	Y (S18)	Partial (S19,S20)	Partial (S22)	Partial (S23,S24)
R6 Outcome	Durable	Durable	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Collapse	Mixed

Appendix D — CMO configuration log

CMO	Context	Mechanism	Outcome	Cases	Conf.
CMO-1	Committed elite + meritocratic core (weak baseline)	Embedding + selective transfer + counterpart training	Durable capacity	Botswana, Rwanda	H
CMO-2	Moderate, patronage-affected institutions + ongoing TA	Partial, project-bound embedding/transfer; weak measurement	Mixed localization	Senegal, Nigeria	M
CMO-3	Post-conflict fragility + high TA intensity	Parallel structures (off-budget, PIUs, LTAs); no transfer	Dependency & collapse	Afghanistan, Sierra Leone	H
CMO-3 contrast	Post-conflict fragility (held constant)	Embedding with co-signatory authority but weak succession	Mixed (stabilisation, not durable transfer)	Liberia	M
CMO-4	Resource windfall (modifier)	Rents through vs around an embedded core	Durable (through) vs capture (around)	Botswana, Nigeria	M

Full CMO narratives with verified quotes in can be submitted upon request.

Appendix E — Task 1b Self-Reflective Report

Producing this report made me realize that the weakest part of my early work was not the topic or research question, but the reliability of the evidence trail behind the argument. I initially treated the source list as if it already represented a secure foundation. It contained recognized theory, country evidence, and donor documents, so it looked credible. The critical feedback and learning points challenged that assumption. They showed me that a persuasive structure is not enough if the sources, matrix cells, and CMO claims cannot be traced visibly.

The key shift was from argument-building to evidence-checking. I had to ask whether each source genuinely supported the claim I wanted to make, rather than whether it fitted the direction of the report. This exposed several weaknesses. A technical-assistance review I had identified by organization was actually authored by Cox & Norrington-Davies (2020). A file labelled as Ovadia's local-content monograph contained a different, though still useful, article by Ovadia and Wolf (2018). Ovadia's *The Petro-Developmental State in Africa* (2016) and Samatar's Botswana study, identified through Mbenga's H-Net review, were unavailable in the working corpus. (Ovadia, 2016; Samatar, 1999) These were not minor referencing issues; they affected the credibility of the synthesis.

Critically evaluating the work also forced me to separate evidence from interpretation. In a realist synthesis, the matrix is not decorative. It is the bridge between sources and CMO configurations. If a cell on embedded experts, transfer mandates or parallel structures are not supported by a checked source, then the later CMO becomes too speculative. This was especially important because the report uses secondary sources only. I could infer plausible mechanisms but I could not treat those inferences as direct empirical proof.

The same lesson applied to Guinea. My original motivation was policy-facing, but the methodology required discipline. Guinea could not be treated as an analyzed case simply because it was the practical concern behind the project. The reflection helped me see that Guinea must remain an application section, derived from the synthesis, not a source of findings. That distinction strengthened the report because it prevented the recommendations from becoming detached from the evidence base.

I also became more aware of the uneven quality of the corpus. Some sources were peer-reviewed and theoretically strong; others were donor or implementer reports with obvious limits. Senegal's evidence remained thinner and partly implementer-reported. These limitations do not invalidate the report, but they mean the findings should be presented cautiously as mechanism-based synthesis rather than generalizable proof.

My main learning is that critical evaluation is not something added at the end of a report. It has to shape the whole research process: checking sources, questioning attractive claims, making uncertainty visible, and being honest about what the evidence can and cannot support.