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STRUCTURED GOVERNANCE CAPACITY AND ROUTINE EFFECTIVENESS: EVIDENCE FROM CHINA-LAOS BORDER VILLAGES

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Abstract

This study empirically examines how different dimensions of governance capacity translate into routine governance effectiveness within institution-dense, discretion-constrained border villages. Challenging the traditional additive capacity logic, this research proposes a structured-capacity framework, arguing that capacity dimensions function unevenly. Drawing on 400 survey responses from the China-Laos frontier, the study uses exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression to assess five capacity dimensions: collective action, coordination, resilience, learning, and resource integration. The findings show that learning capacity is the strongest, most stable predictor of perceived governance effectiveness, underscoring its pivotal role in turning institutional mandates into repeatable administrative routines. Resource integration provides a secondary enabling effect, whereas coordination, collective action, and resilience exhibit no stable direct impact on routine outcomes. Ultimately, the study concludes that effective grassroots governance depends less on cumulative capacity expansion and more on the crucial organizational ability to institutionalize continuous learning and routinize complex policy implementation under constrained local discretion.

Keywords: Governance Effectiveness, Structured Capacity Framework, Organizational Learning, Grassroots Administration, Border Governance

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Introduction

Border villages along the China-Laos frontier are distinctive arenas of rural governance. In these settings, public-service delivery, development administration, social stability, and border-related mandates intersect within a governance environment shaped by overlapping administrative and territorial logics. Village committees must therefore respond not only to everyday livelihood concerns, but also to dense institutional requirements and expectations transmitted from higher levels of government. This combination of routine governance tasks and border-specific pressures makes such villages analytically valuable for examining how governance capacity translates into governance effectiveness under constrained local discretion (Newman, 2006; Scott, 2011).

Existing studies often assume that stronger governance capacity leads to better governance outcomes through the cumulative expansion of multiple dimensions. However, governance is not reducible to the formal presence of authority alone; it also concerns the capacity of governing arrangements to formulate, coordinate, and implement collectively binding decisions in practice (Fukuyama, 2013). This additive logic is less persuasive in institution-dense settings characterized by hierarchical oversight, standardized supervision, and limited room for local discretion. Under such conditions, different capacity dimensions are unlikely to contribute equally to observed outcomes. The analytical question is therefore not simply whether governance capacity matters, but which dimensions matter most, under what conditions, and through what processes they shape governance effectiveness.

Against this background, the present study adopts a structured-capacity perspective. It argues that learning capacity plays a pivotal conversion role because it enables village committees to internalize formal rules, absorb governance tools, and embed them in repeatable organizational procedures (Levitt & March, 1988). Organizational-learning scholarship suggests that implementation becomes more stable when committees translate external requirements into routines through repeated learning, interpretation, and procedural adaptation. In this sense, village governance depends not only on whether committees have resources or coordination mechanisms, but also on their ability to convert policy requirements into routinized administrative practice under institutional constraints.

To empirically validate this structured-capacity perspective, the present study utilizes survey data from eight border villages in Mengla County, Yunnan Province (Watkins, 2018). Using exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression models, the research examines how specific dimensions of governance capacity translate into routine governance effectiveness. The findings challenge the conventional additive logic, revealing that learning capacity acts as the primary mechanism driving perceived governance effectiveness, with resource integration providing a supplementary, enabling effect. Conversely, capacities such as coordination, collective action, and resilience exhibit more episodic, rather than stable, direct influences on routine performance. Ultimately, this article advances the literature by demonstrating that achieving routine effectiveness in discretion-constrained environments relies fundamentally on the differentiated organizational conversion of specific capacity functions, rather than mere cumulative capacity expansion.

Literature Review

Institutional Density and the Limits of Additive Expansion

Governance research often treats capacity as something that can be accumulated across multiple dimensions to improve performance. However, when governance is understood not merely as the formal existence of authority but as the practical ability to make and implement collective decisions, the analytical issue shifts from simple capacity expansion to how different capacities translate into effective governing action (Fukuyama, 2013). From this additive perspective, more resources, stronger coordination, broader participation, and greater resilience

are generally expected to produce better outcomes. Nevertheless, this view is less persuasive in institution-dense and discretion-constrained settings, where standardized oversight, hierarchical supervision, and compliance pressure limit the extent to which all capacities can be converted equally into practical gains. The central question is therefore not simply whether governance capacity exists, but which capacities matter most, under what institutional conditions, and through what processes they shape governance effectiveness (Wu et al., 2015; van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022).

This limitation is also relevant to collaborative-governance research. Coordination and cross-actor collaboration do not automatically produce stronger implementation effects when institutional mandates are dense and local adaptation is constrained (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Cross-sector collaboration is often difficult to design and sustain in practice, and its performance effects depend heavily on task structure, institutional alignment, and implementation conditions rather than on collaboration alone (Bryson et al., 2015). The implication is not that collaborative capacities are unimportant, but that their contribution may vary according to the type of governance task, the degree of discretion available to local actors, and the extent to which administrative routines have already been institutionalized.

Learning as the Conversion Mechanism from Mandates to Routine Performance

A conversion-oriented perspective suggests that governance effectiveness depends less on the mere presence of resources than on the organizational ability to interpret rules, adapt tools, and stabilize implementation through routines. Organizational learning theory supports this view by showing that organizations stabilize action by absorbing external expectations, adjusting internal procedures, and reproducing practice through experience-based routines (Levitt & March, 1988; Bennett & Howlett, 1992). In this sense, learning is not simply the acquisition of knowledge. It also involves the organizational capacity to routinize responses and sustain implementation reliability over time.

This interpretation is consistent with governance-capacity scholarship, which treats capacity as a differentiated set of competences rather than a single undivided stock (Wu et al., 2015; van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022). In border villages, the conversion function becomes especially important because local committees must repeatedly translate top-down mandates into ordinary administrative procedures under constrained discretion (Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Learning capacity is therefore theoretically significant because it connects formal institutional order with everyday administrative repetition.

Border Governance and the Routine-Episodic Split of Capacity Functions

Border governance further suggests that different capacities may not contribute equally to all forms of performance, because frontier settings combine layered territorial pressures with continuing administrative demands (Newman, 2006; Scott, 2011). In routine village administration, some capacities are likely to matter more consistently than others, whereas coordination, collective action, and resilience may become more salient under episodic conditions such as campaigns, inter-organizational mobilization, disputes, or disruption; this expectation is informed by collaborative-governance and broader resilience scholarship rather than by a single established model (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Folke, 2006). Border studies also indicate that frontier governance combines continuous administrative demands with periodic security, development, and cross-boundary pressures in practice (Newman, 2006; Scott, 2011).

A structured-capacity perspective therefore expects governance capacity to be internally differentiated rather than uniformly cumulative. Some capacity dimensions may support everyday implementation on a stable basis, whereas others may become visible only when exceptional events, temporary campaigns, or cross-actor mobilization test governance. The key analytical issue is thus not whether a given capacity exists in abstract terms, but whether and how it is activated in relation to routine governance performance.

Taken together, these strands of literature suggest that governance capacity should be analyzed as a differentiated and conversion-dependent structure rather than as a uniformly accumulating stock. Under institution-dense and discretion-constrained conditions, the key question is not merely whether capacity exists, but which capacity functions can be translated most reliably into routine governance effectiveness, through what organizational processes, and under what task conditions. This mechanism-oriented perspective provides the basis for the following hypotheses.

Hypotheses

H1: The effects of governance capacity on governance effectiveness are expected to be structurally differentiated across dimensions rather than uniformly additive.

H2: Learning capacity is expected to play a more central role in shaping governance effectiveness because it serves as a key conversion mechanism through which institutional requirements are internalized, adapted, and translated into routinized operating procedures.

H3: Coordination, collective action, and resilience are expected to contribute to routine governance effectiveness in a more contextually contingent or episodic manner, whereas resource integration is expected to function primarily as an enabling condition under persistent institutional constraint.

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

This study focuses on border villages in Mengla County, Yunnan Province, along the China-Laos frontier. The study population consists of villages operating under a broadly similar institutional framework of border governance, rural administration, public-service provision, and stability maintenance. In total, 22 border villages in Mengla County formed the sampling frame for the study.

This setting is analytically appropriate because village committees in the area face overlapping governance tasks related to development, administration, infrastructure provision, and social order under conditions of relatively constrained local discretion. To improve representativeness across different village contexts, the study adopted a stratified village-selection strategy. The 22 villages were first grouped by village size and general development conditions into comparable strata. Villages were then randomly selected within these strata, resulting in a final sample of eight villages. This procedure was intended to preserve variation in population size, development conditions, and governance settings while avoiding overrepresentation of extreme cases.

In the eight sampled villages, we administered a structured questionnaire survey to community respondents. The number of questionnaires distributed in each village was broadly proportionate to local population and field accessibility, aiming to ensure balanced coverage across the sampled settings. A total of 425 questionnaires were distributed, and 400 valid responses were retained for analysis, yielding an effective response rate of approximately 94.1%. Respondents were primarily ordinary villagers and residents with regular contact with village-committee affairs, community participation, or related local public issues.

The use of community respondents is consistent with the analytical focus of the study because the dependent variable is perceived governance effectiveness at the village-committee level. Villagers are direct recipients and everyday observers of routine governance performance and are therefore well positioned to evaluate how governance effectiveness is experienced in village life. However, the measure remains perceptual rather than administrative in nature (Rosyadi et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Data were collected between September and December 2025 through a structured questionnaire survey conducted in the eight sampled villages. The questionnaire was designed to measure two core constructs: governance capacity and governance effectiveness.

Governance capacity was operationalized across five dimensions—collective action, coordination, resilience, learning, and resource integration—drawing on recent governance-capacity frameworks and broader capacity scholarship (van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022). More specifically, the items for collective action and coordination were informed by collaborative-governance research (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012), the resilience items were informed by broader resilience scholarship (Folke, 2006), and the learning items were informed by organizational- and policy-learning research (Levitt & March, 1988; Bennett & Howlett, 1992).

Governance effectiveness was measured across six domains—leadership effectiveness, infrastructure improvement, industrial development, environmental quality, quality of life, and social stability—adapted to the institutional responsibilities of border village committees. In total, 50 items were used to measure governance capacity, and 60 items were used to measure governance effectiveness. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

The questionnaire items were developed by translating theoretical constructs into observable governance practices and then adapting the wording to the practical responsibilities of border village committees. This design choice was intended to improve contextual validity by ensuring that the survey captured perceived governance processes and outcomes in concrete village-governance settings rather than abstract attitudes toward local government. Survey administration emphasized neutrality and voluntary participation, and completed responses were screened before analysis to remove incomplete or invalid questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The analytical procedure was systematically structured to validate and interpret the empirical data. Initially, we evaluated the reliability and factorability of the measurement instruments using Cronbach’s alpha, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity to ensure internal consistency and suitability for latent-structure analysis (Watkins, 2018). Subsequently, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal axis factoring and Promax rotation was conducted separately for both governance capacity and effectiveness scales. We guided factor retention by eigenvalues, scree-plot patterns, and theoretical interpretability, and methodically excluded items with low or cross-loadings to ensure conceptual clarity (Cheung et al., 2024; Watkins, 2018). Finally, to capture the differentiated associations of the structured capacities, multiple regression models were estimated. The EFA-derived functional factor scores were entered simultaneously to predict the composite outcome of overall governance effectiveness. To ensure robustness, supplementary domain-specific estimations and models with village-clustered robust standard errors were also conducted, reinforcing the interpretive stability of the baseline structured-capacity model.

Human Research Ethics

This study followed standard human-subject research ethics procedures. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Respondents were informed of the study purpose, expected completion time, and their right to skip questions or withdraw at any stage without penalty. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were anonymized and analyzed only in aggregate form. Given the sensitivity of border-governance issues, enumerators were instructed to remain neutral, avoid coercion, and store all data securely, using them solely for academic research purposes.

Research Results

Descriptive Statistics and Measurement Validity

Prior to hypothesis testing, the reliability and construct validity of the measurement instruments were assessed. Internal consistency was high across both scales, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.897 to 0.926 for the five governance-capacity dimensions and from 0.901 to 0.918 for the six governance-effectiveness dimensions. Factorability was also strong, as indicated by a KMO value of 0.939 for the governance-capacity scale and 0.955 for the governance-effectiveness scale. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant in both cases. These results indicate that the item sets possess sufficient internal coherence and shared variance to support latent-structure analysis in this study.

Exploratory factor analysis yielded theoretically interpretable factor structures for both constructs. The five-dimensional structure of governance capacity—collective action, coordination, resilience, learning, and resource integration—was empirically supported, as was the six-dimensional structure of governance effectiveness. This suggests that respondents did not evaluate village governance as a single undifferentiated impression, but were able to distinguish among multiple governance functions and outcome domains. The measurement results therefore support the decision to model governance capacity and governance effectiveness as internally structured constructs rather than as broad evaluative attitudes.

Descriptive patterns further indicate moderate to relatively high levels of perceived governance effectiveness across the surveyed villages, although the degree of variation differs across capacity dimensions. Overall, learning- and resource-related items show higher central tendencies, while coordination and collective-action items show greater dispersion. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that some governance capacities are more firmly embedded in routine administrative practice. In contrast, others may be activated less evenly across village contexts and everyday governance situations. Taken together, the reliability, factorability, and descriptive results provide a sound empirical foundation for the subsequent regression analysis.

Overall Effects of Governance Capacity on Governance Effectiveness

Regression analysis strongly corroborates a differentiated, rather than strictly additive, relationship between governance capacity and perceived governance effectiveness. As detailed in Table 1, among the five EFA-derived capacity dimensions, organizational learning consistently shows the strongest, highly significant positive association across all model specifications ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.001$). Resource integration also exhibits a positive, albeit secondary, enabling effect ($\beta = 0.110$, $p < 0.05$). Conversely, coordination, collective action, and resilience fail to display stable or significant direct effects on the composite measure of routine governance effectiveness. This substantive pattern remains robust even when subjected to supplementary estimations utilizing village-clustered robust standard errors. The distinct magnitude of the learning coefficient firmly situates learning-oriented processes as the pivotal empirical mechanism within the proposed structured-capacity framework, highlighting a clear hierarchical relevance among capacity dimensions rather than a uniform, parallel accumulation.

Table 1 Regression Estimates for Overall Governance Effectiveness (N = 400)

Variable	Baseline OLS B (SE)	Village-clustered robust SE B (Cluster-robust SE)
Constant	1.531*** (0.162)	1.5308*** (0.2557)
Collective Action (X1)	0.072 (0.048)	0.0721 (0.0429)
Coordination (X2)	−0.034 (0.052)	−0.0343 (0.0408)
Learning (X3)	0.389*** (0.040)	0.3889*** (0.0544)
Resilience (X4)	0.062 (0.050)	0.0623 (0.0401)

Resources (X5)	0.110* (0.049)	0.1100* (0.0475)
R ² / Adj. R ²	0.439 / 0.431	—
F (Prob > F)	61.54 (<0.001)	—
N	400	—

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Significance: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Independent variables are EFA-derived factor scores and are interpreted as latent functional capacities. Collinearity diagnostics indicate VIF = 1.304-1.417; Durbin-Watson = 2.046.

Hypothesis Assessment

The empirical regression outcomes provide comprehensive support for all three hypothesized relationships. The uneven coefficient distribution firmly supports H1, demonstrating that governance capacity functions as a structurally differentiated system rather than a uniformly additive stock. Furthermore, H2 is supported by learning capacity's central and robust predictive power, which serves as the primary conversion mechanism linking institutional mandates to routine performance under constrained local discretion. Finally, the secondary enabling role of resource integration, coupled with the absence of stable direct effects from coordination, collective action, and resilience, robustly supports H3. This suggests that these latter capacities likely operate conditionally or episodically rather than as persistent drivers of routine effectiveness. Cumulatively, these assessments validate the article's core empirical assertion: achieving routine governance effectiveness in border villages depends crucially on the functional conversion of specific capacities—primarily learning—rather than their mere additive accumulation.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study empirically demonstrates that governance capacity in institution-dense border settings operates as a structured, differentiated framework rather than a uniformly additive stock. Analyzing data from the China-Laos frontier, the findings reveal that learning capacity is the most robust and consistent predictor of routine governance effectiveness, serving as the critical mechanism that converts external mandates into repeatable administrative practice. While resource integration provides necessary operational support, it acts primarily as an enabling condition rather than a standalone driver of success. Furthermore, the lack of stable direct effects from coordination, collective action, and resilience indicates that these capacities likely serve episodic or crisis-driven functions rather than routine administrative roles. Consequently, effective grassroots governance under constrained local discretion depends on strategically institutionalizing learning processes, enabling village committees to navigate and routinize complex policy implementation sustainably.

Dialogue with Existing Governance and Collaborative-Capacity Scholarship

These findings refine capacity-based explanations of governance by showing that governance capacity does not operate as a uniformly additive stock in institution-dense settings (Wu et al., 2015; van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022). Evidence from the China-Laos frontier suggests that governance effectiveness depends less on simultaneously expanding all capacities than on whether institutions can translate requirements into stable, repeatable routines.

The theoretical significance of learning capacity deserves particular emphasis. The findings suggest that learning should not be treated merely as a supportive organizational feature. Instead, it should be understood as a central mechanism through which implementation requirements become operational in everyday administration. This interpretation is consistent with organizational-learning arguments that repeated learning processes can help organizations absorb external expectations, adjust internal procedures, and stabilize action through routines (Levitt & March, 1988; Bennett & Howlett, 1992). In this sense, the contribution of the article

is not simply to show that learning matters, but to clarify why it matters: it performs the conversion function through which governance capacity becomes routine governance effectiveness more reliably.

At the same time, the findings qualify a straightforward collaborative-governance interpretation. While coordination and collective action remain important governance functions in principle, they do not exhibit stable direct effects on routine governance effectiveness in this study. This suggests that, in institution-dense border settings, not all governance capacities contribute equally or continuously to everyday performance. Some capacities appear central to routinized implementation, whereas others may become more visible in contingent, campaign-like, or event-driven governance contexts (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

Asian Border Context and Boundary Conditions

The study also contributes to research on governance in Asian frontier contexts. Border villages are shaped by overlapping mandates for development, public administration, and stability maintenance, reflecting the close entanglement of territorial governance, security responsibilities, and everyday administrative order in border spaces (Newman, 2006; Scott, 2011). In such settings, governance effectiveness depends not only on the availability of resources or the presence of formal coordination, but also on whether implementation can be stabilized and reproduced through organizational routines. This helps explain why learning-oriented processes are especially consequential in such settings: they reduce implementation friction, stabilize routine practice, and make institutional compliance more reproducible in everyday local governance work.

Resource integration also warrants closer interpretation. The positive association between resources and governance effectiveness indicates that resources do matter, but their role appears enabling rather than dominant. Material support, organizational linkages, and access to programs or external inputs can facilitate governance. However, they do not automatically translate into better outcomes unless local administrative practice absorbs, organizes, and routinizes them. In highly structured border-governance settings, resources without procedural embedding may remain fragmented, underused, or dependent on temporary mobilization. This is why resources emerge as significant but secondary: they support implementation, but do not substitute for the organizational capacity required to convert them into sustained governance performance.

The limited direct effects of coordination and resilience should therefore be interpreted with caution rather than as evidence of irrelevance. Their non-significance likely reflects the boundary conditions of the type of effectiveness captured in this study. The dependent variable focuses primarily on routine, community-perceived governance effectiveness rather than on crisis response, emergency mobilization, or exceptional inter-organizational performance. Coordination may become more consequential in tasks requiring active alignment among multiple actors, departments, or levels of authority. In contrast, resilience may become more visible when governance is tested by disruption, uncertainty, or shock. In this sense, the findings suggest not that these capacities do not matter, but that their effects are conditional, temporally uneven, and more likely to appear under specific governance circumstances than in the routine performance perceptions measured here.

At the same time, the scope of these findings should be interpreted carefully. The structured-capacity pattern identified here is most applicable to institution-dense and discretion-constrained governance environments such as border villages. It should not be generalized uncritically to high-autonomy rural contexts, where leadership entrepreneurship, informal negotiation, or locally adaptive innovation may play a stronger role in shaping governance effectiveness and institutional performance (Grindle, 1996; Andrews et al., 2017).

Sustainability Relevance and Policy Implications

The sustainability of border village governance is intrinsically linked to the institutional reliability of everyday public service delivery and development administration. Because routine effectiveness stems from structured capacity, policy interventions must shift from mere resource injection to conversion-oriented institutional design. To strengthen grassroots administration sustainably, local committees need formalized learning infrastructures—such as scenario-based training, procedural templates, and standardized workflow checklists—to systematically embed external mandates into routine work. Furthermore, performance evaluation frameworks must be recalibrated to mirror this structured capacity. Assess routine administrative effectiveness through indicators of procedural consistency and continuous organizational learning, while evaluating episodic capacities, such as resilience and cross-sector coordination, during crises or specific mobilization events. By prioritizing these institutional learning mechanisms over temporary capacity accumulation, policymakers can ensure that grassroots governance systems in constrained border environments remain adaptable, reliable, and practically sustainable over time.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts strong causal inference. It does not directly capture the temporal sequence through which governance capacity is translated into organizational routines and, in turn, into governance outcomes. Second, governance effectiveness is measured through respondent perceptions. Although this approach is appropriate in village settings where standardized comparative performance data are limited, perceptual bias and common-method bias cannot be fully excluded (Bouckaert & Halligan, 2007; Rosyadi et al., 2020). Third, the respondent base is centered on community-level evaluations rather than a full multi-actor collaborative-governance sample. Future research could include village officials, local enterprises, and social organizations to test whether the structured-capacity pattern identified here holds across actor groups. Finally, the external validity of the findings is bounded by the institutional characteristics of border governance and should therefore be generalized cautiously beyond similarly institution-dense and discretion-constrained settings. Longitudinal or mixed-method designs would be especially valuable for tracing how capacity conversion unfolds over time and across different governance tasks.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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