



UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERSHIP:

LEADERS, COALITIONS
AND CHANGE

FEBRUARY 2023

BRIEFING NOTE

SUMMARY

‘Political will’ is a popular explanation for why change does (or does not) happen, but it does not actually explain what motivates people to support developmental change, nor how they influence and lead change. Understanding (developmental) leadership as a relational and highly contextual process of contesting power and ideas, rather than a fixed position, is fundamental to understanding why – and how – change happens. We need to go inside the ‘black box’ of political will. The more we understand this, the better we can understand how to effectively support positive change. This Briefing Note summarises the ideas and concepts underpinning DLP research undertaken between 2019 and 2023.

KEY MESSAGES

Developmental leadership is the strategic, collective and political process of building political will to make good change happen.

It relies on three elements:

1. Motivated and strategic individuals with the incentives, values, interests and opportunity to push for change.
 2. These motivated people must overcome barriers to cooperation and form coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence.
 3. Coalitions’ power and effectiveness partly hinges on their ability to contest and de-legitimise one set of ideas and legitimise an alternative set.
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Leadership is an interaction between people.

Individuals 'PIIC' their leaders based on assessment of the leader's: i) *position* and source of authority; ii) views on a particular *issue*; iii) likelihood of acting in the individual's best *interest*; iv) *identity* (and how similar it is to the individuals); and v) *characteristics* and *conduct*. Perceptions are mediated by people's identity, how they consume information and ideas as well as cultural context where norms can be deeply embedded.

Followers play an active role in the leadership process, and yet are an underexplored variable.

Leadership involves both leaders' perceptions of what followers want, and followers' perceptions of leaders' legitimacy. However, perceptions only matter if they are acted upon – that is, if followers can express them through opinion or behaviour, and if leaders respond in thoughts and actions.

Leadership looks different in different contexts but there are some rules of thumb.

Leaders are a product of attributes and resources they have, the experiences they gain and the choices they make. A combination of personal attributes, family background, education and professional and personal networks that help us to understand what motivates them to lead and how that influences their choices. However, the bias towards Western-centric styles of leadership as the default starting position tend to dominate what people assume to be effective.

Common understanding of how leaders create change does not adequately reflect the dynamic nature of leadership. Broadly, research explains it through a binary of either: i) role of people and how they act or ii) the role of structures and institutions in defining boundaries and/or creating opportunities for change. Yet neither fully capture the changing nature of leadership and how different groups and contextual factors interact at different stages in a change process.

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We use **PIIC** to refer to individuals' assessment of their leader's:

- Position
- Issue
- Interest
- Identity
- Characteristics and conduct

Collective processes of change have three interlinked stages:

1. Forming collectives and maintaining cohesion
2. Framing and justifying demands to gain legitimacy
3. Negotiating outcomes for those they represent and to secure institutional change

Leaders need to work across different interest groups to build common ground and establish legitimacy for their claims. External factors, such as space for contestation, as well as internal factors, like sense of solidarity influence the formation and maintenance of these coalitions.

Development agencies' support for leaders does not match what we know about developmental leaders or collective action.

Existing programming is often rooted in business management, which tends to under-emphasise political skills and be rooted in Western-centric models. Yet there is much to be learned from contexts where politics is a necessary focus to navigate resistance to changing entrenched norms (such as support for disability and women's leadership).

IMPLICATIONS

Adopting a culturally embedded approach to viewing and understanding leadership helps to break leadership studies out of its often Western-centric starting point.

Taking a leader-centred approach helps to shift the focus from questions of structure and agency to everyday choices and dilemmas. It can help us to think differently about how they decide to use resources available, pathways in and through leadership beyond education, the psychology of leaders, the efficacy of training and the benefits of focusing on individuals rather than whole communities.

A broader focus on collective processes of change can give a richer understanding of how change happens. It can help to uncover how collectives form and maintain cohesion, how

demands for change are framed and justified, and how institutional change is secured. Focusing on how leaders should be supported helps us to ask questions about what mix of support is needed to nurture people's potential for leadership, how direct support interacts with the enabling environment and helps individuals to overcome structural constraints.

When development agencies are involved, **contextual understanding combined with adaptability and flexibility can help effective support for developmental leadership.** Support can take on different forms (see table 1) which are interconnected. Funders should not inadvertently undermine the cohesion of coalitions – for example through funding calls that create competition rather than collaboration between members.



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TABLE 1: FORMS OF SUPPORT TO INDIVIDUAL, COLLECTIVE AND SOCIETAL LEADERSHIP

| Forms of support | Individual | Collective | Societal |
|--|---|--|--|
| Scholarships | Promotion of individual knowledge, skills and experience through educational opportunities either domestically or internationally e.g. Australia Awards. | Support to the building of and access to networks that can be crucial to future networks or coalitions for change e.g. Women's Leadership Initiative, Alumni networks. | Contributing to the emergence of elites or a middle class with particular values and ways of working that are developmental. |
| Training | Individual classroom-based teaching focused on skills and qualities associated with effective management or leadership. e.g. PNG Training Precinct. | Workshops and events designed to provide organisations, coalitions, networks or alliance with the skills, knowledge and networking to promote developmental leadership e.g. Pacific Leadership Program's (PLP) adaptive leadership work in the Pacific. | Institutional reform to reposition the skills system to align with employment demands, to integrate them into national structures and attempt to shift public ideas and beliefs about the value of vocational training vs. university qualifications e.g. Vanuatu Skills Partnership and Australia Pacific Training Coalition. |
| Technical assistance (TA)/ mentoring/ coaching | Formal TA to support things like legislative drafting. Mentoring and advice to identified leaders on navigating reform processes e.g.: The Asia Foundation in the Philippines & Timor-Leste. | Ongoing support to organisations, coalitions, alliances etc. in building and maintaining their collective resources and capacities to promote change e.g.: The Asia Foundation in The Philippines and Timor-Leste. | Shifting attitudes towards, and legitimacy of, particular groups or issues in the eyes of the broader public. |
| Exchange and learning | Promoting individual events, study visits or exchanges designed to enhance personal leadership skills. | Convening events and creating spaces to bring together potential allies and partners to develop ideas and networks. Twinning arrangements between communities, institutions, industries. | Exposure to different ideas, norms and values as a means to extend the options for what might be deemed possible in a given situation. |
| Financial support | Financial support for individual training, mentoring and coaching. | Financial support (often core) to civil society organisations and coalitions; support for events; cross-sector dialogue; policy fora etc. e.g. PLP, the Indonesia Development Forum. | Financial support for social or mass-media, popular campaigns designed to shift norms and values on leadership. |
| Demand side work: awareness campaigns, triggering demand | Building skills of community/ civil society leaders, researchers and advocates to collect data, engage service providers, government etc. and advocate for change e.g. Indonesia Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI). | Building knowledge and capacities of communities and civil society organisations to form and maintain coalitions and alliances to engage service providers, government etc. e.g. Empowering Indonesian Women for Poverty Reduction (MAMPU), various social accountability initiatives. | Building demand for evidence and recognition of civil society voice as important and legitimate in the policy process. Promoting human rights which can be 'drawn down' by civil society groups. |
| Supporting an enabling environment | Building skills of policy makers to engage with research and evidence, as well as their ability to engage in dialogue with civil society, private sector, development agencies etc. e.g. KSI. | Creating an enabling environment in which civil space, contestation, leadership etc. is possible. Creating institutional environment in which leaders are held to account etc. e.g. policy dialogue around establishment of anti-corruption commissions; public service standards; laws protecting civil society space, media development etc. | Promotion of norms which value negotiation, dialogue and inclusion as opposed to conflict, and exclusion. Influencing channels (i.e. formal and social media) through which perceptions of leadership are shaped. |

FURTHER RESOURCES

The messages and implications presented here form a working theory of change on developmental leadership that has been further explored and tested through research across the Indo-Pacific region between 2019 and 2023, which looks at how leadership is understood, where leaders come from, how leaders work together and how developmental leadership can be supported. This briefing note was prepared by Isobel Wilson-Cleary and is based on the following DLP research papers:

- Corbett, J. (2019). *Where do leaders come from?* DLP Foundational Paper 2. University of Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program <https://www.dlprog.org/publications/foundational-papers/where-do-leaders-come-from>
- Denney, L. & Roche, C. (2019). *How can developmental leadership be supported?* DLP Foundational Paper 4. University of Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program. <https://www.dlprog.org/publications/foundational-papers/How-can-developmental-leadership-be-supported>
- Hudson, D. and Mcloughlin, C. (2019) *How is leadership understood in different contexts?* DLP Foundational Paper 1. University of Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program. <https://www.dlprog.org/publications/foundational-papers/how-is-leadership-understood-in-different-contexts>
- Hudson, D. et al. (2018) *Inside the black box of political will: 10 years of findings from the Developmental Leadership Program.* University of Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program
- Nazneen, S. (2019). *How do leaders collectively change institutions?* DLP Foundational Paper 3. University of Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program <https://www.dlprog.org/publications/foundational-papers/how-do-leaders-collectively-change-institutions>



The **Developmental Leadership Program** (DLP) is an international research collaboration supported by the Australian Government. DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

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