



# BEYOND POLITICAL WILL: EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR WATER AND SANITATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The WASH sector involves highly technical work across multiple ministries and disciplines. Effective leadership is crucial in enabling effective coordination to meet the water security challenge and improve sanitation and hygiene.
- While individual action is important, leadership must also operate on collective and societal levels. Users, providers, and WASH experts must collaborate to oversee sustainable reform, rooted in local communities through existing leadership structures.
- Successful leadership in WASH goes beyond 'form' programming and focuses on 'function' – or activities and behaviours. This means moving away from traditional infrastructure-led projects towards locally-led systems-based approaches.
- A good WASH program is a good gender program, and promoting female leadership can improve outcomes for sanitation, hygiene, and gender equality.



## WHY WE NEED TO MOVE BEYOND THE 'POLITICAL WILL' SHORTHAND

Political will has become an easy shorthand to justify the success or failure of reform. It is often assumed that a politician's willingness to support a reform can tip the balance in favour of meaningful change, or that a lack of such will undermines progress.

But this is not a useful, or accurate, explanation of how change does or does not happen. Leaders can rarely bring about change single-handedly, even if they want to.

This is particularly true of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. Both water and sanitation are highly technical, require co-ordination across multiple ministries, and are often subject to institutional

fragmentation. While individual action has a crucial role to play, effective leadership must also operate on collective and societal levels. This is what is needed to move 'beyond' political will.

## WHY LEADERSHIP MATTERS IN WASH

The need for multi-level leadership in WASH has only been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Billions of people still lack access to clean drinking water and sanitation services that are vital to disease resilience and recovery. Even before the pandemic, the World Bank estimated that the global costs of meeting SDG 6 amount to about three times the current capital investment.

At the individual level, including political elites, more inclusive outcomes for WASH require leaders with more

inclusive visions. Previous political economy research has found that politicians' incentives to invest in WASH increased where they could target these services to favoured constituencies, and that needs to change.

At the collective level, the co-production of water and sanitation will continue to require co-ordination between users and providers, including through local committees that can oversee sustainable maintenance and accountability.

At the societal level, sustainable and locally legitimate reforms need to be anchored in local norms and institutions with the support of local leaders.



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[Inside the black box of political will: 10 years of findings from the Developmental Leadership Program](#)





## THE COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN WASH

There is no shortage of high-level commitments to sustainable water programs. The UN is now in its third 'international decade' of action for WASH, which highlights the tendency for NGOs and governments to fixate on large-scale missions rather than translating visions into administrative delivery.

These international missions would stand to benefit from adopting some of the approaches that emerge from examples of effective leadership in the sector:

- Setting out a convincing narrative that articulates the importance of WASH to a nation, with historical and culturally resonant themes, that can help form a responsive social contract with the

population. Success is seen where hygiene is positioned as a central pillar of national development efforts, and not some far-off 'end goal' (failing to do so was one of the flaws of the Swachh Bharat Mission in India.)

- A whole-of-government approach brings all facets of government together to plan and deliver, with measures of success and co-ordination mechanisms established at all levels of implementation.
- This is aided by distributed leadership functions across wider groups of officials, encouraging local-level responses to local challenges and avoiding the rigidities and misreporting incentives associated with more authoritarian leadership styles.

The ability to diagnose bottlenecks and course-correct is an underrepresented trait of effective leadership. Establishing processes to support this, and embedding feedback loops into a system, allows for adjusting reforms where problems arise.

These components of successful leadership in WASH are best captured as activities and behaviours. Put another way, they are 'functions' and not 'form'. Of course, this can sometimes challenge technically-oriented approaches centred on investment in fixed assets and measured by the number of people with new access to toilets or taps.



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[Implementing political will: effective leadership in delivering WASH for all](#)



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## LESSONS FROM THE CIVIC CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

WaterSHED avoid investing in the 'form' (drilling wells, installing toilets, or teaching people how to wash their hands) and opt instead to support the 'function' - strengthening the local market for water, sanitation, and hygiene to make it more sustainable, inclusive, and efficient. In doing so they build a system that avoids long-term dependencies on outside actors and donors.

Civic Champions stands apart from conventional leadership development programs in several aspects. Rather than passively absorbing a predetermined curriculum during a one-off training, participants drive the iterative process themselves. Through this process of creating a vision for change, developing a plan of action, and executing against it, the project couples soft skills with tangible gains in key development outcomes.

To that end, the Civic Champions program develops general leadership skills, experience and confidence of local-level elected government officials, using sanitation as a leadership practice problem.

In Cambodia, this program is heading into its fifth iteration, evolving from a 46-participant pilot study in 2013 to a scaled-up government-led scheme operating in 35% of all communes in the country. In 2021, WaterSHED is scheduled to make its strategic exit and hand over ownership to the Cambodian government, who is considering expanding the program nationwide.

In the most recent model, participating communes saw a 6.9% increase in latrine coverage. But the real success of the alternative approach promoted by the program can be seen in an evaluation of Civic Champion councillors and their leadership traits compared to other councillors.

A survey demonstrated that Civic Champion councillors employ different leadership strategies with different target groups to increase sanitation coverage, and display a greater capacity for leadership skills. They were also much more inclined to engage with village officials and commune councils than NGOs and donors, laying the groundwork for sustainable local networks.

The Civic Champion training had a role to play in promoting alternative modes of leadership, but gender also appeared to be an influential factor. There are numerous examples of the transformative role that WASH programs can have for gender equality. The outputs of the Civic Champion survey suggest that, similarly, promoting female leadership can improve outcomes for WASH programs.



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### READ MORE

[Leadership journeys and outcomes of Civic Champions Program in rural Cambodia](#)

## SHIFTING FOCUS

Moving donors and program designers away from infrastructure-led projects towards systems-based approaches is a significant policy challenge that many aid agencies are addressing. Though some donors have learned to adapt, as Australia did through precursors to the Water for Women project, it remains a difficult sell to politicians and taxpayers.

Systems strengthening and sustainability is a more complex narrative than the oft used 'this many dollars pays for this many toilets'. In the UK aid program, for example, there remains some fixation on levels of expenditure rather than the actual purpose of aid. Examples like the Civic Champions program offer pathways in 'exiting from aid' and ending dependency on overseas support.

Donors are starting to switch their focus towards

supporting effective leadership activities that articulate a consistent values-based message, support local-level leadership and innovation, and encourage less rigid projectised approaches. But this will require longer-term funding commitments with a higher threshold for risk, as well as developing indicators and assessment criteria of transformative behaviours to replace, or at least supplement, existing metrics.

WASH experts can make a positive difference by harvesting their collective knowledge and experience, and continuing to work with local partners to help move towards more inclusive, effective WASH programs.

Meaningful change will come about through collaborative approaches that understand the components of successful leadership to be far greater than the simple will of any individual.

This report is a summary of the DLP webinar 'Beyond Political Will: Effective leadership for Water and Sanitation' that took place on 10 June 2021. We would like to thank the panellists for their contributions and to all those who engaged with the event.

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