LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING IN RURAL CAMBODIA:

MOTIVATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS

TUM NHIM

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JUNE 2022

DLP

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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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The 'Leadership journeys and outcomes of Civic Champions Program in rural Cambodia' project was funded by the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) and ran from April 2020 to April 2021. It examined WaterSHED's Civic Champions leadership development program. Through exploring the contribution of the program to leaders' resources, capacity and self-efficacy, it asked:

- How do participants of the Civic Champions program leverage local cultures, values, and ideas in their developmental leadership strategies for sanitation promotion to maximise results in the form of latrine uptake?
- How do participants of the Civic Champions program differ from other commune councillors in terms of resources, leadership capacities, self-efficacy, and sanitation promotion strategies?
- How do participants of the Civic Champions program, as positive outliers, differ from other commune councillors in terms of their leadership journeys and motivations to pursue developmental change?

Thank you to Henry Northover (Independent consultant) for providing feedback during the peer review process.

Australian Aid

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government, the Developmental Leadership Program or partner organisations.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding leaders' capacities, perceptions of leadership and motivations is vital in informing how they can be successfully supported to push for positive change in their communities. How do commune councillors who participated in WaterSHED's Civic Champions program differ from other local leaders in terms of resources, leadership capacities, self-efficacy and sanitation promotion strategies? And how do participants differ from non-participants in terms of their leadership journeys and motivations to pursue developmental change?

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

- **The Civic Champions program has had a positive effect on confidence among participants in using leadership skills, and has also improved their leadership and promotion capacity**
- **Previous experience of engaging with public services improves leadership and sanitation promotion capacity in both study groups, demonstrating the importance of embeddedness and trust, developed over time through public service**
- **Trust also provides legitimacy and is a source of motivation for leaders, with both study groups identifying being a role model as a vital characteristic of leadership**
- **Local leaders' embeddedness is important, but it needs to be accompanied by structures that enable others to hold them to account**
- **Leaders across both study groups share common motivations and public service ethos**
- **Gendered variations in leadership capacity and engagement with other key actors need further investigation**

This briefing paper sets out some initial findings from research that investigated these questions in Cambodia, based on a report prepared by WaterSHED and the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP). Using a quasi-experimental approach, the study combines survey data (n=234) and in-depth interviews (n=20) to assess the leadership and sanitation promotion capacities among locally elected leaders – commune councillors (CCs) – that participated in the Civic Champions program in the 2018-2019 cohort and those that did not.

The survey covers seven main fields: (i) participants' characteristics, (ii) commune's sanitation, (iii) background and resource assessment, (iv) leadership styles, (v) leadership concept, (vi) self-efficacy and (vii) promotion strategies. The in-depth interviews aimed to understand different leadership journeys and motivations to become a leader and/or to make developmental changes in their community.

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LEADERSHIP, CAPACITY AND MOTIVATION

Developmental leadership relies on motivated and strategic individuals who push for change, overcome barriers to cooperation and form coalitions with sufficient power, legitimacy and influence to help reshape society's rules (Hudson et al., 2018). While individual action is important, leadership must also operate on collective and societal levels. This is particularly important in a highly technical sector such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), which requires co-ordination across multiple institutions as well as between providers and users (Mcloughlin et al., 2021). Understanding the resources, capacities and motivations of local leaders is therefore a vital element of improving local WASH systems, as well as strengthening local governance and community resilience.

While individual action is important, leadership must also operate on collective and societal levels.

Leadership development programs are more locally owned when they are aligned with culturally relevant perceptions of leadership, and programs that enable locally-led problem solving are likely to be more effective (Roche and Denney, 2019; Hudson and Mcloughlin, 2019). The iterative and participatory model of the Civic Champions program (see Figure 1) engages commune councillors and other sub-national government staff to plan and deliver projects in their communities. The approach facilitates ownership among local leaders, in this case commune councillors, which is a key principle of building legitimacy to lead.

This study observes similarities and differences between leaders that participated in the Civic Champions program and those that did not, with the aim of understanding leadership motivation and capacity. The results are discussed in the context of wider debates on developmental leadership, including embeddedness through experience and understanding of the local area, legitimacy and accountability.

THE CIVIC CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

The Civic Champions program, created in Cambodia in 2013, is a leadership development project that provides elected commune councillors (CCs) with the opportunity to improve their leadership skills and develop localised sanitation strategies. It has three key phases – 'Discover', 'Develop' and 'Deliver' – during which participants drive an iterative process of change, focused on strengthening sub-national water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems (see Figure 1). The aim is to address long-term sustainability, as commune councillors are local leaders with the mandate to achieve sanitation coverage and ensure sustainable WASH service delivery. Through this experience, participants learn how to create a shared vision for change then develop and deliver a plan of action, coupling soft skills with tangible gains in key development outcomes.

Civic Champions directly engages subnational government staff as facilitators, advisors and advocates at multiple levels to improve their political willingness to make change happen, recognising the need for coordination among multiple actors. Commune councillors must apply to join the program and pay to participate. This self-selection demonstrates that participants are motivated to improve their leadership skills, and this study provides insights into their backgrounds and attributes.

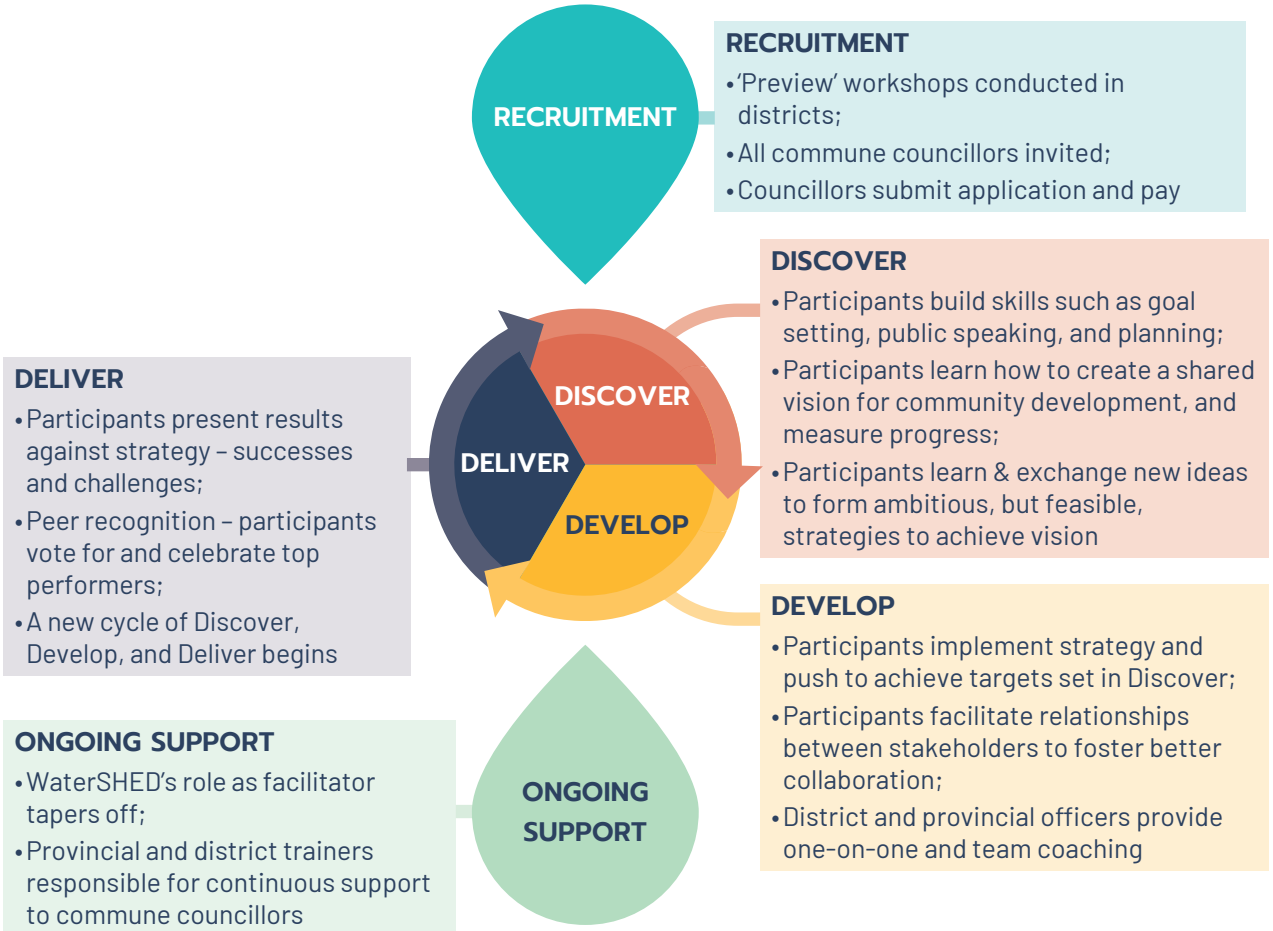
An evaluation of the pilot Civic Champions program carried out in 2014 found that the proof-of-concept project made a significant contribution to improving participants' leadership capacity and increasing sanitation coverage – particularly latrine uptake – in their communities. The pilot resulted in an extraordinary 400% increase in toilet sales in the treatment districts, with commune councillors playing a key role in delivering these improvements (Ann et al., 2014). These positive findings inspired this research by WaterSHED and DLP to understand *why* the Civic Champions program works, through a natural leadership experiment approach.

BOX 1: KEY DEFINITIONS

Commune councillors (CCs) are elected officials on the commune council.

Participants learn how to create a shared vision for change then develop and deliver a plan of action, coupling soft skills with tangible gains in key development outcomes.

FIGURE 1: OVERVIEW OF CIVIC CHAMPIONS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



COUNCILLOR AND COMMUNE CHARACTERISTICS

For this study, commune councillors from four provinces receiving the Civic Champions program were selected for the participant (experimental) group, and councillors from communes with similar characteristics in three different provinces were selected for the non-participant (control) group.

A total of 234 people were interviewed between December 2020 and January 2021, see Table 1 for a breakdown. These people participated in the 2018-2019 cohort of the Civic Champions program.

The average age of CCs in the participant group is slightly higher than those in the non-participant group (a statistically significant difference of 3.7 years), and the average number of participant CCs' schooling is also slightly higher (a statistically significant difference of 1.1 years). Nonetheless the groups remain comparable as all the CCs are typically in the upper middle age group (between 50-60 years old) and have reached lower secondary formal education in Cambodia.

In term of specific responsibility within the commune council, the main areas of responsibility in the participant group are WASH (36%), Women and Child Affairs (26%) and Social Order (13%). In the non-participant group, the main sectors are public works (24%), Women and Child Affairs (21%) and Social Order (13.4%). The study did not account for the effects of these differing responsibilities in the analysis. Notably, we observe that the participant CCs have more engagement and experience with the WASH sector than the non-participant group.

There are gendered dimensions to the division of responsibilities, for example female CCs typically lead Women and Child Affairs. Interviewees noted that this can be the case in the WASH sector, where female CCs may provide extra support to the sanitation promotion work in the commune. Other studies of rural sanitation have warned that female participation in this sector may reinforce existing gender roles by increasing women's household labour, rather than providing opportunities for wider empowerment (Mehta and Movik, 2010; Burt et al., 2016).

With similar commune's sizes and inhabitants per household, there is a statistically significant difference in the average latrine coverage. The coverage for participant CCs (72%) is lower than that of non-participant CCs (78.9%). And yet, communes in the non-participant group seem to experience more sanitation challenging environments and have more issues with flooding and access to water than the participant group.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED BY GENDER AND STUDY GROUPS

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total
Participant	79 (65.3%)	42 (34.7%)	121
Non-participant	79 (69.9%)	34 (30.1%)	113

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

CCs in the participant group have a higher level of learning resources than non-participant CCs, including both formal and informal education. The average number of leadership training sessions attended by participant CCs (7.07±7.53) is higher than that of non-participant CCs (4.22±5.73), and the average number of WASH training sessions attended by participant CCs (9.24±8.24) is also higher than that of non-participant CCs (5.11±6.79). However, the average number of total training sessions attended by both study groups is similar (22.4 for participants, as compared to 21.1 for non-participants), suggesting that the difference in learning resources of the two groups is mainly attributed to WASH and leadership trainings.

On the other hand, the participant group has lower digital literacy compared to the non-participant group, who use the internet more at work (88.5% for non-participants, as compared to 80.2% for participants).

The non-participant group are more confident with using social media for communicating with people, as well as for organizing data. It would be useful to learn more about which groups within the commune population engage with social media, and whether this method of communication could be used as part of sanitation promotion strategies.

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SOCIAL NETWORKS

The three key actors engaged by the study participants are other CC members, village level officials and NGOs/donors (see Table 2). The main difference between the study groups is that the participant CCs seem to engage more with village level officials, who are considered to be part of their communal governing structure, while the non-participant CCs more frequently engage with the NGOs/donors. Both groups engage with their fellow commune council members to a similar level, though female CCs do so more frequently than their male counterparts. In the participant group, a small proportion of males engaged with monks or other religious figures, but their female counterparts did not at all. This reflects the ambiguity of women's position in Cambodian society where they are expected to be strong and hard-headed in some public and economic spheres, while being largely excluded from other political and religious realms (Kent, 2010).

Overall, in both groups participants are more frequently interacting with commune council members, followed by village officials and NGOs, and their level of cooperation is also higher when engaging with commune council members than with other key actors. Non-participants engage more and have higher levels of cooperation with NGOs and donors. In contrast, the participant CCs engage more frequently and have higher levels of cooperation with village level officials and their commune council members.

This reflects the ambiguity of women's position in Cambodian society where they are expected to be strong and hard-headed in some public and economic spheres, while being largely excluded from other political and religious realms.

TABLE 2: FREQUENCY OF INTERACTIONS WITH KEY ACTORS IN SANITATION PROMOTION

	NGOs/ donors	Village level officials	CC members	Monks/ religious figures	Other key actors specified	Other key actors not specified
Participant Male	20.44%	24.44%	22.67%	8.89%	12.89%	10.22%
Participant Female	23.01%	25.66%	30.97%	0.00%	8.85%	10.62%
Non-participant Male	28.33%	18.45%	24.46%	0.86%	6.87%	19.31%
Non-participant Female	27.72%	17.82%	28.71%	0.00%	5.94%	18.81%

CCs with more extensive and established social networks, particularly within local governing structures, may be in a better position to improve sanitation promotion within communities. However, depending on the nature of these relationships, the CCs may also lack autonomy from powerful social actors, which can lead to local capture.

This tension is captured by the concept of embedded autonomy, which emphasises the importance of social ties while also recognising the need for insulation from external pressures (Evans, 1995). Greater engagement by local leaders does not necessarily translate into improved delivery of public goods and services in the absence of accountability structures, which will be discussed further below.

Greater engagement by local leaders does not necessarily translate into improved delivery of public goods and services in the absence of accountability structures.

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LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Perceived self-efficacy reflects an optimistic self-belief that "one can perform a novel or difficult tasks, or cope with adversity" (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995). It can be conceived of as a personal resource facilitating goal-setting, persistence and recovery from setbacks, and is therefore a crucial element of leadership. Self-efficacy is also the foundation of agency (Bandura, 2000), and is closely linked to the concepts of 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within' (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2007), which in turn can shape opportunities for social change.

On a 4-point Likert scale, the participants expressed their degree of confidence about 10 statements based on Schwarzer and Jerusalem's General Self-Efficacy Scale. Examples include: 'I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort' and 'If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution'. The participant and non-participant groups are not statistically different in terms of self-efficacy, with both groups scoring between 3 and 3.5 on all statements, suggesting high levels of confidence in their abilities to effect change.

Female CCs interacted more frequently with their CC members than their male counterparts.

In the areas of leadership and promotion capacity, the participant group demonstrate significantly greater confidence in using key skills as compared to the non-participant group. The participant group expressed higher confidence in leading teams and planning. It is worth noting that these two key skills are the main focus of the program.

In particular, female CCs expressed higher leadership capacity compared to male CCs. They reported higher confidence in teamwork and leading teams than their male counterparts. Findings also show that female CCs interacted more frequently with their CC members than their male counterparts. Leadership skills include planning, communication and teamwork, while sanitation promotion skills include hygiene, latrine and faecal sludge management.

In terms of explanatory factors, formal education and attending more training sessions are positively correlated with higher leadership capacity in the participant group. A common factor observed in both groups that could explain their leadership and sanitation promotion capacity is that they have engaged in public services in the past, gaining both experience and skills.

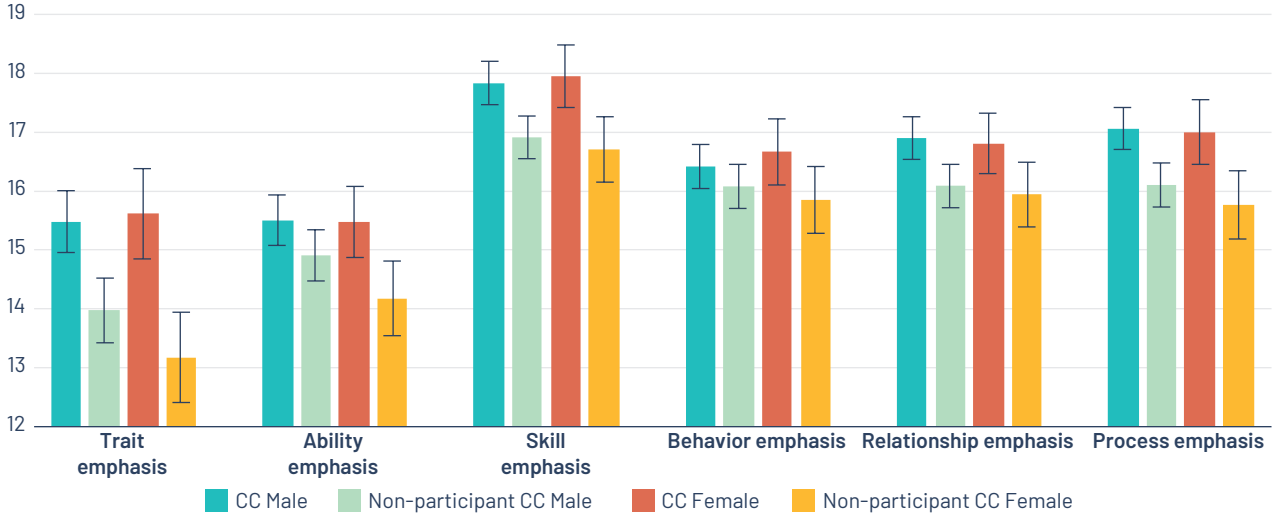
Analysis shows that family background (e.g. family has business experience) and resources (having/using internet at work) appear to be explanatory factors for leadership capacity within the non-participant group.

LEADERSHIP CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

Living and working in the commune for many years, commune councillors are familiar with the situations, localities, and difficulties, which can shape their perceptions and practices. The findings from this study suggest that the embedded position of councillors within their communes provides legitimacy to lead, and their attributes and approaches to leadership contribute to this legitimacy. When asked how they would define leadership, both study groups emphasize three key factors: acting as a role model for the people; gaining enough experience, knowledge and leadership skills (planning, communicating etc.); and good collaboration and coordination skills. Another area of focus is leader attributes, which include being reliable, accountable, moral, honest, persistent and hard-working.

Using Northouse's (2017) Conceptualizing Leadership Questionnaire, respondents were asked a series of 24 questions covering the six main concepts of leadership: Trait, Ability, Skill, Behaviour, Relationship and Process. Trait refers here to the innate characteristics of leaders, differentiating it from the other concepts which for the most part can be learned and developed. The study finds that both groups share the same preference for the concepts they feel more and less comfortable with, although the scores are lower across the board for the non-participant respondents. Skill emphasis is the most preferred concept of leadership, whereas Trait or Ability emphasis is the least preferred concept among all groups (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: PREFERENCES FOR LEADERSHIP CONCEPTS ACROSS BOTH PARTICIPANT AND NON-PARTICIPANT GROUPS



The skills emphasis focuses on the competencies of leaders, which can be learned and developed, rather than innate characteristics of leaders, which is the focus of the traits approach. Relationship and process emphasis focus on the interaction between leaders and followers rather than being leader-centred, and also score relatively high across both participant and non-participant groups. This suggests that participants are open to the skills development and relationship-building offered by the Civic Champion program, and may also indicate future demand among other commune councillors who believe that leadership skills can be learned.

The effect of gender on conceptualising leadership is mixed, but there are some indications that the Civic Champions program may have reduced differences in how both male and female participants conceptualise leadership.

In the participant group, both males and females have similar preferences and scores in each leadership concept. However, in the non-participant cohort, we see a significant difference for the first two concepts of leadership (trait and ability), in which males always have higher scores.

While these results capture the respondents' perceptions of leadership, thinking and doing are not always aligned. The 'hands-on' approach of the Civic Champions program enables CCs to practice their leadership approach, and a 2014 evaluation of the scheme found a number of changes in the participants. As well as gaining more confidence, they increased the frequency of their village visits and began to take their own initiatives to bring about change (Ann et al., 2014). Leadership has also played a key role when engaging with village level officials to promote sanitation, particularly through delegation (Nhim et al., 2021).

When asked about how both groups deal with challenges in work, we can notice some differences. The participant CCs come up with solutions that involve engaging with other leaders for suggestions and recommendations, working closely with relevant stakeholders, and effective planning. Non-participant CCs seem to focus on self-motivation, persistence, and hard work.

When it comes to their initiatives and achievements so far, we can see a clear difference between both groups. Participant CCs mentioned a range of initiatives related to WASH, environment, and health, but those initiatives are undertaken by themselves, or with their group. In contrast, the non-participant group also mentioned achievements related to WASH and agriculture, but these typically operated in collaboration with or with support from their NGO partners. This corresponds to the study finding that participant CCs engage more with communal governing structures, while the non-participant CCs engage more with NGOs and donors.

As well as gaining more confidence, participant CCs increased the frequency of their village visits and began to take their own initiatives to bring about change.

LEADERSHIP LEGITIMACY AND MOTIVATION

There is not much difference between both study groups in terms of their background and motivation to become a leader, but we see some differences in terms of their perceptions and how they execute their daily work.

In both study groups, most of the respondents had engaged in public service jobs, such as teaching, voluntary communal work, or being a village chief before becoming a leader in the commune council. Experience of engaging in public work had provided them with self-confidence, knowledge and skills, and trust by people, as well as greater authority to shift towards a new leading role.

Respondents mentioned some important skills that they had gained through previous work and continue to use in their new leading roles, including teamwork, planning, educating, leading, coordination and collaboration, and time management. Important characteristics that make them become a leader include good cooperation with teams, good communication, being moral, honest, friendly, and hard-working, and so on. Overall, the emphasis seems to be on CCs relationships with people they provide the services to and with their team members.

When it comes to sources of motivation to become a leader, respondents mentioned three important sources. First, encouragement and trust by local people who recognize the services provided by them before becoming the leader. These kinds of leaders are typically well-respected and thus have good relationship with their local people which facilitates legitimacy to lead. Second, encouragement or recommendation, and sometimes prescription from higher authority, at the commune or district levels, mainly based on their past achievements or merits. This type of leader seems to be largely focused on building good relationship with their higher authority. Thirdly, self-motivation or encouragement from family members or colleagues to take a new role to become a leader.

The central role of trust and good relationships, both with local people (or 'followers') and higher authority, demonstrate the importance of legitimacy for developmental leadership. Such foundations can be built up over time through public service, by demonstrating knowledge and experience as well as connections with communities. Leaders that are considered trustworthy are often highly valued, although perceptions of leadership may vary in different contexts (Hudson and Mcloughlin, 2019). In this study the leadership skills and motivations are self-reported by respondents, so it would be valuable to conduct further research to find out what people living in the communes think and whether their perceptions match those of the CCs.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings suggest that the Civic Champions program has increased confidence among participants, both in terms of leadership skills and sanitation promotion, but there are a number of similarities between the study groups. High levels of motivation and a public service ethos are present in both the participant and non-participant groups – largely built up over time based on experience of delivering public goods and services – providing legitimacy to lead based on their local engagement.

There are notable gendered dynamics at work, both in terms of expectations that women will provide extra support for sanitation promotion and the finding that female CCs have more interaction with fellow CCs members than with other stakeholders in the WASH sector. Overall, the female CCs are expressing higher leadership capacity as compared to the males, which is very promising.

Commune councillors are well embedded in their local communities and for the most part have high levels of cooperation with local governing structures, although this is stronger for those who participated in the Civic Champions program. Embeddedness can have both positive and negative effects on service delivery, as it may generate trust and reputational incentives to deliver but can also provide opportunities for capture or misconduct (Granovetter, 1985). Policymakers therefore need to consider accountability structures in communes, and how this may affect public service performance of commune councillors.

There are different possible routes to accountability, and the approach will vary by context. CCs are elected officials, so one option would be to vote them out at the end of their term. However, the actions of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) following the 2017 elections have reduced the space for free media and opposition parties (Croissant, 2018), potentially threatening this long route to accountability. Communities can also take shorter, more direct routes to accountability through citizen voice or applying informal pressure on councillors (Hossain, 2010).

Trust and good relationships, both with followers and high authorities, emerge as being a key source of motivation for commune councillors as well as a means of establishing legitimacy as a leader. Trust can be based on assessment of motivations, competence and performance of individual leaders (McLoughlin, 2015). Building a track record of public service delivery over time can therefore serve to strengthen trust and legitimacy, providing a strong foundation for positive change – in this case sanitation promotion.

Leadership programs such as Cambodia's Civic Champions can clearly build confidence and skills among motivated commune councillors, as well as providing opportunities for locally-led problem solving. The extent to which this awareness and skills development is put into practice in communes beyond the training would benefit from further study. It would also be valuable to investigate what other incentives may encourage or discourage CCs to take the lead in sanitation promotion strategies in their communes.

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Australian Aid

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government, the Developmental Leadership Program or partner organisations.

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