

The background of the page is a photograph of a rural village in Cambodia. In the foreground, a dirt road leads towards several traditional wooden houses built on stilts. The houses are painted in bright colors: one is blue with a red door, and another is purple with a blue balcony. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. In the background, there are green trees and a simple structure with a corrugated metal roof. A large pile of logs and construction materials is visible on the left side of the road.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE SANITATION PROMOTION: EVIDENCE FROM THE WASH SECTOR IN RURAL CAMBODIA

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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?

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INTRODUCTION

Commune councillors in rural Cambodia use different strategies to promote sanitation uptake in their respective communities. This paper draws on data from a leadership development program to investigate the role of leadership within sanitation promotion, and how it can be supported by such programs. It also examines how contextual factors – such as migration and access to resources – act as barriers and enablers for commune councillors to use different types of strategies.

KEY FINDINGS

- Improved leadership skills can strengthen existing promotion practices to boost sanitation in communes
- The participatory design of the Civic Champions program encourages locally-owned solutions, helping commune councillors adapt promotion techniques to their own contexts
- Perseverance is an important leadership characteristic, especially for working with target groups who may be resistant to change
- Commune councillors work closely with village officials, demonstrating that teamwork and delegation are important leadership skills for sanitation promotion
- Lack of resources, including money and limited knowledge, is a barrier for poor households and at village level
- For non-adopter households, mentality or perception is a more significant barrier than money
- The study did not find strong associations between enabling conditions and the different target groups, although subsidies can assist poor households

The Civic Champions program is a leadership development program for elected local leaders – commune councillors (CCs) – that uses an iterative training process in which participants design and then conduct sanitation promotion activities, to achieve a latrine coverage target. Those that reach their targets present their strategies to fellow program participants as part of a competition to win a cash award.

In 2020, 68.8% of households in Cambodia had access to basic sanitation (JMP 2020), for those living in rural areas access is lower (61%). In the target provinces where Civic Champions has been implemented, the average sanitation coverage rate is slightly above national average (70%).

This study is based on two types of data drawn from the program: participant application forms (completed in early 2018 when the program began) and competition transcripts (taken from recordings in late 2019 when the program was ending). The application forms are used to gain baseline data based on a question about commune councillors' promotion strategies before joining the Civic Champions leadership program.

The competition transcripts of the participants' closing presentations form the basis for the analysis of local promotion strategies adopted because of participating in the program.

The researchers then conducted a thematic analysis of the transcript data following Nowell et al. (2017), in order to understand the range of promotion techniques and channels used for different target groups. The existing strategies before the leadership training have then been compared with those used during the program, although the diversity of responses in the application forms may be somewhat limited.

LEADERSHIP AND SANITATION PROMOTION

The research aims to test associations between various aspects of the sanitation promotion strategies, including promotion techniques, channels, target groups and key actors. The study hypothesises that leadership skills will influence how commune councillors interact with key actors and target groups.

The findings suggest that participation in the Civic Champions program motivates commune councillors to engage more frequently with the target groups and encourages them to adapt the promotion strategies they use with specific target groups. This is significant because high engagement of active commune-level leaders has been identified as one of the pathways to high latrine coverage in Cambodia (Tribbe et al., 2021).

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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. While individual action has a crucial role to play, effective leadership must also operate on collective and societal levels.

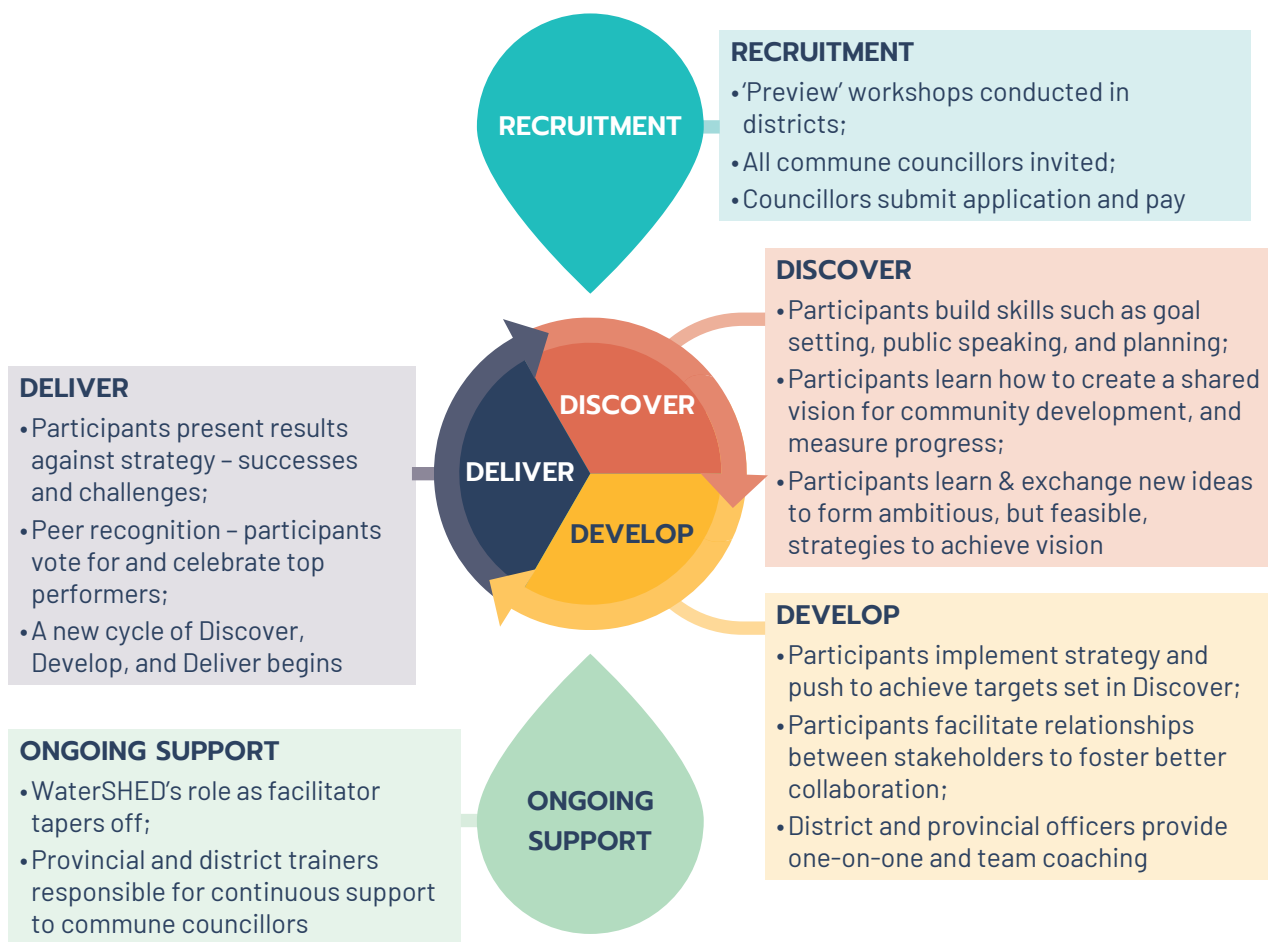
Commune councillors have to apply to join the program and pay to participate. This self-selection demonstrates that participants are motivated to improve their leadership skills and this study provides insights into their backgrounds and attributes. The locally-owned nature of this leadership development approach is a key principle of building legitimacy in communities.

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 the ways in which leadership skills interact with local promotion strategies to improve sanitation coverage.

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



SANITATION PROMOTION STRATEGIES

Community councillors most commonly used village meetings/workshops and direct door-to-door approaches as channels to promote sanitation prior to participation in the training. In terms of promotion techniques, educating about the benefits of latrine use is the most popular option, and to some extent educating about the consequences of open defecation (See Table 1). Analysis of the presentation transcripts shows that sometimes, both these techniques are mentioned concomitantly, making it difficult to distinguish the two. Other less common promotion techniques include emotional triggering and household reflection.

Commune councillors also mentioned the key actors they engaged with to promote sanitation. The most commonly engaged key actors are village level officials, which includes village chiefs and deputy village chiefs. Another key actor is village focal persons who are volunteers working on different sectors, in our case sanitation.

The analysis also investigated associations between the mentioned promotion channels, techniques, and key actors, focusing on which techniques were used when and with whom. However, no clear relationships were identified between them.

TABLE 1: PROMOTION CHANNELS AND TECHNIQUES, AND KEY ACTORS ENGAGED, BEFORE PARTICIPATING IN THE PROGRAM (N=245 CCS)

Promotion channels	Frequency
Village meeting/workshop	41
Direct door-to-door	39
Informal promotion	18
Cross-promotion	12
Promotion techniques	
Educate about benefits of latrine use	31
Educate about consequences of open defecation	18
Emotional triggering	8
Household reflection	5
Key actors	
Village level officials	15
Village focal persons/volunteers	11
NGOs/donors	7

LOCALLY DEVELOPED PROMOTION STRATEGIES

In the presentations at the end of the training, commune councillors referenced a direct door-to-door approach as the most frequently used channel for promoting the latrine uptake, followed by village meetings/workshops. Two further approaches which are less frequently used are cross-promotion and informal promotion (see Table 2).

Preferences for these promotion channels are similar to those observed before the program started, however the frequency of use of all channels increased compared to the pre-program data in the previous section. This suggests that while Civic Champions did not introduce new promotion channels, it did motivate commune councillors to be more active in their sanitation promotion efforts.

BOX 1: KEY DEFINITIONS

Cross-promotion refers to promotion of sanitation in spaces/at events that were not focused on sanitation.

Informal promotion refers to promotion during informal conversations in social settings.



TABLE 2: PROMOTION CHANNELS AND TECHNIQUES, AND KEY ACTORS ENGAGED, FROM COMPETITION TRANSCRIPTS AT THE END OF THE CIVIC CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

Promotion channels	Frequency
Direct door-to-door	49
Village meeting/workshop	43
Cross-promotion	30
Informal promotion	16
Promotion techniques	
Educate about benefits of latrine use	77
Educate about consequences of open defecation	47
Household follow-up	33
Emotional triggering	21
Household reflection	16
Sanction	15
Latrine specification	12
Leveraging social norms	12
Align with policy	8
Target groups	
Village level	74
Poor households	58
Non-adopters	33
Young adult female/woman	16
Household with disabled/senior members	14
Key actors	
Village level officials	165
NGOs/donors	80
Other government	53
Village focal persons/volunteers	51
Monks/religious figures	29
Healthcare centers/workers	25
Schools/teachers	24
Construction sectors	17
Finance sector	17
Other private sectors	15

While educating people about benefits of latrines and negative consequences of open defecation remain the most popular techniques, commune councillors used more varieties of techniques to promote latrine uptake over the course of the program. Those techniques include household follow-up, sanction, latrine specification, emotional triggering, household reflection, social norms, and aligning with national policy on basic sanitation. Below are examples of quotes corresponding to each promotion technique.

“Another point is to double check on some households that are currently building the house. Oftentimes, they plan to build the latrine as well. What we normally do is to observe and make sure they really do it right. In case they haven’t started, we try to encourage and push them to start as soon as possible.”

(**Household follow-up** technique used by a CC in Pailin province)

“Events that will further urge them to get a toilet are like wedding ceremonies in which a couple would come and ask for permission to host the wedding party. We always ask them to get a toilet first before hosting the party or else we won’t allow them to organize the event.”

(**Sanctioning** technique used by a CC in Battambang province)

“We have monitored the building process, checked the contractors and suggested the villagers on their toilet building or what types of door to use such as wood or metal.”

(**Latrine specification** technique used by a CC in Pursat province)

“We educate them to understand more about health and safety issues. We try to raise the possible scenarios that could happen if they don’t have the latrine. For example, there could be a lot of consequences if a young and beautiful daughter goes into the jungle for defecation. Many things could happen.”

(**Emotional triggering** technique used by a female CC in Pailin province)

“Lastly, I train people to use smart technique through feeling. When talking to them, they might want to have a latrine too because everyone else does.”

(**Leveraging social norms** technique used by a CC in Kampong Chhnang province)

Commune councillors talked about engaging with more key actors in their presentations than in their application forms, indicating that they expanded collaboration and cooperation, building social networks over the course of the program, as a means to promote latrine uptake in their community.

The most important key actor remains the village level official, followed by NGOs and other government institutions. Others include healthcare workers, teachers, private construction sector, and the microfinance sector. While these people are in formal institutions, the commune councillors also work with others who are in informal institutions such as village focal persons (volunteers) and monks or other religious figures. Village focal persons usually have good relationships with the majority of people in the village. Villagers highly respect monks and religious figures and hence their messages could be very impactful.

To facilitate sanitation promotion and make it more efficient, commune councillors targeted different groups of households. Following participation in the program, the most common is the target group at village level. Here, commune councillors conducted promotional activities, not specially aiming at certain households, but everyone in the village, whether they already have a latrine or not.

The second most important group is poor households, followed by non-adopters—the ones who refuse to build latrines for various reasons. The least mentioned groups are households with young female members and households with disabled/senior members. This finding could have positive connotations, if it is because these households are more likely to already have a latrine, or negative connotations if they are considered to be less of a priority.

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While Civic Champions did not introduce new promotion channels, it did motivate commune councillors to be more active in their sanitation promotion efforts.

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PROMOTION CHANNELS AND TECHNIQUES

Table 3 indicates associations between promotion channels and promotion techniques used by commune councillors. In cross-promotion and village workshops, the participants tend to use routine techniques to promote sanitation, namely educating people about the benefits of latrines or negative consequences of open defecation. As previously noted, commune councillors frequently mentioned these two techniques concomitantly in the speeches.

In addition, emotional triggering is used in village meetings/workshops and cross-promotion, but less frequently. For direct door-to-door, the most frequently used techniques are educating about the benefits of latrines and household follow-up. Less frequently used techniques in this promotion channel are emotional triggering and educating about the consequences of open defecation. Informal promotion is not strongly associated with any promotion techniques. However, sanctioning and educating about the consequences of open defecation are used a few times in this promotion channel.

TABLE 3: ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN PROMOTION TECHNIQUES AND PROMOTION CHANNELS

Promotion techniques	Promotion channels			
	Cross-promotion (Gr=30)	Direct door-to-door (Gr=49)	Informal promotion (Gr=16)	Village meeting/workshop (Gr=43)
Educate about benefits of latrine	8	18	1	16
Educate about consequences of open defecation (Gr=47)	5	6	4	10
Emotional triggering (Gr=21)	3	4	1	5
Household follow up (Gr=33)	2	13	0	5
Latrines specifications (Gr=12)	1	0	1	1
Leveraging social norms (Gr=12)	1	0	1	3
Sanction (Gr=15)	2	0	3	0

Note: Gr stands for code groundedness – the number of quotations linked to a code.

PROMOTION TECHNIQUES AND TARGET GROUPS

Commune councillors tend to use specific promotion techniques with certain target groups, while previously there were no clear relationships between which techniques were used with whom. This suggests that participants learn to adapt and localise their strategies during the Civic Champions program. Table 4 below shows that when commune councillors promote sanitation aiming for all villagers (village level), educating people about the benefits of latrine use and about the negative consequences of open defecation are the most common techniques used. Other less frequently used techniques for this target group include emotional triggering and describing latrine specifications. For non-adopter households, commune councillors mention sanctioning and household follow-up.

One of the most common forms of sanction is commune councillors not issuing a formal letter/certificate (e.g. a marriage certificate) to non-adopters or not giving them permission to host ceremonies in the village. For poor families as well as families with young adult females, commune councillors try to educate them about the benefits of having a latrine as well as the negative consequences of open defecation.

Commune councillors tend to use specific promotion techniques with certain target groups.

TABLE 4: ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PROMOTION TECHNIQUES AND TARGET GROUPS

Promotion techniques	Target group			
	Non-adopter household (Gr=33)	Poor family (Gr=58)	Village level (Gr=74)	Young adult female/ woman (Gr=16)
Educating about benefits of latrine use (Gr=77)	1	8	24	8
Educating about consequences of OD (Gr=47)	3	5	16	5
Emotional triggering (Gr=21)	2	2	6	4
Household follow up (Gr=33)	5	3	3	2
Latrines specifications (Gr=12)	0	1	5	1
Sanction (Gr=15)	6	0	3	0

Note: Gr stands for code groundedness – the number of quotations linked to a code.

LEADERSHIP AND SANITATION PROMOTION

Leadership influences how commune councillors work to engage with key actors and communicate with the target groups as well as among their team members. When commune councillors promote sanitation at the village level, they stress the importance of communication skills, delegation of tasks, and perseverance with handling the tasks. Also, when they promote sanitation specifically with poor and non-adopter households, perseverance is considered a key leadership characteristic needed to succeed.

Overall, the analysis did not find any strong associations between leadership skills and most key actors engaged. However, it did find that leadership is very important when commune councillors work with key persons in the village/commune and village level officials.

In general, commune councillors regard village level officials as team members who are informally under the authority of the commune councillors. This can explain why, as shown in Table 2 above, village level officials are the key actor commune councillors engaged with most frequently to promote sanitation. This implies that commune councillors mainly use leadership as part of teamwork and delegating promotion tasks to village level officials as well as to key individuals at village/commune level. With village level officials, the commune councillors share the results with, develop, and motivate them.

In their presentations, commune councillors particularly highlight the importance of communication skills as well as perseverance in teamwork, suggesting that there may be resistance to latrine uptake among the groups they are working with.

Notably, when promoting sanitation with poor families, the commune councillors engaged with three key actors, namely microfinance institutions, NGO/donors, and village level officials, which also requires coordination and teamwork. When they promote sanitation targeting everyone at the village level, commune councillors work mainly with the village level officials, and sometimes with NGOs/donors.

When commune councillors promote sanitation at the village level, they stress the importance of communication skills, delegation of tasks, and perseverance with handling the tasks.

BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

The study found that barriers are strongly dependent on which target groups commune councillors are working with. For non-adopter households, their mentality or perception is the main barrier, and this barrier is mentioned more frequently than the money.

“Some household responded to me that “you can just build it for your family if you have money. You don’t need to care about me. I can just relieve myself around banana trees behind my house”. I met a lot of citizens like this and because they live in mountainous area, they relieve themselves just like that.”

(Perception of a non-adopter villager in Kampong Chhnang province when it comes to building a toilet)

For non-adopter and poor households, frequent migration is also a barrier as it makes it difficult for commune councillors to reach them. The main environmentally related barrier was poor households located in the forested area, in which open defecation is easy and common.

Understandably, for poor families the most significant barrier is money, and the study finds that subsidies can act as an enabling factor to promote sanitation with poor households. Lack of resources also acts as a barrier for promotion at village level. Resource barriers include lack of financial support to village focal persons, limited knowledge of village level officials, and the limited knowledge of the commune councillors themselves – which can be improved through training and experience.

Overall, the study found no strong associations between various enabling conditions and different target groups. There is some indication that aid dependency/subsidy and resources (mainly financial) can help commune councillors to promote latrine uptake among poor families and families with disabled/senior members. However, other studies have found that subsidies are unlikely to be effective without being complemented by a wider set of activities (for example Kohlitz et al., 2021). When it comes to promoting sanitation at the village level, the level of knowledge of the village level officials can also act as an enabler to promote sanitation uptake.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Perseverance, communication and delegation are key leadership skills for sanitation promotion

Commune councillors leverage leadership skills with existing practices to promote sanitation in their respective communes. While perseverance is seen as an important leadership characteristic useful for working with various target groups, namely poor households, non-adopters, and village level, two other skills – communicating and delegating – are key for commune councillors to work with those who are engaging in the promotional work. By targeting different groups, using appropriate promotion techniques and channels accordingly, and identifying barriers/enablers for each target group, the commune councillors can work more effectively to promote sanitation.

Leadership training helps local leaders to adapt sanitation promotion skills and strategies to their own contexts, which increases uptake and coverage

While the leadership development program did not significantly change the channels or techniques of sanitation promotion used by the commune councillors, there are increased associations particularly between the promotion techniques and the target groups.

However, some limitations of the study include potential underestimation of the diversity of strategies used prior to the training, due to limited information provided in the application forms compared to the detailed presentations given at the end of the training. Also, the frequency of responses as well as the associations between themes and concepts may be over-represented due to the use of “code co-occurrence”. If two concepts were just concomitantly mentioned they would be coded, and yet in practice there could be no meaningful relationship between them.

Overall, the study findings suggest that the leadership development program helped the commune councillors think through the promotion techniques in more detail and adapt them to the context. In this way, leadership training – such as the Civic Champions program – can strengthen the adaptation and localisation of sanitation promotion strategies, which in this case has been found to improve latrine uptake by 400% (Ann et al., 2014). This approach encourages local level responses to local challenges, which has been identified as a key component of effective leadership in the WASH sector (McLoughlin et al., 2021). Further elaboration on when or how the factors identified as barriers and enablers affect specific activities or techniques would be a fruitful area for further investigation.

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