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Transforming sanitation coverage: civic champions inspire sustainable change in Cambodia

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**SUSTAINABLE WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES
FOR ALL IN A FAST CHANGING WORLD**

**Transforming sanitation coverage:
civic champions inspire sustainable change in Cambodia**

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BRIEFING PAPER 2025

Inspired by local leaders who have motivated their communities to make transformational change in sanitation coverage, WaterSHED is implementing a proof-of-concept leadership development project. Self-selected participants from two 'treatment' districts in rural Cambodia are engaged in a cyclical program of conferencing and coaching. Transformational change is rewarded through a combination of output-based financial and non-financial incentives. Significant improvement in sanitation coverage, including villages with 100 percent sanitation access is targeted. We are evaluating the effectiveness of the methodology to catalyze civic champions to enable more rapid and cost-effective means to reach total sanitation. Among other indicators, we are measuring the number of latrines sold, using neighboring (non-treatment) districts as reference points for comparison. Qualitative transformation is captured, through the mentoring program, documentary videos and small case studies. Early indications are that the enabling civic officials to enhance their leadership capacity, is cost-effective, sustainable and applicable beyond sanitation.

Introduction

WaterSHED implements the *Hands-Off* market based approach to support an increase in access to improved sanitation in rural Cambodia. In a 3-year period, over 75,000 improved latrines have been purchased at full cost by rural consumers from local businesses. Since inception, WaterSHED has appreciated that market agents cannot shift social norms alone. In several communes and districts, we have witnessed the emergence of local leaders who, in spite of the many challenges facing their communities, have led their communities to rapidly achieve full sanitation access.

The Royal Government of Cambodia initiated the first program to support the decentralisation process in 1996. In 2001, the Royal Government of Cambodia adopted legislation that paved the way for the first commune council (local government) elections in 2002 (ADB 2013). Much of the emphasis to support democratic reform and local development focused on the basic infrastructure and administrative needs for local government to operate for example: a civil registry system; geographic mapping for planning purposes; and 'capacity building' for front line local officials (ADB 2013). Leadership development amongst elected local officials (commune councillors) in rural Cambodia has been limited to date.

Non Government Organisations (NGOs) in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector that provide training to government officials tend to focus on developing specific skills or providing training and incentives to complete specific tasks to ensure the project outputs are met within agreed timeframes. In Cambodia, there is limited information on the quality of WASH trainings and workshops and whether the skills or tasks learned have any applicability beyond the NGO project or the WASH domain.

With an estimated 1.8 million households still lacking access to safe sanitation in rural Cambodia, the need to address consumer barriers is critical. The Cambodian Millennium Development Goals call for 30 percent of the population to have access to improved sanitation by 2015, 60 percent by 2018 and 100 percent by 2025. While the country is on track to meet the first goal, achieving the latter is highly unlikely at the current pace. Supply chain development work by WaterSHED and others, combined with social marketing

activities and CLTS inspired programs are helping to address the problem. Persistent acceptance of open defecation as a cultural norm is proving a challenge.

Innovation in engendering a change in community sanitation norms

Under WaterSHED's *Hands-Off* sanitation marketing program, the rapid improvements in some communities and not others led WaterSHED to consider other determinants of change. Whilst proximity to markets and alternative, non-seasonal incomes are indicators of the likelihood of early sanitation adoption, not all communities were accelerating coverage at the same pace.

Over time, more reports of rapid sanitation change were accompanied by stories of the role played by community leaders, in particular village chiefs or local government elected representatives (commune councillors). This opened up the opportunity to understand mechanisms that could inspire and motivate other leaders to facilitate similar change in their communities.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB 2013) supported a major commune development initiative in Cambodia from 2003-2013. During this time, seventeen management and skills-building trainings were offered to elected commune representatives. United Nations development partners and WASH NGOs have also supported numerous capacity and skills-building workshops. Seldom is the interest of the participant assessed or the application of the skills, post training measured. A review of the literature has failed to identify programs in Cambodia that focus on leadership development for elected commune representatives (Thon et al 2009).

Developing a model

WaterSHED sought the assistance of an emerging leadership consultancy firm, Leadapreneur. The consultants strongly emphasized 'democratizing leadership', a concept that embraces the notion that it is increasingly important to have good leadership, at all levels, from more people and that top quality leadership training should be available to everyone.

The target group are elected local government representatives or commune councillors. The first local government election was held in 2002. The third and most recent election was held in 2012. Approximately 50 percent of commune councillors have held their positions since 2002. The average age was over 50 years and most commune councillors had not graduated primary school. Three matched districts were identified from one province in rural Cambodia. Two districts were randomly assigned as 'treatment' districts. Typically for many training activities, good attendance is assured through the payment of per diems and travel allowances. In this program, participants self-selected and paid an upfront nominal, non-refundable fee of US \$30. The initial leadership development model was linear in nature. As a greater familiarity with the audience and the environment developed, an iterative model emerged.

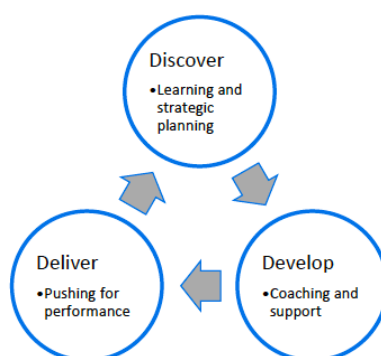
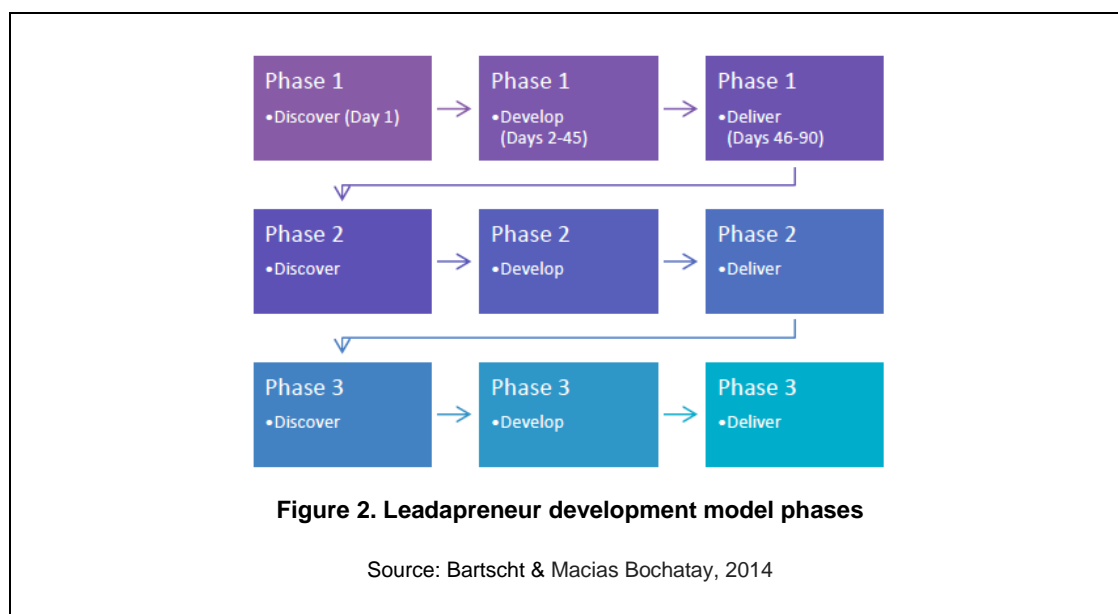


Figure 1. Leadapreneur iterative development model

Source: Bartscht & Macias Bochatay

The iterative model of ‘discover’, ‘develop’ and ‘deploy’ as shown in Figure 1 above, was implemented through a series of three 90-day cycles or phases as shown in Figure 2 below. In each phase, the ‘discover’ element was presented through 2-3 day learning events or conferences. Participants were assigned to small learning teams of 4 people. The ‘develop’ and ‘deliver’ elements enabled participants to build on the ‘discover’ learning. Each participant was encouraged to develop at his or her own pace, as he or she becomes more confident to deploy or deliver their new leadership capacity. Following each ‘discover’ conference, the participants were visited at least two times by a leadership coach. The coaching sessions would enable each participant to express their ideas and understanding emerging from the ‘discover’ conference, share their plans and provide feedback on the outcomes of their efforts to influence and motivate others.



The pilot program is overseen by an advisory group comprised of representatives from key government ministries responsible for local government administration, decentralisation and rural sanitation; a development partner focusing on supporting government reforms; private sector; and local inspirational peers.

Early results

This unique program of leadership development is engaging with elected local government representatives to develop their capacity to engage, inspire and motivate their peers and constituents to share and work towards a common vision. The program enables them to move away from a self-centred focus where the leader feels the responsibility to ‘do-it-all’, empowers them to work with others to create a vision for change, instils competence to inspire and motivate others on a shared journey to achieve the vision with defined values and promotes simple planning with feedback loops to track progress. With this new found capacity, the commune councillors can be the orchestrator of broader and more diverse change, just as the conductor of an ‘orchestra’ coordinates the talent of the musicians to produce quality ‘music’ regardless of the size or resources of the group.

Embedded within WaterSHED’s existing market-based WASH program, this innovative leadership project is showing promising signs of success. Already communities are increasing sanitation coverage, and upgrading to improved sanitation models. Over 1,500 unsubsidized improved latrines have now been installed. Five communities have already self-declared 100% sanitation access ahead of independent verification. Qualitative change is also palpable. Commune leaders talk about the opportunity to learn from others, developing greater self-awareness, growing in confidence and developing a network for advice and support. Sanitation is on the agenda of commune and village meetings, stronger connections are being forged with local businesses and there is a sense that these emerging civic champions can make the impossible possible.

Lessons learnt

1. People are willing to pay for quality programs. As learnt through the market-based approach to sanitation, participants can and will pay to participate in programs they value.
2. Attrition is not failure. Prepare and allow for participants to 'drop-out'. Leadership development is not about getting everyone through the program but is designed to enable strong, dynamic leaders to emerge through the process.
3. Provide for flexibility in program delivery. Allow for the program pace to be modified in accordance with the needs of the group. This cohort of commune councillors was older, had low levels of education, and very little experience with group learning and team building.
4. Alignment with administrative regions is strong. Participants aligned strongly with their respective commune and district. Public acknowledgement of the progress of someone outside of their own 'group' was muted, despite all participants being from the same province. Challenges and awards were reconfigured to align with commune and district administrative groupings.
5. Nuanced leadership development can sow the seeds of long-term, transformational change.

Suitability for scaling up

From the outset, WaterSHED and Leadapreneur included measures of sustainability and scalability. The program builds on the government's strategy that promotes 'those that can pay should pay' for WASH products and services. It is integrated within a successful program that promotes sustainable change by tapping into existing local market-based mechanisms.

Program costs are being measured. Participant fees are channelled into a peer-awards program. Conferencing, coaching and monitoring costs are externally funded. WaterSHED's sanitation marketing program cost of less than US \$20 per latrine purchased is used as the benchmark for cost effectiveness. The additional change in coverage inspired by the participating leaders will enable a direct cost comparison.

The Civic Champions project is first and foremost a leadership development program. These leaders can apply the learning from this focused challenge to any of the development challenges facing their communities. WaterSHED intends to capitalise on this leadership potential through the market-based WASH program implemented across 7 provinces and over 500 communes.

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