Civic Champions Leadership Survey

Summary of findings

August – September 2013

The following analysis draws on 15 face to face interviews with Commune Councillors in 3 districts of Kampong Speu province in August and September 2013, conducted by WaterSHED staff.

Background

Civic Champions is a 1 year pilot program that is aims to identify innovative ways to mobilise local government leaders to better lead local development initiatives. It is adapting leadership training that will provide leaders with new tools and strategies to improve their leadership capacity in the course of their everyday work as elected representatives. As part of the preparation for the design of the structure and content of the training and development course, WaterSHED undertook a small formative survey with Commune Councillors (CCs) in 3 Districts of Kampong Speu Province. The survey sought to determine the CCs' perceptions of good and bad leadership and to identify what they see as necessary for their further development as leaders. Other questions addressed CCs' regular interactions and support within structures of government, and experience with previous leadership support and training. Finally, the survey sought to gauge enthusiasm for the kind of training Civic Champions was planning to offer and to address some logistical issues.

This report includes a summary of important findings and some analysis of the different topics covered in the survey. It concludes with a discussion on the way the findings impacted the design of the leadership development and training program and some thoughts on follow up research.

Summary of most important insights

- There is great enthusiasm for civic champions project, particularly the focus of leadership and the prospect of the ongoing coaching.
- Many are happy to pay for the programme

- Leaders generally recognise that they "lack capacity" – this is more often expressed as a lack of technical knowledge but sometimes also as general leadership capacity
- The relationship with village chiefs (VCs) is unclear, but generally it doesn't seem like many CCs see themselves as having a role in developing or supporting VCs as leaders
- All CCs were familiar with support from the district – mostly in the form of technical training and support, and advice on how to get things done.
- One of the biggest challenges leaders face is getting the people involved – encouraging their participation and getting them to understand about development.
- A number of the most enthusiastic leaders gained office after having emerged as good community organisers and being encouraged by people to run as a CC.

Survey findings by topic

Perceptions of leadership

Having good leadership is generally seen as an important as a way for the communities to solve their problems and develop.

The most commonly stated characteristics of a good leader were someone who:

- works to "develop the community"
- is ethical, just, and doesn't discriminate.
- understands and wants to learn more about the community and people's needs
- is educated, organised and good at planning
- puts others first and doesn't just think of their own interest
- is honest and not corrupt
- is a good communicator and good at managing relationships

Unsurprisingly, bad leaders were described as having the opposite qualities of those listed for good leaders – corrupt, selfish, unethical, disorganised and inattentive to community needs and problems.

Paths to leadership and motivations

A number of the CCs interviewed had originally worked in community organising roles, and had been invited by Commune Chiefs or other leaders to run for elected office. Many expressed that the reason they became CCs was to help their community develop and to address its problems. Some expressed a desire to work with specific groups, such as women and youth. None expressed links to political parties or a family history of leadership as a reason for becoming commune councillors, despite this almost certainly being an influencing factor for some CCs.

Needs of leaders

Although most respondents stated that knowing the needs and issues of the community was an important part of being a good leader, some also expressed this in different terms by saying that that an important part of being leader was knowing how to get the people to vote for you.

The CCs interviewed generally saw knowledge of the law and of bureaucratic and planning processes as crucial for successful commune leadership. The most common expression of needs was for more skills in this area. It seems that most of the training and support they receive, from the district, provincial and national levels, is linked to bureaucratic and procedural matters, such as how to apply for grants. It is not clear if the expressed need for this kind support is because it is genuinely the highest priority, or whether this response is due to this being the most common form of training and support that they are offered.

Another commonly identified need was for more funds and resources, as well as more support from NGOs. Almost all CCs said they needed increased budgets.

Perceived Barriers to good or effective leadership

The most commonly identified challenges for being effective leaders were related to a lack of knowledge and commitment, on the part of both communities and leaders themselves. On the one hand, many said the people's lack of participation in the development of their own community, and the overall lack of education were barriers to leaders effectively developing their constituencies and effectively communicating their vision. On the other, leaders' lack of knowledge and capacity to plan or implement activities also holds them back. Two of the female interviewees saw commonly held perceptions that women lack capacity and do not make good leaders as a barrier to their success as CCs.

Responses to common situations

Respondents were asked to say how they would respond to different situations in their commune related to sanitation, drought and sickness in the commune, and allocating untied funds. While it is difficult to draw too many conclusions responses to hypothetical situations such as these, the answers do present some common trends.

It is clear that asking for outside support, particularly from NGOs, is common response to problems. The CCs also stressed consultation as an important first step in deciding how to allocate money and find solutions to problems – "have a meeting" was the most common first step for CCs in response to the second and third situations. It is not clear however, if this would actually happen in practice, or if it is just seen as a desirable way for leaders to behave.

Experience with training and mentoring

Almost all CCs reported having received training from the district, provincial or national level on planning processes and technical matters related to commune administration. For many, this occurred under the World Bank funded MoI administered SEILA program, which concluded almost a decade ago in 2005. Others had received a variety of training provided by NGOs. Less than a third said they had received "leadership" training. Only two reported having ever paid for some kind of training.

Most said that they had learned from their experience on the job. Some have read books or documents on how to lead and on broader development issues, and used other media like radio and TV as learning tools.

Although many reported having discussions with their fellow leaders about how to solve development related issues, only a couple said they discussed broader issues of leadership with CC colleagues.

Regarding the support that CCs provide downward to village leaders, more than half said they never provided support on how be good leaders to their village level counterparts. Those who did reported more commonly providing support on solving specific problems. About a third of those surveyed said they worked with village leaders to encourage them to take greater responsibility, to engage the participation of villagers in addressing problems, and to be better communicators.

Interest in Civic Champions and likely commitment and payment

The leaders interviewed were generally very enthusiastic about the proposed Civic Champions project. They liked the idea of ongoing support, which unlike in other trainings would allow them to ensure that they use new skills and knowledge in practice. Many expressed wanting "more knowledge" or "more capacity" to help them "develop the community".

Leaders were asked if they would be willing to pay for some of the cost of the training. It was explained that this was ensuring commitment as well as about covering the costs of the program. All but two said they would be willing to pay something. Six of the 15 said they would pay $30 (the highest dollar option presented in the survey as part of a multiple choice response), four said $25 or $20. One said he was willing to pay $50. Of the 13 who said they would pay, the mean amount was $26.15.

It was the impression of the field researcher that of those who said they would pay, at least five would be certain to follow through with payment and to make the commitment to the one year course. For the others, there was some doubt as to the level of their willingness to actually pay.

Conclusions and impact of results on training program

The leadership survey served to galvanise the WaterSHED team, making it clear that there was a demand for more leadership development support. It also gave the training planners confidence to move ahead and to charge a fee for the services as part of the strategy to ensure greater commitment from participants and to prove the longer-term sustainability of the project. At the time of writing, this approach had been so far vindicated, with almost all participants making a payment to participate in the first session.

The results also made it clear what kind of barriers CCs regularly face and how they articulate these, particularly related to their own capacity and the willingness of communities to get involved in community development. These issues are being addressed directly by Civic Champions, with strategies for better engaging the community forming a key part of the training and coaching program.

The survey results also provided an indication of the kind of support CCs are used to receiving and how this might frame their response to a new leadership development program. The Civic Champions curriculum and structure has taken this in to account, and while it does not directly deal with issues of technical and bureaucratic capacity, training is contextualised in terms of how it related to everyday activities, and how another skillset is also an important part of maximising potential. In fact, the program is able to emphasise that the skills and behaviours that Civic Champions is seeking to support are closely aligned with many of the characteristics of good leaders that were identified by CCs themselves through this survey. Importantly, the program is also able to respond to CCs expressed desire for more follow up, and longer term training that isn't over in just 1 day and that allows them to practice and develop new skills.

Follow-up research

This formative research was not of sufficient scale to be representative of the target group, however it was valuable in that it provided important insights into perceptions and attitudes of leaders and other issues relevant to the development of the program. While follow up research will not be able to track the impact of the program conclusively, it will be able to indicate if there has been a shift in attitudes and ability to articulate about issues of leadership among those exposed to Civic Champions.

The follow up research should be undertaken in August 2014, or near to the conclusion of the project, and should repeat most of the questions around attitudes towards leaders and leadership as well as perceptions of needs and common barriers. Comparing the responses of those in the treatment districts to those in the control, will be particularly instructive. Follow up research can also act as the next stage of formative research, dependent on plans to scale up the program in the future. The follow-up survey findings will be an important addition to the results of several other qualitative and quantitative monitoring tools that WaterSHED has put in place to track the impact of the pilot program.