Locally Led, Locally Owned: WaterSHED’s Civic Champions Program

As WASH markets in rural Cambodia are taking off, communities that are similar in nearly every way show vastly different results. Some make incredible progress. Others lag behind. Working at scale has given us a vantage point to see what drives these different results.

We learned that a key driver can be the councilor in local government who demonstrates initiative and action, versus the one who believes nothing will ever change. In fact, we see local leadership as the biggest driver of sustainable WASH. It was a critical factor in our ability to exit the market. These leaders are Civic Champions.

But can something be done to foster the emergence of local leadership, instead of simply hoping for the best?

Turns out, yes. And not only yes, our program to cultivate local leadership behaviours is the most impactful component of our work to build markets for sustainable WASH. It is a critical key driver.

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The key driver: local leadership

We began with a hypothesis that leadership is a key component to market build-out, especially in Cambodia. We learned that leadership is the single most impactful component to market build-out. Leadership is the biggest driver of sustainable WASH.

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Introducing Civic Champions led to high levels of independent sales of toilets – a metric we use to gauge sustainability – 94% of the toilets installed under WaterSHED’s sanitation marketing programme during the first six months of 2017 were sold without direct assistance by WaterSHED (see Figure 5).

Looking Forward: 2018-2020

Civic Champions is a bold, non-traditional approach to development. It is more than just a scalable mechanism to promote the leadership development of subnational government. At its core, Civic Champions embodies a comprehensive mindset change that helps government develop the skills, agency, and motivation to fulfill their mandate and instigate positive change in their communities.

Other actors in the sector are seeing the value in Civic Champions. WaterAid Cambodia is replicating a version of the program, and Plan International and iDE have requested to replicate the program in Cambodia. The scale-up was two times more cost-effective than the pilot iteration, primarily because of the lower costs of leadership expertise and significant contributions from the government, mainly in the form of staff time.

Cost-effectiveness: At USD$5.14 per latrine, the scaled-up iteration may have had the lowest cost per latrine of all sanitation interventions in Cambodia. The scale-up was two times more cost-effective than the pilot iteration, primarily because of the lower costs of leadership expertise and significant contributions from the government, mainly in the form of staff time.

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