



Founder's Perspective: *Civic Champions* Manager Nareth interviews WaterSHED co-founder Lyn

Youtube video available [here](#).

Nareth: Good morning Lyn! It's wonderful to have you here today. Thank you so much for joining us from Australia. I'm calling from Cambodia, from our office. How are you today?

Lyn: I'm very well, thanks Nareth, and thanks for the opportunity to chat with you today.

(0:28) Nareth: A quick introduction about myself: I'm Choun Nareth. I began with WaterSHED in 2017 as a researcher and coordinator. Since early 2020, I've worked as a program manager where I support the *Civic Champions* program. Today work closely with national and subnational-level [government] to hand over the elements of *Civic Champions* to the government.

I want to share a bit of background about Lyn. Lyn has been working in water and sanitation since early 1980, and she came to Cambodia in 1999. She joined in the early days of WaterSHED in 2009, and she serves as a valuable board member.

I really enjoyed working with you throughout the years that we work closely and collaborate. It [has been very special to me] to have you as a mentor in both career and in my life as well. Thank you so much.

To start the conversation, could you share with me what sanitation in Cambodia looked like back then when you first came to Cambodia in 1999?

Lyn: I was traveling a lot in rural areas and in some very remote areas, and in fact in some areas that were landmine affected, and finding a toilet at that time was hugely difficult. And you would try to find perhaps a small, small restaurant at the side of the road, or you waited until the evening where you got to use the toilets wherever you were staying.

At that time there was less than 10 percent sanitation coverage in rural Cambodia, and everybody thought that this was kind of an impossible problem to deal with. Lots of NGOs and donors saw it as a private issue, and so most of the funding at that time went into community initiatives – in particular into wells. And that's really what I was working on in those early days.

A lot of NGOs might include in a health program initiative, maybe, a hundred toilets to install over a 2-3 year period. A lot of those projects saw contractors coming in and building the toilets for the families, or

they would provide them the tools and the materials to construct the toilets themselves – right from scratch – and that's a pretty big effort to construct every component part from scratch and build the latrine if every day you're working in the fields, you know, in the heat or in the rain.

So in 2009 when I started working with WaterSHED, we started to go out to meet with provincial officials to discuss this concept of engaging people in rural areas to think about buying their own toilets from local suppliers. And because we've had such a background of donor-funded toilets, you know, nobody was really sure that this might work. This idea of encouraging people to invest their own fund, was, I thought, going to be a really big challenge, and that it was going to also be a significant behavior change for the hundreds of thousands of people in rural Cambodia who had, since they were small, been going to the forest and the field [to defecate].

(4:15) Nareth: It's really inspiring listening to all the experiences you've gone through and the strategy you shared with us. WaterSHED has changed so much over the years, especially when we see the *Civic Champions* leadership trainings. Could you share more on how local leadership became [fundamental] for WaterSHED's strategy?

Lyn: Yes. There seemed to be so many firsts for us in this program, and one of the things that we started to notice once we got these sales events happening and suppliers were starting to offer the product and service, we noticed that some villagers were advancing much more quickly, so that more households in a village were actually purchasing and installing their latrines. And quite early on we kind of had a feeling that it might be related to the leadership shown by the village chief or commune councilor.

So that got us thinking, if we've got some really good leaders – leaders that are very persuasive in their community, that have high trust in their community, [and] that are able to engage [their community] in thinking differently – how could we bring on board other local leaders to start to share their experiences, and what might be a forum for doing that? So this idea of bringing local leaders together was how the concept of the *Civic Champions* was born.

The idea wasn't actually to develop a leadership program for sanitation, it wasn't about sanitation leadership. It was first and foremost about leadership that could be applied to a whole range of development issues that the community faces. The idea was to bring leaders together to learn together about key aspects related to leadership, but mostly to learn from each other in a peer-to-peer network, if you will.

And we started to hear some really, really interesting stories that came out of this. I remember one commune councilor sharing with me that he had a village in his commune and it was called "King of Poor". So this village was really considered by many other people within the commune as being a very difficult village to work with, that poverty was really a big problem in the community and change was going to be really a challenge to bring about. And so over the course of his engagement in the *Civic Champions* program he actually took that village up from having virtually no latrines, to over 50 percent coverage, and he had real pride in that achievement. And it was so exciting to see how he had tackled

what was seen as a really challenging element or challenging village within his commune. So he didn't really go for just the low-hanging fruit of the people in other villages that were ready, willing, and able to pay now that there was a product being sold in their village that they could see others were putting in. He tackled something that was really quite challenging.

But not only that, there were stories about what commune councilors had done after they finished the *Civic Champions* program. And one story that I recall is [of] a commune councilor who said he had a market in one of the villages – it was the commune market – and every wet season this market would be flooded. So it was something that they just learned to deal with. But it was really problematic so it meant that perhaps the market couldn't trade in particularly wet times. It was, you know, really problematic for the store holders and for the community. And so he decided he would approach the store holders and discuss with them what they could do to resolve this problem. And he also asked them if they would contribute some money towards the works that would be necessary to overcome the flooding.

So some people did contribute but he said others were quite skeptical – skeptical that the work would actually be done and that their money wouldn't be wasted. And so to enable it to go ahead, he said he contributed some of his own money just to make sure that it was able to be done. And he said the next wet season after the work was done, he was standing under an awning opposite the market, and he said he was so proud of seeing how the works had changed the situation, the market was no longer being flooded, and people were able to use it as they would normally. But not only that, he said somebody came up to him and he patted him on the back and said 'I didn't think you'd be able to do it'. And for him he said that was such a proud moment that some that other people in the community had recognized that this was a really difficult problem to deal with and that he was able to resolve it. And he attributed his confidence in working on that issue to his involvement in the leadership development program.

So research by others and research that I did in Cambodia indicates that there needs to be a mechanism by which local leaders – indigenous leaders if you will – can come together and develop or foster their leadership potential.

And this really fits well with the Royal Government of Cambodia's decentralization program, where they're expecting that more and more services will be undertaken at these local levels. So the more we can work with the locally elected leaders and help to strengthen their capacity to develop their own potential, the better that or the stronger the decentralization program will be in the long term.

And so this work that you're continuing to do, Nareth, with government to help bring the *Civic Champions* program or fold that program into the government's own training initiatives, is something I think will be a great legacy for the future.

(11:01) Nareth: Yeah thanks again. As you know that now we are at the end of WaterSHED's work in Cambodia. So what are some reflections on WaterSHED's unique path?

Lyn: From the beginning, we talked a lot about organic growth. We didn't want to introduce a totally new latrine. We didn't want to set up demonstration businesses to show people how to do it. We wanted to work with existing small local businesses – like the mom-and-pop kind of stores. We wanted to work with the elected local councilors and bring these elements together in a way that they could start to develop and grow under their own system.

It's not to say that we didn't have some significant input into the program and we had some marvelous international expertise that supported the effort and helped us to work through some of the challenging issues. But we wanted to at all times make sure that the change was emerging from within the community – from within those businesses themselves – and that government saw that it was central to the work that they have been doing and will continue to do.

So from the beginning we tried to influence that and have the shift of emphasis from NGOs, [and to instead] have government at the center. And so our work on *Civic Champions* and also [our] work on collective action with the sector was key to supporting that change.

We also tried to encourage the sector to start to move away from inserting themselves into programs. A simple example of that is the production of materials that might be used to promote messages associated with the program. You know the ubiquitous poster or pamphlet that is funded and distributed through communities – often NGOs and donors, they all want to put their name on the bottom of them. And whilst there may be a government logo there somewhere, often the community only saw the NGO or the donor logo. When you ask the community about who they trust in terms of getting the right information, more often they would put NGOs above the government. So we wanted to look at how we could work with the sector to try to change that to have the government as the central focus for the community. That we were all giving consistent information, but that those messages and images were seen to be coming first and foremost from the government.

It wasn't an easy task, and I still think there's a long way to go. But some of these things are really simple changes that we can make that start to reduce the dependency on an NGO and start to move or move government into a central position as being the support mechanism for the community. I'm not saying that the community has to depend wholly on the government but at least developing that trust that these messages and images are something that they can trust in even when they think they're coming from the government.

So it's exciting to see that some of these things are starting to take hold, but as I said we've still got a long way to go.

Something that I'm really proud of is being part of a locally-led initiative. So often this space is occupied by international actors, big international NGOs that are very well resourced, and WaterSHED was really able to hold its own on these international platforms.

It's really inspiring that I've been able to work with all three executive directors of WaterSHED. I mentioned Hengly earlier. He brought that initial entrepreneurial skill to the organization that was

followed up by Daroath, who had a really strong business mindset as well. And as we evolved more into supporting the development of leadership potential amongst local government elected representatives, it was so great to have Sovattha come on board and really round out the organization as we move through those changes.

I really think that WaterSHED punched above its weight. It's very difficult I think for any NGO to survive in these challenging times but it is through the hard work and determination that the leadership of WaterSHED was able to promote that at all levels within the organization. So right from the grassroots, the youngest and the newest staff were encouraged to take on significant responsibilities, and [they] were encouraged to develop their own leadership potential. And I know that staff who were part of the leadership program, the *Civic Champions* program, have often expressed that this has really contributed to their own personal development and helping to reach their own potential. And I think that is an amazing legacy for any organization, as it starts to exit the sector, and we don't see that happen very often.

And we don't see it happen often enough where organizations plan for these exits early on by not inserting themselves in, or creating dependencies on the work that they're doing, but also to support and encourage their own staff to develop their potential to be the best that they can wherever they go. And so that's something really exciting and, again, that I've been so proud to work with you.

I've learned a lot from you as I have from everybody within WaterSHED, and it's just been an amazing journey over these last 10 years or so, achieving development outcomes that I didn't think were possible. So you know, over the 20 years that I've been here, these last 10 years have really shown that if we start to look at things in a different way – if we think about not just bringing something from outside, but actually trying to ignite the local capacity to really work with what we have on the ground and supporting it from the ground up - I think we can see that change can take place.

And I'm really excited about what I've seen in Cambodia during this time. And I'm so proud of the change in sanitation coverage. [Cambodia is] seen as one of the leaders in this area internationally and, you know, my hat goes off to every staff member that's been part of that work.

(18:26) Nareth: Thank you so much, Lyn, for sharing these very valuable reflections with us. I believe that this very inspired storytelling not only benefits myself, but our team and other members within and outside the sector as well. So this kind of unique experience is definitely [something that] the [the team and I] can benefit from in the next jobs that we are going to do. So as I work with my team to finish the work that you began, I'm sure that we will learn from this sharing experience, and use it as a benefit.

As a Cambodian woman working [with] the Cambodian government - national and sub-national level - I'm so excited to continue supporting my country's institutions – especially like with systems strengthening [work where] we are stronger together.

Thank you so much, Lyn, again thank you.

Lyn: Thank you Nareth, I am also very proud to have had the opportunity to learn from you, and I've learned so much from you and others within WaterSHED. And I think this is a great legacy going forward where we have so many young, skilled Khmer that are able to fulfill leadership roles going forward. And thank you so much for the opportunity to chat with you today. Thank you.