



# Teamwork, trophies and toilets: Inspiring local leadership for sanitation in Cambodia



## Sanitation access for everyone: a challenge of scale and capacity

In 2014, only 46% of people living in rural Cambodia had access to a decent toilet at home.<sup>1</sup> The millions of people daily defecating in the open exposed their communities to health risks through the contamination of water and food with human waste. That year, the same year that WaterAid began working in Cambodia, the Royal Government of Cambodia set a target for every Cambodian to have access to a household toilet by 2025.

The Ministry of Rural Development (MRD) is responsible for overseeing the Cambodian Government's vision for universal sanitation, but they cannot work alone. MRD rely on a network of local governments comprising 1652 commune councils in 207 districts and municipalities across the country to promote the use of toilets. Key to this effort are commune councillors - women and men who are elected to develop their community – who often take on their roles with limited training or strategies to navigate the government bureaucracy. Many local government staff also struggle to prioritise sanitation among their various responsibilities, and motivate other stakeholders at commune and village level.

<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Statistics, 2015. Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2014, Royal Government of Cambodia Ministry of Planning, Phnom Penh.

## WaterAid's Response

Since 2018 WaterAid has partnered with local NGO WaterSHED to implement the Civic Champions program to increase the leadership capacity of local government authorities in rural communities. Civic Champions aims to equip local leaders with the leadership skills and confidence they need to define their community development vision, and to mobilise others to achieve it. During the program, the participating commune councillors apply what they learn to the challenge of low sanitation coverage in their commune, and motivate and inspire one another through regular sharing of experience and competitions.

Between 2019 and 2022 WaterAid and WaterSHED collaborated with MRD and the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), through the National School of Local Administration (NASLA), to plan, organise and deliver an entirely government-led Civic Champions program through government institutions and structures. WaterAid provided training, coaching and advisory support to NASLA and MRD to roll out Civic Champions across eight provinces. NASLA and MRD's national and provincial teams trained 267 district trainers who led the program in 68 districts, engaging 1,272 commune council participants.



**1,272**

Elected commune councillors trained in leadership and community development



**267**

District government officials trained to deliver Civic Champions and motivate commune councillors.

## Structure of the Civic Champions Leadership Development Program



*Civic Champions participants grow their leadership skills through three-month cycles in which they discover new skills, develop their new skills through applying them in their community, and deliver presentations to their peers about their results and lessons learnt.*

Civic Champions is not a conventional capacity development program:

- The participants – elected commune councillors – must apply and pay to participate.
- The participants drive the 10-month iterative training process themselves based on the skills they feel they need to develop to create and achieve a vision for their communities; skills like public speaking, teamwork, emotional intelligence, action planning and data collection.
- Through quarterly cycles of training and implementation, district trainers progressively introduce ideas to the participants over time and reinforce earlier concepts. Each quarter the participants apply their skills to the sanitation challenge, providing repeated opportunities to put leadership skills into practice, try new innovative approaches and inspire confidence among commune participants as they see their peers achieving their goals.
- Participants are supported with materials and resources to assess and monitor household toilet access. Progress in household toilet numbers provide an objective, tangible measure of participants' improving capacity and confidence.
- At quarterly competitions participants present about how they applied their leadership skills to make progress against their plans. Champions are voted by their peers to receive trophies and cash (funded from the participation fees) to recognise and inspire continued motivation.

## Ms Chanthy – the ‘Toilet champion’ of Pongro commune

Ms Chanthy earned the nickname ‘The Toilet Champion’ after featuring on national TV as a role model for local leaders. A commune councillor from Pongro commune in Kampong Chhnang province, Chanthy has participated in the Civic Champions programs twice since 2017. She applied the training by rallying a team of influential people across the commune to visit each house and encourage people to build toilets. “After I received training, I met with the commune leader to share with him and ask for recommendation and support for my plans to provide follow-up training on what I had learned with village leaders, village focal persons and communities. I am only a commune councillor, [but] since he is a commune leader, he can support me by mobilising communities,” she said.



In 2018, Chanthy was voted the most inspiring leader from her fellow participants. She decided to share her trophy and cash prize to the village leaders and colleagues in her sanitation team.

“They helped me to reach the target and win the competition so as a good leader, I must share with them,” said Chanthy. “I am a Champion, together with my team, for my community!”

## WaterAid’s Impact

Program evaluation surveys with participants conducted by NASLA, provincial household toilet access



**137,348**

*Households built decent toilets for the first time*

data collated by MRD, and in-depth interviews by WaterAid with 11 trainers and participants of the program provide quantitative and qualitative evidence of WaterAid’s impact through Civic Champions:

**Improved access to decent household toilets.** During the project, over 137,348 households constructed a household toilet for the first time. The table below shows the increases in household sanitation access in each province during the 2019-2022 Civic Champions program. Two of the participating provinces – Kampong Speu and Kampong Chhnang – have declared ‘open defecation free’ status, with everyone in those provinces now accessing a household toilet.

Province	Increase in household toilets
Tboung Khmum	24,254
Pailin	2,564
Takeo	32,416
Kampong Speu	43,058
Kampong Chhnang	14,042
Battambang	21,014
Total - 6 provinces	137,348

\* Note, consolidated data was not available from Pursat or Kampong Cham provinces

## Local leaders with the skills to do their job.

NASLA asked commune council participants to self-rate their own abilities on several tasks at the beginning and end of the program. Statistically significant improvements were observed in participants’ abilities related to planning, public speaking, stakeholder engagement, goal-setting and motivating team members.

*“I used this skill for accelerating district ODF. I used skills from Civic Champion such as resource mobilization, leadership, planning, motivation, and finally I can lead my district become ODF. I also used my leadership skills to communicate with other stakeholders to mobilize resources. I also use monitoring skills to ensure my planning is on track.” – District trainer, Tuek Phos*

**Improved confidence to champion local development.** Every sub-national government person that WaterAid interviewed in post-program monitoring – both district trainers and commune participants – reported that the Civic Champions program had improved their confidence. This improved confidence has empowered sub-national leaders to ask for assistance when they need it, clarify unclear requests from managers or other departments, speak in public and facilitate community activities, coordinate a team and face difficult community development challenges.

*“Civic Champions has given me more confidence and courage to face challenges and to coordinate success.”* – Participant, Prak Phalla commune

*“Previously, I was someone who was less comfortable speaking in front of a group of people or in public. But after I attended the program, I feel more courage and confidence to speak and share to other people. Especially, I was confident to raise the awareness of WASH concept in the communities.”* – Participant, Pea Ny commune

**Stronger collaboration between government departments.** The joint ownership and facilitation of the program by NASLA and MRD contributed to better national-level coordination on sanitation issues, and clarification on roles and responsibilities for supporting sub-national sanitation promotion.

*“[The program] improved the interaction between MoI and MRD. We often hold meetings to address problems and together come up with solutions. Previously, MRD was responsible for the WASH sector, but now MoI & MRD strongly collaborate after joining the civic champion program as we participated in the curriculum design.”* – National master trainer, MRD

At sub-national level, the program’s emphasis on teamwork has led to improved communication and mutual support between government at district, commune and village levels which extends beyond sanitation.

*I have improved close connection and communication with commune ... [Before] I didn't have regular meetings with commune. After I joined this program, I have regular meetings with commune.”* – District trainer, Banonn

**National commitment to developing local leadership.** Following the success of the government-led Civic Champions program, in 2023 Cambodia's then Minister of Interior – the Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng – issued an official decree recognising the program's contribution to public services. The decree encouraged provinces to continue to organise Civic Champions-style leadership training and motivate local authorities through competitions and awards.

## Next Steps

With the support of partners and funders WaterAid can continue efforts to strengthen local leadership for sanitation. Future work will focus on:

- Continuing to encourage NASLA and MRD to implement Civic Champions in other provinces in Cambodia where not everyone has access to a toilet. To date, only six out of Cambodia's 25 provinces have eliminated open defecation and there are thousands of local leaders who have not yet participated in this program.
- Collaborating with NASLA to scale Civic Champions to other sectors where leadership and motivation can empower local development, such as improving water supply, sanitation and hygiene in health care settings and schools, or strengthening locally-led climate resilience planning.
- Trialling Civic Champions in other countries where local leaders are responsible for sanitation.