

Perspectives on Local Leadership among Current and Future INGO Leaders in Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how local and community leadership is understood, where it is learned, the opportunities and challenges it presents, and mistakes that are made. It examines the views of leadership held by Cambodians working for International Nongovernmental Organizations (INGOs) in the capital of Phnom Penh and the provincial city of Battambang. Those interviewed are in leadership positions in their organizations¹, or, because of their responsibilities, can be expected to be in such roles in the future. The consensus themes that emerge – that leaders and leadership should be values based, more facilitative than directive, focused on developing others, emphasize soft skills, be open to rather than threatened by new ideas, and be motivated by passion for the work and not ego driven – are remarkably close to qualities commonly associated with good leadership in Western societies. This convergence may be explained by the influence of globalized ideas about leadership, the fact that interviewees work for INGOs, the high education levels of those interviewed, and early life experiences. It is of future interest to know how these images of leaders and leadership compare with those held by others in Cambodia, such as government officials.

I. Introduction

Nongovernmental organizations, both domestic and international, are an important resource for addressing important societal changes. The approach to leadership taken by people working in them is consequential because it will impact the success of their organizations and may alter views of what in the future is regarded as effective, public-regarding leadership in Cambodian society. This paper gives attention to both of these impacts.

Interest in leadership, as both a theoretical and an applied issue, is widespread in the West (see for example Bennis, 2009; Chaleff, 2009; Pierce and Newstrom, 2011; van Velsor *et al.*, 2010). In Cambodia discussions about what is good leadership, how it is developed and how it is

¹ Two interviewees recently left INGO positions to join other organizations.

disseminated within institutions, are far from common. It is not part of Cambodian culture and, as in other places, such discussions might even be interpreted by officials as threats that deserve retaliation. Moreover, existing ideas of leaders and leadership are reinforced by traditions hard to question, with those traditions commonly being embodied by those occupying positions of authority (see for example, Ledgerwood and Vijghen, 2002).

This absence of discussion continues despite forces for change that would seem to make new understandings of leadership increasingly critical. Cambodia will continue to face strong currents of transition for the foreseeable future. Some of these are the consequence of an often-tumultuous history, others are associated with on-going economic transformations, and still others come from outside as global ideas and practices enter the country. All of them help to shape the context in which local leaders operate and in which this research is done.

The research reported here is directed at understanding how local and community leadership is understood, where the practice of it is learned, the opportunities and challenges it presents, and mistakes that are made. This work is part of research in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia that inquires into leadership at more local levels.² The focus on local leadership reflects efforts, global in scope, to move greater responsibility, resources and authority to less centralized governance institutions.

The first section describes the broad setting in which those interviewed work. The second addresses the significance of ideas about leadership and leaders. The third section describes the evolution of this research on local level leadership. Section four summarizes the methods used to conduct and then analyze the responses to questions about leading and leadership. Section five presents and compares the results from interviews conducted in Phnom Penh and Battambang. The final section interprets what is revealed about ideas of leading and leadership, how they compare with other places, and what they may imply for Cambodia.

II. Context for Ideas about Leadership and Research Setting

Cambodia has experienced a challenging and, too often, turbulent history. National independence was achieved in 1953 after a long period of foreign rule. The country soon entered a violent period that lasted until 1991, highlighted by the bloody Khmer Rouge regime. A Peace Agreement was signed among those vying for power, and the United Nations agreed to act as a transitional authority.

² 'Local' in this article refers to activities in district or sub-district jurisdictions.

Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

The 1993 constitution describes a multi-party democracy comprised of institutionally separate legislative, executive and judicial bodies. Today however it is common to portray Cambodia as a set of hierarchy-based patronage relationships (see for example Peang-Meth, 2013). Loyalties and obligations are pervasive at national and local levels and operate outside of formal institutional arrangements (Gottesman, 2003). Many observers have connected the country's low scores on various measures of social and political development, and why corruption is so commonplace, to this pervasive pattern of elite-based patronage relationships that has been entrenched from pre-colonial times until the present day.³

Hughes and Un (2011: p. 5) argue that the “legacies of conflict” from the recent past have declined and that, starting in 2002, the focal point has been on an economic transformation that takes place alongside an authoritarian state operating through neo-patrimonial institutions. They conclude that “profound social and political changes” already have occurred in Cambodia as a result of this transformation.

The form any new national political-economic order will take is unclear. One possibility, less likely to Hughes and Un given the deeply embedded patronage relationships, is toward a Western model of ‘Good Governance’ that emphasizes competent public sector management, the rule of law, accountability, and transparency. More probable in their view is a kind ‘crony capitalism’ in which the state and business elites cooperate in draining wealth out of the country at the expense of broader development goals. A more desirable possibility would see the state gaining sufficient degrees of autonomy – albeit an independence that necessarily remains engaged with elite networks – to pursue development programs benefitting broader segments of society, including the poor (*loc. cit.*: p. 16).

Globalization also will play a role, acting in different ways on domestic institutions. Hughes and Un think this may mean that the new political-economic order will be a “balance of power among different forces inside and outside of the country” (*loc. cit.*: p. 21). These forces would include international aid donors. The current and emerging leaders of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), the focus of this paper, can be viewed as both ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ because they bring in external ideas and values while, as Cambodians, they are part of the local fabric.

³ Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Cambodia as 150th of 168 countries in 2015. Freedom House's 2015 ‘Freedom in the World’ survey rated it as ‘Not Free’, with low scores on political rights and civil liberties. The United Nations Human Development Index placed Cambodia at 143 of 188 in its 2014 estimates.

The first humanitarian INGOs appeared in 1989, followed soon by new or reorganized domestic NGOs. Both entered a space created by the devastating conflicts of the preceding years. Many more followed the United Nations entrance as a transitional authority in 1992 (NGO LawMonitor, 2015; Brinkley, 2011: p. 25). According to the NGO Law Monitor (2015), as of spring 2015 approximately 3,492 NGOs, INGOs and associations were registered. It estimated that about 1,350 of them were active. In comparative terms there was about one for every 10,000 Cambodians, the second highest ratio in the world after Rwanda (Domashneva, 2013).

INGOs in general do not have much *direct* influence on government strategy and policy because in practice there is little room for dialogue. Moreover officials can easily interpret advocacy, such as for human or civil rights, as oppositional and take steps to control or restrict it. (NGO Law Monitor, 2015; Brinkley, 2011). Recent years have brought efforts to impose new requirements on INGOs^{4,5} (see Frewer, 2013; Babovic and Vukovic, 2014).

At the same time it is widely acknowledged that, since the early 1990s, NGOs and INGOs have made significant contributions to reconstruction and development. It is reasonable to expect that they will continue to play a meaningful role in addressing outcomes associated with economic change, and in promoting more effective public institutions at all levels (Norman, 2014). For how an INGO can act to improve local government services, see Neb (2017).

Their impact may be especially strong at local levels because of decentralization initiatives beginning in 2002. A system of commune governments was followed in 2009 with election of local district and provincial officials.⁶ Sedara and Ojendahl (2014) suggest that as these local institutions are changing so are local decision-making processes. This has the potential of generating “deep transformation in the structure of local governance.” Community-based organizations then will have “a crucial role to play in being *intermediaries* in the ‘dialogue’ between people and authorities now emerging in rural Cambodia” (Sedara and Ojendahl, 2007:

⁴ The procedural requirements for registration of INGOs can be complex and difficult. See for example NGO Law Monitor, 2015; Brinkley, 2011.

⁵ The patronage pattern has at times presented challenges for NGOs and INGOs. For example, in their 1990s study of rural leadership in Cambodia, Ovensen *et al.* (1996) concluded that. “Any agents of a development project should thus prior to its commencement ask themselves whether, or which, power structures and patron-client relations are being challenged by it, and whether the project, and the people participating in it, will be able to endure that challenge; and whether the development gain will outweigh the insecurity it might bestow on its ‘beneficiaries’.”

⁶ For interpretations of Cambodia’s decentralization initiative see for example Eng (2014).

p. 267).

III. Significance of Ideas about Leadership

Leadership of all kinds is important for societies and organizations. In Cambodia's shifting institutional setting local leadership – what happens at the district or sub-district levels – is especially significant because it affects how communities organize and express their interests and concerns (Ledgerwood and Vijghen, 2002; Thon *et. al.*, 2009; Sedara and Ojendahl, 2011). The influence of organizations operating in communities is likely to vary with the practices of their leaders and their ideas of leadership. Although not much is known about how new ideas about leadership are disseminated within or across organizations (see for example Shondrick *et al.*, 2010), leadership perspectives and practices may have broader impacts through the multiple interactions individuals from these organizations have with Cambodian society and its institutions.

Finally, the particular ideas about leadership held by Cambodians working for INGOs are of interest because they have been exposed to outside views while also regularly interacting with community members, local organizations and government officials.

IV. Project background

Our interest in local leaders has evolved over a number of years, beginning in November 2008 in a project with five successful local leaders from northeast Thailand. In September 2009, we organized a workshop in Dan Sai, northeast Thailand; and, in February 2010, another in Mukdahan on the Mekong River across from Laos. These workshops brought together a larger group of individuals, including Laotians, from organizations operating at the local level and joined them with the five Thai leaders from the first project. In 2011, we traveled to Vientiane, Laos, using questions we had asked the five Thai leaders to conduct a small survey, then returned in 2012 for interviews (Pratt and Yongvanit, 2014, 2016). In Cambodia, we interviewed in Battambang in February 2014; and in Phnom Penh in February 2015.

Access to a diverse range of interviewees was gained through the indispensable assistance of well-connected local colleagues, since we wanted to create a climate in which people could more openly express opinions. This was important even though our primary goal is to explore diverse understandings of leadership and leaders. Not surprisingly aspects of the political context surfaced in responses to our questions.

V. Methodology

Because what we have sought to learn has remained constant since 2008 it has been possible to use the same questions across diverse settings. This level of consistency provides rich opportunities for generalizations and comparisons. The six questions⁷ that are the focus of this paper are:

- What is a ‘leader’? (“What do you think it means to be a ‘leader’?”).
- What makes someone an effective leader? (“In your opinion, what is most important for a local leader to be effective?”).
- The challenges local leaders face (“What do you think is most challenging about being a local leader?”).
- The sources of learning about leadership and leading (“Describe where and how you learned to be a leader. Who are your important leadership role models, and why is each important?”).
- The mistakes being made by other local leaders (“What do you think are the biggest mistakes made by people who want to be local leaders, and what makes those mistakes so important?”).
- Suggestions that would improve what local leaders do (“What suggestions can you give to help to help local leaders make positive differences on behalf of their organizations and their communities?”).⁸

Most interviews could be conducted in English because of the facility with it required by the INGs including for travel outside of the country for work and education.⁹ Responses were captured in writing by one of the researchers, who interrupted the interview to ask when something was not clear. Some responses were written down verbatim for possible use later. Following the interview the researchers reviewed the notes together to ensure agreement on meaning.

The interview results for Phnom Penh and Battambang are reported for each question as themes. The themes emerged from analysis of the written interview notes. The points made by respondents to each question were first listed, and then similar and overlapping points were grouped together. The groupings that emerged are the themes summarized for both interview sites. Each was given a label to reflect its content. The results by themes include illustrative statements from the interviews.¹⁰

The conditions under which this research was carried out did not permit a representative sample, or even the approximation of one. All of the respondents are Cambodians who occupy

⁷ These together with follow-up probes are listed in the Appendix.

⁸ Two other questions were part of the interviews but are not included here for space considerations and because they are less relevant to this article. They were (a) What the interviewees see as their greatest successes, and why; and (b) What has motivated them to undertake the work they do.

⁹ An interpreter was used in one interview. In a few instances a native speaker sat in the interview for when clarification was needed.

¹⁰ The statements in quotations are either exact quotes or close paraphrases from interview records.

important positions in INGOs that address important issues at the community level.¹¹ The individuals, and therefore the organizations they work for, were chosen by the opportunities created by Cambodian colleagues, rather than at random. To counter the limits this places on generalizability we compare results from interviews conducted in Phnom Penh with those from Battambang. This provides some basis for inferring that the results apply to a broader range of organizations doing similar kinds of work.

‘Leader’ and ‘leadership’ are key terms in this inquiry. They of course may have their own meanings in Cambodian society and culture. Given the previous field testing, the education levels of this particular population, the wording of the questions, the opportunities for clarification that interviews permit and the responses generated, there is good reason to conclude that we and the respondents were looking at the same thing. We believe that, despite the challenges presented by language, cultural differences and political sensitivities, these questions are capturing perspectives on what “leadership” means, the sources of their understanding, and the ways leaders can be more effective.

VI. Results

1. Phnom Penh Interviews

Phnom Penh, the capital city, has a population of about 1.3 million, and is the urbanized commercial and political center of the country. The INGOs of those interviewed in Phnom Penh address issues related to access to education, environmental protection and conservation, the challenges facing family and youth, agricultural practices, health and HIV, and community development. Three the INGOs are funded by foreign churches and incorporate to varying degrees a Christian perspective.

Table 1 shows interviewees were split almost equally between male and female suggesting that responses do not have a gender bias. The equal division may reflect gender diversity in the hiring and promotion of staff for INGOs. This diversity in turn is likely to have

Table 1 Interviewees’ gender and age for Phnom Penh.

| Age | Total | Number of Females |
|--------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Less than 30 | 3 | 1 |
| 30 to less than 40 | 5 | 5 |
| 40 to less than 50 | 5 | 1 |
| Total | 13 | 7 |

¹¹ Two interviewees recently changed from INGO to government positions. Our questions focused on their INGO experience. Their contrasting of the two environments is referred to in the Discussion.

consequences for who fills leadership positions in the future.

Table 1 also presents the range of ages by gender.¹² All five of the females are in the 30 to 40 age range, while four of the five above 40 are male. It is noteworthy that no one has reached 50 years of age, in a society that historically associated respect for authority with age. The person with the most experience and highest-ranking position is mid-40s and others are occupying positions of responsibility at much younger ages. This is presumably a consequence of the country's ordeal in the mid to late 1970s when so many adults lost their lives under Khmer Rouge: someone born in the early 1970s now would be in his or her early 40s. It also means that the perspectives of older people are less represented while in the future the views reflected by these interviewees will be more prevalent.

Table 2 shows that eight had a Master's degree, with the other five having an undergraduate degree. Five of the thirteen serve in 'director' roles for their organizations, while six are in vice president and coordinating positions. Five of the latter had Master's degrees, suggesting they will move to higher positions in their current or similar organizations in the future.

Table 2 Current position and highest education level of Phnom Penh interviewees.

| Position | Number | Education Level | |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------------|----------|
| | | Undergraduate | Master's |
| Project Officer | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Director | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| Vice President/Coordinator | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| Total | 13 | 5 | 8 |

i. What a 'Leader' Means Six themes together represented what these respondents believe makes a person a formal or informal leader, in comparison to a person who is respected or liked but not viewed as a leader. They were:

- a) **Capacity Building** – Capacity building in general, and giving people the tools needed to do their work; understanding what is needed to be successful; recognizing where a program, an organization or a community is going and what is needed to get there.
- b) **Being Moral and Working for Others** – Not being superhuman (“A leader is just a normal person”), but someone with special qualities; showing moral behavior (e.g., being fair, respectful); doing things for society and not just for self.

¹² We did not, for sensitivity reasons, ask the age of interviewees. These data are based on deductions from information provided in the interview or on our shared guess of approximate age.

Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

- c) **Boss vs. Leader** – A ‘boss’ tells people what to do, without providing the needed support or information; a leader assumes meaningful responsibility for what happens (“A leader is more like a father who spends time with the family and is able to guide its members”).
- d) **Supports Team Effort** – Being a good example for the team; high commitment to team-based efforts; combining shared responsibility, good management skills, information sharing and high levels of collaboration; understanding the issues facing team members (“Work with them; walk with them; hold them”).
- e) **Vision** – Working with others, but seeing the bigger picture (“Walk together but with a clear vision”); a perspective that can turn a challenge into something of benefit (“Some people just see a tree, but I look at it and see its many possible uses”).
- f) **Developing Leaders** – Showing others how to lead, and not just being a competent follower (“Leader is building a leader”); knowing what someone needs to be a leader, such as experience, skills, character and attitude.

ii. What is Required to be Effective The question about effectiveness explored perceptions of what is required to successfully move organizations and communities in desired directions.

Five themes emerged:

- a) **Passion** – Having passion and enthusiasm (“I love working in the village”); conversely, without passion, leaders are likely to be overwhelmed and may give up.
- b) **Knowledge over Power, Tradition** – Willingness to learn and not assuming that simply occupying a role, however powerful, is enough; readiness to accept change and not be bound by past practices.
- c) **Self-Knowledge and Soft Skills** – Self (‘inside’) understanding of what is good for people and not just for self; joining soft skills (*e.g.* facilitation and communication) with hard skills (*e.g.* project management, accounting); being able to get followers to do what the leader wants “without being afraid.”
- d) **Motivating and Engaging** – Being more than smart or competent; good interpersonal communication; encouraging others; guiding and giving feedback; showing how to contribute; helping followers to see when something is not working so they are comfortable discussing issues and problems
- e) **Being a Good Role Model** – Actions speaking louder than words (“If speak A, don’t do B”); being patient and not jealous of others’ successes; participating in decisions with staff; not using people; showing flexibility.

iii. Challenges This asks what is most challenging about being a local leader. Probes inquired into what was turning people away from wanting to lead. There are six themes:

- a) **Not Able to Apply Knowledge** – Jobs not fitting formal education; bosses threatened by education and/or competence; an environment that blocks initiatives; poor discouraging facilities; low quality human resources.
- b) **Villager and Farmer Expectations** – Farmers and villagers having a low education and not understanding that good results usually take time; frustrated villagers and farmers too impatient for action.
- c) **Becoming Visible and Connected** – Getting the visibility and connections needed to be effective, especially when younger; dealing with government officials operating within their established relationships.
- d) **Be Clear on Values, Goals** – The conflict between seeking a high a position or trying to become powerful and other priorities, such as developing character, loving yourself and others, and being useful to people.

- e) **Information** – Obtaining information needed to understand things that are complex (such as financial accountability).
- f) **Working across Differences** – Differences in ideas, personalities and behaviors; people not listening to one another; dealing with jealousies; difficult individuals who require special understanding; the older not respecting those younger; employees not being trust worthy (“All of this is tiring and takes a lot of time and energy”).

iv. Sources for Learning about Leadership and Leading This asks about sources for learning about leadership. The responses form five themes:

- a) **Inspirational** – People who take care of the poor; common people in villages who have dignity and patience despite obstacles (“The people are my teacher and professor”).
- b) **Famous People** – Jesus, Peter, Mahatma Gandhi, Barack Obama and Bill Gates.
- c) **Models from Work** – The directors of NGOs and INGOs; bosses; foreigners in these organizations, including country directors.
- d) **Family** – Fathers (“Uneducated but a good man”) and mothers, brothers and brothers-in-law.
- e) **Media** – Newspaper stories, books, and Facebook.

v. Mistakes This inquires about mistakes made by others who lead or aspire to lead locally. A ‘mistake’ refers to something that results in not being successful, or doing harm to an organization or community. This and the following questions – about advice they would offer if given the opportunity – generated the most comments.¹³ The responses formed five themes:

- a) **No Perspective, Skills, Planning** – Trying to lead while seeing only parts of the big picture; not well organized; inability to manage time; poor planning (“Leaving a group or community in poor condition”).
- b) **Self Importance** – Being too proud; thinking he or she has knowledge and not accepting it from others; only telling people what to do with no effort to understand the situation; not being open about mistakes (“You see, I make a mistake but I am still a leader”).
- c) **Focusing on Power** - Pursuing power in different forms; desiring the organization to grow so the position gets bigger and bigger (“Think that power makes them good”); using power to promote people not deserving; being unfair (“Loves power more than people”); participating in corruption.
- d) **Not Learning** - Not making use of feedback from the group or the community; taking feedback too personally; failing to accept information that is challenging and wanting to hear just good things (“They don’t want to hear the bad news”); focusing only on money matters without understanding the staff’s experience; complaining without learning about the problem and trying to fix it.
- e) **Insensitivity to Staff** – Not responding; leaving people feeling unsupported; with holding information important to a team; not allowing staff to provide information needed by the village; poor communication and using words without thought. (“Don’t use speeches, use action”); not sharing benefits, such as professional opportunities, awards and recognition. (“They take benefits as theirs that should go to members”).

¹³ The reason for this is not clear. It was not true for Battambang.

vi. Advice To Other Leaders The final question solicits suggestions to help other local leaders be more effective. Interviewees were asked to picture themselves in front of a group of leaders who have asked them for advice. Four themes formed:

- a) **Openness to Learning and Seeing Mistakes** – Be open to learning, including learning lessons from outside of Cambodia; not being too proud to see own mistakes (“If you make a mistake, everyone will see it.”); think about what *you* are doing wrong before going to others; hear what is not working for followers (“Many leaders in Cambodia are not real leaders; they are commanders”).
- b) **Other Oriented, Transparent and Good Governance** – Thinking first about nation, family, team and not about position; working hard for the group or for society and not personal benefits; being open to solving conflicts and consulting with others before making decisions; having good governance, transparency, accountability and independence; not being corrupt.
- c) **Respect and Humility** – Serving people with respect and humility (“If you want to be a leader you should not tell people you are better than them”); relying on behavior rather than words; not being “the boss” and learn to manage yourself (“Don’t act like you know everything because you have a high position or high degree”); giving support and not leaving people on their own (“Don’t just say: ‘complete this and get back to me’”); valuing people who contribute and encouraging their ideas; not taking others’ abilities as threats; sharing benefits and opportunities fairly with those who work hard (“It makes me sad to see people who are not treated well and not given opportunities”).
- d) **Understand Teams and Teamwork** – Understanding what teamwork is; being interested in the lives of team members (“Try to understand the people around you rather than them trying to understand you”); trying to understand the culture of group members, including those not from Cambodia; encouraging learning from outside the organization and from each other..

2. Battambang Interviews

Battambang is the third largest city in Cambodia with a population of about 140,000. It is the capital of rural Battambang province, known for rice production, and is a commercial center in the country’s northwest. The interviewees’ INGOs address issues similar to those in Phnom Penh. These include youth and village education, challenges facing children, the environment and sustainability, land titles and housing, and empowering women. The biggest difference is attention given to resettlement of those displaced in the Khmer Rouge period, and on empowering women. One interviewee’s salary is paid by the INGO, but he is assigned to the municipality of Battambang to improve the city-INGO relationship.

Table 3 shows an age distribution similar to Phnom Penh interviewees, with none reaching age 50. Three of the eight are female and, as with Phnom Penh, this may be a reflection of hiring practices among INGOs.

Table 3 Interviewees’ gender and age for Battambang.

| Age | Total | Number of Females |
|--------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Less than 30 | 2 | 1 |
| 30 to less than 40 | 2 | 1 |

Table 4 shows that despite their relative youth five of the eight are at the level of director and one holds the position of project officer. Table 4

| | | |
|--------------------|---|---|
| 40 to less than 50 | 4 | 1 |
| Total | 8 | 3 |

presents the educational level of these interviewees. Three have Master's degrees and the remaining five completed an undergraduate education. As was the case in Phnom Penh, this is higher than the general population. As we will see, higher education competes with younger age in accounting for positions held.

Table 4 Current position and highest education level of Battambang interviewees.

| Position | Number | Education Level | |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------------|----------|
| | | Undergraduate | Master's |
| Project Officer | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Director | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| Vice President/Coordinator | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 8 | 5 | 3 |

i. What a 'Leader' Means Six themes describe what makes someone a 'leader' according to the Battambang sample:

- Leader vs. Boss** – Being a boss is not enough (“In Cambodian context people want to be leaders so that they can be the boss and have influence over people.”); staff are not ‘assistants’, but colleagues; responsibility is shared; not forcing people at lower levels; not deciding by self alone.
- Self-understanding and Ethical** – First leading oneself well (“Understand yourself first!”); working not for self but for the community; being ethical.
- Vision and Realism** – Having long-term vision; realism about what a community can do; showing the way.
- Works with Others** – Inspiring others in working with them; solving problems together; sharing information with staff who don't have enough of it.
- Capacity Building** – Increasing capacity in knowledge and education; providing knowledge to build the community.
- Responsibility** – Having a big sense of responsibility; working harder than others; being accountable.

ii. What is Required to be Effective Perceptions of what is required to successfully move organizations and communities in desired directions generated five themes:

- Knowledge over Power** – Building knowledge, not power; readiness to learn and not assuming knowing everything; listening.
- Other-Oriented** – Consulting on decisions; sharing responsibility; being happy for successes of others; not doing harm; helping with mistakes; gathering ideas from others.
- Role Model** – Transparency; honesty; politeness; using skills (*e.g.*, good communicator).

Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

- d) **Responsibility** – Being strongly committed; clarity on goals; sense of accountability.
- e) **Openness** – Being open-minded; receptiveness to criticism; accepting change (“Things are not right or wrong and a leader has to be ready to change mind about the best way to do things”).

iii. Challenges What is most challenging about being a local leader produced five themes for these interviewees:

- a) **Working across Differences** – Having to compromise with different views; negotiating and networking with the government (“It is a big challenge.”); younger people working with older persons in the government (“The problem is only with the older government officials, not villagers”); dealing with staff that don’t perform well.
- b) **Being Heard** – Struggling to have your voice heard; trying to get the community to understand things; dealing with groups that aren’t doing what was agreed.
- c) **Relevant Skill Sets** – Developing the right skills for highly diverse settings.
- d) **Hard Work and Patience** – Being more responsible and accountable; working hard with the community while also being patient.
- e) **Risks** – Giving responsibility to current staff who may fail; striving to develop a community; being blamed when things go wrong; losing your position because of a mistake.

iv. Sources for Learning About Leadership and Leading What are these respondents’ most important sources for ideas and images of leadership? The Battambang responses fall into three themes.

- a) **Inspirational** – Common people; ordinary people with courage (*e.g.* a Cambodian community worker who worked before and after the Khmer Rouge; women who stood up against the government and a land activist; a Cambodian monk.)
- b) **Famous People** – Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi; Bill Gates; a former king of Cambodia.
- c) **Models from Work** – People in other NGOs.

v. Mistakes Mistakes observed in others who aspire to lead locally formed four themes:

- a) **Self Important, not Open** – Thinking they are the ‘boss’, the best (“They know and others don’t”); not doing what was agreed to with the group; not respecting people in the community who promoted or elected them; talking and not listening because of self-image as leader (“Do what I do”); being too ‘official’.
- b) **Not Learning** – Not understanding that times change; not recognizing that what worked before may not now; not learning from mistakes; not learning from outside the organization; just giving up when something doesn’t work.
- c) **Insensitivity** – Asking the staff to work too hard; not knowing the staff’s capacity; blaming and causing loss of face.
- d) **Not Public Oriented** – Mixing private interests with public work; violating individual rights; enjoying benefits but not giving to common people (“People are poor, and so is the government; they both are beggars ... but high ranking government officials are rich”).

vi. Advice To Other Leaders The last question asks what advice each would give a group of local leaders to help them have a more positive impact on their organizations and communities. There are four themes:

- a) **Work with the Community** – Being clear with community about what you are thinking (“Here is my idea; what do you think?”); being flexible and guided by cultural values and community traditions; staying close to local people; being accessible to the community when it needs you.
- b) **Understand Processes** – Being engaged with a process enough to make the process work; setting and then monitoring plans (“The government sets plans and then just leaves them without monitoring what happens in implementation”); finding out why mistakes are happening and addressing them.
- c) **Share Power and Respect** – Delegating power to others; practicing democratic management; discussing with team before adopting goals; knowing how to motivate staff; respecting the staff (“Recognize that staff are not just subordinates, but also are leaders”).
- d) **Supportive Role Model** – Being a positive role model; being friendly with everyone; supporting those who are working at the local level.

3. Comparing Results From Phnom Penh and Battambang Interviews

This section compares and interprets the themes found in the two interview sites. There is a substantial overlap on all but one of the six questions, the exception being about advice to give other local leaders. This at least suggests that responses to questions about leaders and leadership found in this study would be similar for Cambodians working in a range of INGOs. Because our interest is in the degree to which ideas about leadership converge in these interviews, the emphasis is on points of agreement between Phnom Penh and Battambang, rather than differences.

i. What being a ‘Leader’ Means Four themes from Battambang overlap strongly those found in Phnom Penh. They are:

- A ‘leader’ is distinctive from a ‘boss’.
- A leader is moral and works for others.
- A leader has a guiding vision.
- A leader builds capacity in organizations and communities.

In addition there is substantial overlap between the Battambang theme of “Working with Others” and Phnom Penh’s “Supporting Team Effort.”

With respect to differences, nothing in the Phnom Penh interviews is close to the theme of strong sense of responsibility, while Battambang responses do not include a focus on Phnom Penh’s theme of leaders developing other leaders.

These comparisons are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Shared and distinctive themes on what distinguishes a leader.

| High Overlap | Substantial Overlap | Phnom Penh Only | Battambang Only |
|---|--|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| A 'leader' is different from a 'boss'. Moral and works for others. Has guiding vision. Builds capacity | Supporting team effort (PP) with Working with others (BB). | Developing other leaders. | Strong sense of responsibility. |

A 'boss' is someone who assumes an official position brings the right to direct others, make decisions and in general be deferred to. A 'leader' is defined by what he or she is able to do in facilitating the work of others and guiding the group, organization or community. A leader's moral principles mean work is on behalf of others. A clear vision and a broader understanding of context guide actions. A leader builds capacity. Leaders are not controlled by pride, show humility, and are open to new ideas.

ii. What is Required to be Effective As in the first comparison, four themes are in common:

- Making knowledge more important than power or tradition.
- Having self-knowledge and soft skills.
- Acting as a positive role model.
- Being strongly motivated and passionate about the work.

With respect to differences, a Battambang theme highlights the need for openness to criticism and to change, while a theme in Phnom Penh emphasizes the importance of motivating others. This is shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Shared and distinctive themes on what is required to be effective.

| High Overlap | Phnom Penh Only | Battambang Only |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Using knowledge over power or tradition. Self-understanding and soft skills. Being a positive role model. High motivation; passion for the work. | Motivating/engaging others. | Openness to change, criticism. |

This characterization is consistent with the distinction made between 'boss' and 'leader'. A leader relies for effectiveness on knowledge and experience, not position; has developed self-

understanding that overrides pride and the need for control; works well with others rather than directing them; is a positive role model; and has strong motivation.

iii. Challenges Local INGO Leaders Face Three themes describing the consensus challenges local leaders face:

- Working across differences.
- Being heard and gaining visibility.
- Having the right skills and knowledge.

Differences are found in the Battambang themes of ‘Hard Work and Patience’, and ‘Risk’, and in the Phnom Penh themes of needing to be clear on values and goals and the effort required to get needed information. This is summarized in Table 7.

Table 7 Shared and distinctive themes on what challenges local INGO leaders face.

| High Overlap | Phnom Penh Only | Battambang Only |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Working across differences. | Villager/farmer expectations.* | Both working hard and being patient. |
| Being heard; becoming visible. | Getting needed information. | Presence of risks. |
| Having the right skills and knowledge. | Maintaining clarity about values/goals. | |

*This also has substantial overlap with ‘Working across differences’.

iv. Sources for Learning about Leaders and Leadership Three themes are shared about the source of ideas and images on how to lead:

- Inspirational individuals (*e.g.*, common people and those who stand up for them).
- Famous People (*e.g.*, Aung San Suu Kyi, Bill Gates).
- Models from work.

Table 8 Shared and distinctive themes on sources for learning about leaders and leadership.

| High Overlap | Phnom Penh Only | Battambang Only |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Inspirational individuals. | Family | |
| Positive models from work. | Media | |
| Famous people. | | |

Table 8 displays these results. Ideas of leadership and images of leading are shaped by those well-known as inspirational figures, by people in their work places whose effectiveness they

Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

admire, and by people whose successes in different walks of life have made them famous. Only one historical Khmer national figure, a former king, is included. Only Phnom Penh interviewees mention family and social media.

v. Mistakes Observed in Other Leaders Three themes describing mistakes made by other local leaders are common in both sets of interviews:

- Too much self importance.
- Not learning.
- Insensitivity to the needs of staff.

This, together with what is not shared, is shown in Table 9.

Table 9 Shared and distinctive themes on mistakes seen in other local leaders.

| High Overlap | Phnom Penh Only | Battambang Only |
|--|--|------------------------|
| Self-importance; too much pride. Not open to learning. Insensitivity to staff. | Lack of perspective, skills, planning. Too much focus on power. | Not public oriented. |

The consensus points for mistakes are in essence the opposite of the thematic pattern that defines a ‘leader’. They point to being prideful and seeing oneself as too important (*i.e.*, acting like a ‘boss’), assuming that having an official position of authority means no further learning is needed, and not respecting, acknowledging or rewarding staff.

vi. Advice To Other Leaders There is much less agreement on what advice to give other local leaders. One of the Battambang themes, showing respect for others, has a parallel with Phnom Penh. These results are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10 Shared and distinctive themes on advice to other local leaders.

| High Overlap | Phnom Penh Only | Battambang Only |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Having respect for others. | Openness to learning; seeing mistakes. Other orientation; transparency; good governance Understand teams and teamwork. | Work with the community. Understand processes. |

The differences in this area are larger than the similarities. Phnom Penh interviewees focus on recognizing mistakes, being other-oriented and transparent, and understanding teams and

teamwork, while Battambang responses emphasize understanding processes and the importance of working with the community.

VII. Discussion

Similarities between Phnom Penh and Battambang in views about leadership outweigh differences. The strongest consensus is in responses to the first two questions: what it means to be a 'leader' and what is required for a leader to be effective.

Interviewees reject views of leadership that are defined by an official position or the power an individual holds. A leader's moral authority and orientation to others are more important than his or her positional authority. A leader, unlike someone who is just 'a boss', provides critical components for success by setting direction and building individual, organizational and community capacity. These views clearly challenge both seniority and hierarchy as the basis for effective leadership.

Ideas about what is required to be effective are consistent with this image of a leader and leadership. Information and knowledge are more important than actions that are based on traditional ways of doing things or on power. Self-understanding that lays the foundation for good people skills and positive role modeling are critical. Strong motivation – passion – for the work is more important than experience or job description. Age, seniority or connections are not relevant to getting things done for an organization or a community.

Key challenges are presented by the need to work effectively across the diversity of staff as well as bridging differing staff and villager experiences and expectations. Staff can vary widely in education and experience, and, in the case of an organization with international staff, in culture.

The challenge of bridging the gap between staff and villagers is not surprising given differences in age and education. Responses to what a 'leader' means made it clear that knowledge and experience are highly valued, but it is a challenge to have the right kind of each because of the diversity of settings and range of issues. Working with poor, uneducated farmers and villagers who speak and think so differently can be a bridge even harder to cross than working with older or unskilled staff. Interviewees consistently acknowledged the life experience and practical skills of farmers and villagers, and contrasted these with their youth and formal education. In their view crossing the bridge this created requires they show humility and respect.

Another important challenge occurs in relations with government officials: INGO executives and staff may meet with government officials, but as our review of the position of INGOs in

Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

Cambodia shows, are not on the ‘inside’ when important decisions are discussed and made. They are not in the formal or informal networks that public officials use and therefore need to seek out ways of ‘being visible’ and of being taken in to account. This lack of standing is compounded by age differences that are culturally important. Government officials, who typically have been promoted by seniority, tend to be older.¹⁴

These respondents have acquired their ideas of leadership from individuals whose community work or defense of vulnerable people inspires them, from some whose successes have brought them international attention, and from those they see as good role models in their organizations. Strong *motivations* to make a difference and/or a demonstrated *effectiveness* in action appear to tie these together. What is surprising is that only one Khmer national figure, a former king, is mentioned. Despite the abundance of Khmer symbols in their everyday environments, well-known contemporary Khmer are not seen as positive models for leading.

What interviewees observe as mistakes by other local leaders are of particular interest. Two are virtually direct opposites of the positive patterns that define a ‘leader’. These are, first, being prideful and seeing oneself as too important and, second, assuming that simply occupying an official position of authority means no further learning is needed. Both of these are viewed negatively as acting like a ‘boss’. The third mistake is not respecting, acknowledging or rewarding staff. This emphasizes the kind of relationship leaders are expected to have with staff and others they work with. This relationship should be one of equality rather than subordination; facilitation rather than dictating; and acknowledgement rather than taking for granted.

It is not surprising that respecting others is highlighted as important advice to give other local leaders since the importance of respect is registered in different ways throughout the responses. This appears to be another way of rejecting highly structured systems of authority and unresponsive bosses in favor of teamwork, collaborative decision-making and the development and acknowledgement of peoples’ skills.

It is striking however to find so much divergence on what advice would be given since overlap in responses to the first five questions is much higher. This difference might be explained by the frames of reference in which leaders are seen. Phnom Penh interviewees appear to be more focused on the ‘inside’ of the organization and therefore tend to see the leader in relation to how he or she deals with its issues. From the perspective of leadership as more of an internal

¹⁴ This also may be compounded by the relatively young age of these respondents.

issue, teamwork transparency and mistakes that may harm the organization are of great importance.

On the other hand, the Battambang reference is in general more outward focused with a greater emphasis on effectiveness in relation to the external environment. Leaders of course have organizational responsibilities, but their external effectiveness is paramount. Understanding processes, such as those guiding relations with the community and government officials, and working well with community members are critical to success.

The consensus themes that have emerged here – that leaders and leadership should be values-based, more facilitative than directive, focused on developing others, emphasize soft skills, be open to rather than threatened by new ideas, and be motivated by passion for the work rather than ego-driven – are remarkably close to qualities that are commonly associated with good leadership in Western societies (see, for example, Goleman, 1995; Greenleaf, 1997; Chaleff, 2009; Block, 2013). Stated differently, no one attending a graduate course or company training on leadership today would be surprised to find these qualities the focus of discussion. Why this apparent convergence, and what might it tell us?

One explanation is that it reflects the globalization of ideas – in this case ideas about leadership. It is beyond question this is occurring, but also a stretch to conclude that these ideas have penetrated deeply everywhere. It is more likely that these ideas are powerful because of factors related specifically to these interviewees.

One factor could be that the respondents are employed by organizations with international sponsors and in the normal course of their work these ideas might be reinforced. It would occur through interactions with the foreign heads of the funding organization, travel to conferences, and training programs. The possibility that this is occurring has to be tempered by the fact neither travel nor training were mentioned as sources, although organizational leaders were.

This group overall has much more formal learning than the population as a whole and education may be a factor. No one had less than a university education, and nine of the 21 had graduate degrees. Education changes people's outlooks. Still, it seems unlikely more than a few of them would have immersed themselves in curricula focused on leadership.¹⁵

¹⁵ A internet scan of leadership training and education in Cambodia produced very little and less than we saw in Laos in a similar review. This also is common across the region. In addition, no one mentioned training or coursework as a source of their views. Courses and training in good leadership practices would appear to be a good investment.

Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

Another factor may be the way in which age and life experience have combined for these interviewees. In Phnom Penh eight of the thirteen are below 40 and none 50 or older, while in Battambang none were as old as 50 and half were less than 40 years old. Yet at these relatively young ages they are occupying positions of responsibility.

Their prior life experience may influence views associated with this early assumption of responsibility. A number commented that their childhood experience of abuses of power, war and genocide, which occurred recently in their personal histories, affect how they view leaders and leadership and contribute to the passion for their work. A number referred to their family's struggles with poverty during their childhood. These experiences taught them the importance of helping others. They also created a strong drive to push Cambodian society into a better future, a drive that is above their own personal needs and successes.

Their views of leadership can, from another perspective, seem overly idealistic and even naïve, especially given the interviewees were relatively young, and when held up against the societal context in which they are trying to be successful. It is also true that their views are informed by personal and professional experience that is beyond what would be expected of someone at their stage of life.

Until there is further research, it is not possible to know how these images of leaders and leadership compare with those held by others. Government officials, for example, may not place as strong an emphasis on nonhierarchical relationships, facilitation, teamwork, and capacity-building. But there also may be areas of overlap. Knowing the differences and similarities would foretell whether the views held by these current and future INGO leaders will lead to on-going clashes in views; or whether, on the other hand, there are enough points of convergence that they will be, as elsewhere, catalysts for a continuing evolution in ideas about effective public leadership in Cambodia.

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Perspectives on Local INGO Leadership in Cambodia

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions and Probes

1. 'Leader'

What do you think it means to be a 'leader'? (Possible probes: What distinguishes a formal or informal leader from other another person? Many people may be accepted and/or respected, but does that make them leaders? What is it that makes a person a leader?)

2. Effectiveness

a. In your opinion, what is most important for a local leader to be effective? (Possible probe: These can be personal qualities, skills or behaviors, or something else.)

3. Challenges

What do you think is most challenging about being a local leader? (Possible probes: Please share what you find most challenging about being in a leadership role at the local level. What do you think turns people away from wanting to be a local leader?)

4. Learning and Role Models

Who are your most important role models in leadership, and why was each important? (Possible probe: A little about why each has been important.)

5. Mistakes

What do you think are the biggest mistakes made by people who want to be local leaders, and what makes those mistakes important? (Possible probes: 'Mistakes' refers to actions that cause someone not to be successful, or even does harm to their organizations and communities. Examples without naming individuals, if possible.)

6. Suggestions

What suggestions can you give to help to help local leaders make positive differences on behalf of their organizations and their communities? (Possible probes: This could include a wide range of things, but what is most important? May help to picture a meeting or conference of present or future local leaders who have asked for advice on the most important things for them to do to be successful. Please provide as many suggestions, guides and examples as possible.)