



Insights Into Commune Council Leadership: Case of Decentralization Reform in Choueng Prey District, Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization reform has been adopted by the Cambodian government since 2001, bringing the government and services closest to the people through the commune council, the lowest tier of subnational administration. The reform has contested local leadership to the premise of decentralization and local democracy based on good governance. To look into such a contest of a two-decade-long decentralization reform, this research aims to examine in-depth insights into the leadership capacity of the commune council in Cambodia upon the case of Choueng Prey district, Kampong Cham province. With the adoption of qualitative methodology along with score-based assessments, the results of this research uncovered the perspectives on local leadership. The results suggested that the current decentralization reforms need further reforms with stronger and more genuine political commitment of the government in return for local sustainable development and effective public service delivery. Evidentially, the leadership of the commune council has been identified to be relatively deficient due to the durable existence of a low education standard for the council candidates, the meagre structure of commune council management, and the privation of procedures for selecting and recruiting the council candidates. These are key focuses to results and discussion because they are believed to be fundamental drivers in shaping the quality of commune council leadership which is a cornerstone of this research.

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1. Introduction

Like many countries in the world, Cambodia has begun to underpin the decentralization since 2001, bringing the government and services closest to people and adopting it as one of the essential paradigms of participatory local governance to improving and achieving the local sustainable development and delivery of public service based on people's needs (CDRI, 2021). These are key elements leading to socio-economic development and poverty alleviation. As an indispensable part of such advantages and an effective principle to good governance and local democracy, the government started its decentralization process by initially forming the lowest-tire level in 2002 – the commune council, which plays a substantial role as both local service providers and local representatives. This

council is democratically elected every five years based on the Law on Commune Sangkat Council Election 2001, or Law on Commune Election for short, and it works based on the Law on Commune Sangkat Administrative Management 2001, or Law on Commune Management for short.

As cited by Cashore & Nathan (2020), the World Bank (2018) disclosed Cambodia's economic growth by an average of 7.7% per year from 1995 to 2017, or 8% between 1998 and 2018, as argued by Lundv and Xinhai (2020) marking the country the 6th fastest growing economy in the world. Such growth has encouraged the poverty rate in the country to a dramatic decline, which has expanded the opportunities for transnational infrastructure development such as roads, bridges, water systems for agriculture, and many other public infrastructures, which has played a momentous role in

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reducing poverty (Boret et al., 2021). According to these authors, the poverty rate in Cambodia has declined from more than 50% in 2004 to 13.5% in 2014, lifting up millions of people out of extreme poverty over the past three decades. Known as the collaboration team of nearly 300 countries and regional experts from leading universities and think tanks worldwide, BTI (2022) identified that economic growth has allowed the Cambodian government to invest in improving public service delivery. To the scope of subnational growth, the Provincial Planning Department 2023 showed that Kampong Cham's GDP growth has flourished from around 1 billion US dollars in 2011 to more than 1.8 billion US dollars in 2022, reducing the poverty rate from 14.99% in 2018 to 12.94% in 2022 in the province, and from 14.89% in 2018 falling at the average of 1% to 13.02% in 2022 in the targeted research district of Choueng Prey.

Despite much effort in making progress, decentralization reform in Cambodia has neither succeeded nor failed in contributing to the progress of local governance and suggested that the reform be refined (Shen, 2022). Many scholars and researchers have blamed the quality of commune council leadership in the Cambodian context on three major challenges: lack of knowledge-based human resources, small scale of the management structure model of commune council, and the privation of legal selection and recruitment procedures of the council candidates for election. These challenges have reposed in the law on commune management and in practice, leading to weakness of commune council leadership, subsequently resulting in a range of following issues, and affecting local governance. This research has therefore inspected the insights into where the leadership of the commune council has been these days, how the critical challenges have affected the council leadership, and how this leadership can improve toward the success of decentralization. To this respect, the quality of local leadership is argued to be truly effective to the premise of decentralization when the law on commune management is amended to fit challenges in the face of evidently rapid changes because leadership is key to releasing the potential of good governance and organizational effectiveness throughout its influence to strategy, people, and process (the Essence of Leadership, 2015).

2. Theory

Since leadership in the public sector is a milestone for this research, its theories have been put into a centerpiece of this section. To look at leadership is to learn certain dimensions in various contexts. As cited by Riza et al (2020), Lussier and Achua (2010) introduced three analysis levels of leadership theory: individual, group, and organization. Even classifying leadership theory into salient four conventionalities including trait, behavior, contingency, and integration, these authors believed that leadership is the foundation and organizational process to effective performance through adapting to the environment and acquiring the necessary resources to survive for the sake of service and product.

In other words, Adero and Odiyo (2020) indicated that leadership came in several theories, such as contingency leadership, adaptive leadership, leader-member exchange, and servant leadership, that do not contradict but compliment each other, additionally noting that these theories received significant impact on applicability from interpersonal relationships, psycho-social support, information sharing, organizational rules, and regulations. All of which are connected with this study.

Gardner (1990), cited by Horner (1997), presented various contexts of leadership theories between the past and present. The author pointed out that leadership theory in the past usually attached leadership to individual innate quality for success throughout culture and belief while leadership in modern time is acquired through education and lived experience and it is now defined as the accomplishment of group purpose, which is dependent not only by effective leaders but also by innovators, entrepreneurs, and thinkers, and operates according to the availability of resources and the value and social cohesion toward goals. Furthermore, answering the question of why a leader became successful in the modern world, Horner (1997) recognized the importance and impact of all leadership theories and indicated a number of advantages of today's leadership for success: motivation, innovation, initiatives, skills of the 21st century such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and adaptive behavior to changing environment. These advantages also have a strong impact on the leadership of the commune council this research has commanded as a centerpiece for the results and discussion.

According to Morse et al (2007), leadership in the public sector means differently: 1) the dynamic to set up with leaders who can influence followers to do something 2) bringing people together to make something different happen. From this aspect, the author argued that leadership is one of the key core components to organizational effectiveness and change, and in time of the emerging genuine world market, public organizations should be more performance-oriented and expected to provide service twenty-four hours a day via the use of information technology tools and be more innovative to engage with citizen demands for openness and transparency. Furthermore, as cited from many scholars who studied public administration regarding public leadership, Seakkeav (2015), who uses Woodrow Wilson's theory to reflect the Administration in a Cambodian context, indicated that there are two different functions of government: politics which deals with policies or expression of the state in the name of what is called 'legislative branch' and administration which at the other side called 'executive branch' deals with the implementation of these policies. In democratic countries, these branches cannot be of a single constituent and one person cannot take dual powers in both legislative and executive roles because it leads to weakness and controversy of accountability.

To sum up, the theories and definitions raised by the authors are respectively related to the aim and objectives of this research. Leadership in this context refers to the

quality of individual councilors primarily obtained from an academic education and permanent capacity building, along with a further review of procedures for selecting and recruiting the council candidates and the commune council management structure based on the strong support of rules and regulations. With these vital bases, the councilors would feel the ownership of their responsibility for local governance, leading to effective organization. However, the question is not whether individual leadership shapes organizational leadership or vice versa; it is about how the systems and rules shape such leadership. This research, therefore, deepens its study on how the principal law on commune management has shaped the commune council leadership as individuals and as a whole under decentralization reform and how the law can improve for effective governance in this knowledge-based society.

3. Research Method

This study has been conducted in Choueng Prey, one of the ten districts in Cambodia’s Kampong Cham province due to its rapid economic growth and social demands. In this study, the qualitative method, which Ohman (2005) had conducted, is adopted to explore the insights of respondents rested in this research for a qualitative description on commune council leadership in the decentralization reform process. To achieve this, eight interview forms have been designed to interview key respondents individually and in groups. In this regard, three kinds of data collection used by Patton (2005) and Minowa and Belk (2020) have been applied: interview, observation, and evidence of written documents. Furthermore, with the implication by Hart (2011) and Tummers and Knies (2016), 2 score-based assessments have been adapted to collect imperative insights on the council leadership. The interviews and the assessment were conducted with a total of 117 key respondents at the provincial and district levels and local citizens at the commune level and 2 public organizations at the provincial and district levels.

This sample has been identified based on a technique of Tongco (2007), who suggested those who were experienced, knowledgeable, and very close working with the commune council in the target district and could share their insights into the commune council leadership. To this basis, those respondents included the director of the provincial health department, the governor of the district, all chiefs of communes, commune councilors, the director of the operational health district office, heads of local schools, heads of commune health centres, heads of pagodas, and representatives of development partners. See Table 1 for the key informants and Table 2 for the design outlook of assessment forms.

Table 1. Key Informants of the research

No	Informants	Level	N	Approach
1	Heads, health department	Province	3	Focus group
2	Heads and deputy heads, administration, and local citizens	Province	70	Assessment
3	Public organizations	Province & district	2	Assessment
4	Head, health office	District	1	Interview
5	Commune council chiefs	Commune	10	Interview
6	Community leaders	Commune	10	Interview
7	Local school directors	Commune	10	Interview
8	Health care centre	Commune	10	Interview
9	Development partners	Commune	3	Interview
	Total		119	

Source: Author

Table 2. Design outlook of assessment forms

No	Form	Informants	Level	Categories	Indicators
1	Assessment	2 (Public organizations)	Provincial and district	1. Outlook of local development	7
				2. Management capacity of commune councils	7
				3. Trust and participation	3
				4. Leadership capacity of commune councils	4
2	Assessment	78 (respondents)	Service support, service delivery, and local citizens	1. Transversal achievement index at the commune	9 ^a
				2. Major issues at the commune level	21 ^b
				3. Main causes of issues	6 ^c
				4. Perspectives on critical solutions	6 ^c

Source: Author

Three techniques have been used to collect data. They included 1) a literature review as a means of accumulating academic opinions used by many authors and scholars published in Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Wiley, Taylor Francis, PubMed, Google Scholars, etc., 2) interviews and assessment forms for primary data collection conducted in site, phone call and online, and 3) extra documents for complimentary secondary data from the government, national and international institutions, and websites relevant to the research areas. All data and information collected are input into eight different tables and contracted them into one on Microsoft Excel in specific categories for final straightforward analysis. In addition, data from two assessments (with key respondents and public organizations) are interpreted to deepen the insights on commune council leadership using a score-based calculation with five rating levels: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The results of the assessments are shown in the graphs and tables they relate. In terms of the ethics of the research, the interviews maintain an ethical consideration of respondents’ private lives, answers, and the intrusion suggested during and after the interview as strong confidentiality.

4. Results

Many scholars, researchers, and eloquent reports have exposed their critical results and insights into decentralization that the Cambodian government has adopted for more than twenty years. In order to find out the leadership capacity of the commune councils, it is important to sharply look into three critical challenges resting within the principal law on commune management. Those challenges have been argued as critical prerequisites that shape the quality of commune council leadership and they are found below.

4.1 Standard of Education of Commune Council Candidates

In terms of the commune council candidates' education standard. 'Being able to read and write a native language' is stipulated in the law on commune management 2001 and is one of the criterions for those who want to apply for the commune councilor. Among all 72 commune councilors in the research district, this research found that 44 councilors or 61.11% of them studied in primary education; 22 councilors or 30.55% studied in lower secondary school education; 5 councilors or 6.94% in upper secondary education; 1 councilor or 1.38% graduated with an associate degree (Figure 1). Meanwhile, 6 council chiefs or 60% studied in primary education, while the other 4 chiefs or 40% studied in lower secondary education (Figure 2).

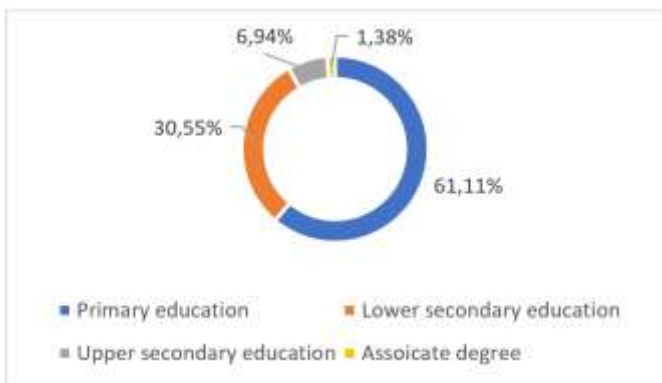


Figure 1. Educational background of commune councilors
Source: Data of Choueng Prey district administration, 2021

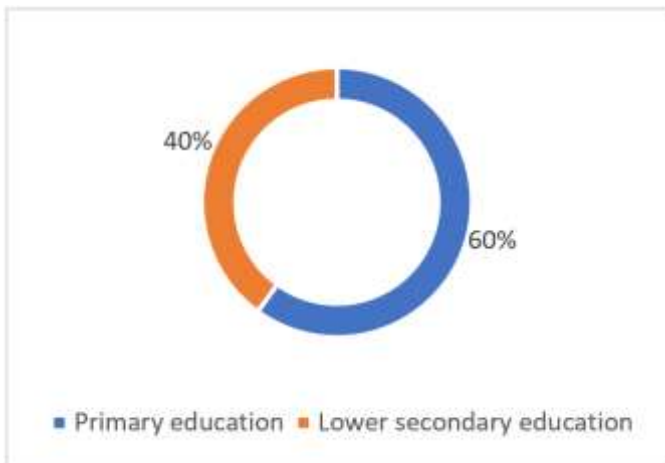


Figure 2. educational background of commune councils chiefs
Source: Data of Choueng Prey district administration, 2021

The assessments and interviews with respondents at the provincial, district, and commune levels obtained the irritable comments that most of the commune councilors were aged in addition to poor knowledge, which usually led to the ineffective implementation and inadequate responsiveness to local needs. The interviews also indicated that despite many trainings provided to the

commune councils, no much change has been observed regarding local governance, falling in much dependence on the higher levels. The respondents added that: *“the commune councils should have high ability to create a vision for local development, adding that low knowledge leads to low creativity and fragile development.”*

Although the councilors come with higher education than just being able to read and write as required by the law, the interviews found that there was a general recognition on limited basic knowledge among the commune councilor, which usually led to ambiguous understanding and implementation on public policies. For example, in terms of health care development plan most councils were found that the council representatives rarely attended the monthly meeting of the commune health center management committee as required by the regulations because they thought that they did not know anything about health sector, which, according to the interviews, led to frequent transfer of the council leadership on community health responsibilities to the health center directors. Similarly, the interviews with the development partners disclosed that the councils were relatively poor at human resource management, budgeting for local development and innovation for delivering service, resulting in common reliance on the external and high-level aids. However, it is observed that the councilor who has graduated the 12th-grade education and the associate degree seemed more energetic, agile, faster-learning, and adaptive to local demands and change than the rest, and he is literate in computer and technology, especially he has the capacity to lead large groups of youths and community members for public purposes. He is therefore likely to be depended by his co-councilors and appreciated by the majority of local citizens.

Furthermore, 87.5% of the key respondents realized that 'being able to read and write' set in the law as the minimum education standard for the commune council candidates was one of the fundamental issues leading to weak personal development and poor organizational leadership. Responding to such this realization, the assessment showed that 75% of informants supported the upgrading of education standards for candidates from 'being able to read and write' to 'at least completing compulsory education or grade 9 as set by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2006 or even higher. See Figure 3.

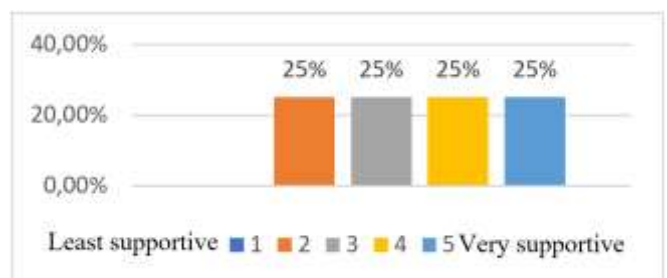


Figure 3. Upgrading commune council candidate's education standard in law on commune management
Source: Ministry of Education

Academically and practically, the commune councils with limited knowledge usually have difficulty to

understand the policies and end up with false decisions and poor innovation in service. For example, based on the interviews, all commune councils usually donated cash and emergency aid to those who were in need and vulnerable for short-term life relief, which ended up with possible frequent support in the future. No innovative long-term aid programs or similar initiatives such as employment opportunity support or career development at households were found. When asked about the innovative programs, for example, community public parks, community sports programs, creative, etc., all commune councils failed to show up any plans or progress.

4.2 Structure of Commune Council Management

Regarding the structure of commune council management, the law specifies that each council should consist of one commune council chief, two assistants (first deputy chief and second deputy chief), and a number of councilors. Each council should have totally no fewer than five and no more than eleven councilors in odd number. Moreover, the council has a clerk who works as a permanent administrative assistant to the council and is appointed by the Ministry of Interior to ensure local governance sustainability at the commune level. The law also stated that the commune council institution should have at least three compulsory committees, namely a technical facilitation committee, a women’s and children’s affairs committee, and a procurement committee, yet more committees can be established if necessary. However, the research found that there has been no additional established committees up to date. The council may employ additional contract-based staffers to assist the affairs as required by the needs and necessities under the decision of the council. To this regard, the research found that 20 staffers have already been recruited as assistants to each commune council so far. See Figure 4.

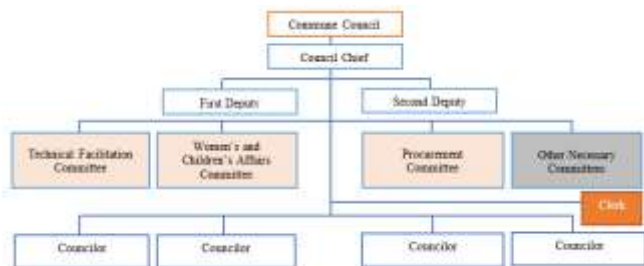
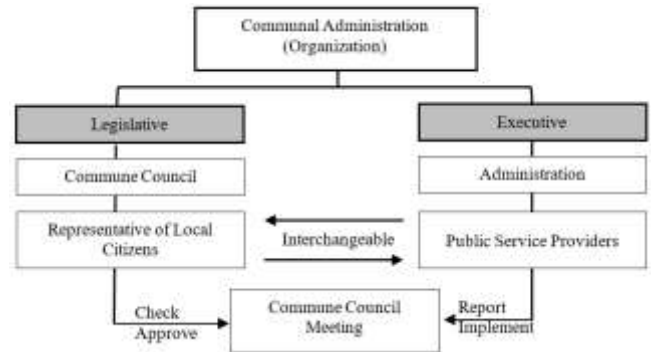


Figure 4. Management structure of commune council
 Source: Implication from the law on commune council administrative management 2021, Cambodia

According to the law on commune management, the commune council plays two roles in a single body –

executive as service providers and legislative as representative of local citizens. In terms of power, the commune council is the legislative body led by the council chief, while a commune chief, who is the council chief, plays an executive role in service delivery and local development. This means that these bodies and roles are interchangeable. The paradigm defines that the commune council chief becomes the commune chief when he or she provides public service. On the other hand, the commune chief becomes the commune council



chief when he or she attends and leads the council meetings. To understand this better, a conceptual framework of the current model of the commune council management structure has been adopted based on the law on commune management, as shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Conceptual framework of current structure model of commune council management
 Source: Author

It should be noted that the model of the commune council management structure is different from the structures of the administrations of the capital, province, municipality, district, and khan in the country. The Organic Law 2009 of the Cambodian government designs these administration management structures by dividing the board of governors as an executive power appointed by the government and the councils elected by the commune councilors every five years for holding legislative power. To extend this study, the model of the commune management structure in Cambodia is even dissimilar to the models of the lowest-tier local governments in three selective countries in ASEAN, namely Thailand for its Tamboon (Yavaprabhas, 2018), Indonesia for its village (Nurcholis et al., 2019), and the Philippines for its Barangay (Boysillo, 2017), all of which have separate bodies (legislative and executive) and separate roles (local representative and local service providers). More specifically, they come with two separate jurisdictions and discrete roles – the executive branch to implement the administrative affairs and the legislative branch to monitor the implementation of the administration as a check and balance.

Based on the assessment, 75% of respondents recognized that the scale of the management structure model of the commune council was too small and likely to be incapable to the rising demands and social complexity, and 100% of them (Graph 2) realized that restructuring the model should be another path to more effective decentralization, ensuring the promise of local governance and avoiding the controversy of accountability between legislative and executive powers, roles and responsibilities as implied by Woodrow Wilson’s theory in the study on decentralization reforms in the Cambodian context by Seakkeav (2015). The comment in the assessment also suggested change of the management structure be considered because the commune councils work closely and directly with the people.

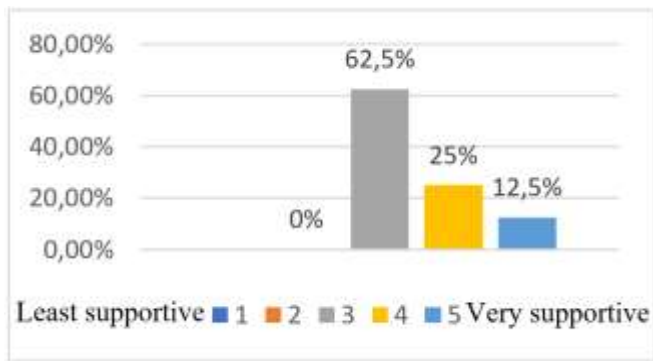


Figure 6. Restructuring the model of commune council management
Source: Author

4.3 Procedures for Selecting and Recruiting Commune Council Candidates

In connection with the candidates’ education standard and the management structure model, this research also looked into the procedures for selecting and recruiting the commune council candidates for the election in accordance with the setting of education criteria in the law. By studying the principal law on commune management, this research found no evidence on how the commune council candidates are legally or systematically selected and recruited for the election practice regarding the educational criteria clearly demanded by the law. 75% of the respondents in the assessment believed that having and exercising a legal standard procedure for selecting and recruiting commune council candidates should be an integral path to more potential councils.

Finally, the leadership capacity of the commune councils was concluded. The organization-based assessment showed that only four councils, or 40% out of all ten councils whose scores ranged from 54 to 59, came with sound leadership capacity compared with the average score of 54 and the maximum score of 90, while the rest or 60% were considered as the councils with poor leadership, with the scores under the average rate and far below the maximum rate. Most importantly, this assessment as a whole showed that the commune council leadership scored 52.7 below the average score and even farther below the maximum: $52.7 < 54 < \dots$

90. This could be analytically interpreted that the leadership of the councils in the research district is poor

No.	Key areas	Sub areas	Score of perspectives on commune council leadership												
			CC01	CC02	CC03	CC04	CC05	CC06	CC07	CC08	CC09	CC10			
1	Development outlook	Local development	3	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4
		Security and safety	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Environment and hygiene	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
		Quality of public service delivery	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
2	CC engagement	Clear planning of development	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Overall budgeting	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Assessment of development policies	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
		Financial management	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
3	Trust and participation	Service delivery	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
		Revenue collection/ taxes and impositions	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Addressing people's needs	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		People's participation	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
4	CC leadership	Public trust in CC	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Satisfaction with service delivery	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Integrity	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
		Transparency	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Assessment by CC			3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	
Assessment as a whole			49	50	50	50	51	52.7	54	54	54	54	54	54	

and inadequate in the face of critical challenging demands. See Table 3 and Figure 7 below.

Table 3. Assessment outcomes on commune council leadership capacity perspective

Source: Author



Figure 7. Leadership of commune councils in Choueng Prey district
Source: Adapted from Table 3

5. Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study uncovered that 60% of the commune councilors or the commune council chiefs in positions had studied in the primary education putting a consequence of poor leadership of the councils in general, which could be understandable that they were able to read and write the native language, a higher standard compared with the education level required by the law. Such an education standard might be appropriate for Cambodian decentralization back to twenty years ago, i.e. in 2001 just three year after the country started to embrace total peace at the end of 1998 throughout a government’s win-win policy. However, this research argued that both being able to read and

write and primary education cannot develop strong governance leadership whose human resources are equipped with good knowledge and reasoning and logic skills, analysis, critical and creative thinking, and especially innovation and technology ability strongly demanded by global trends in the 21st century. Moreover, as the Cambodian government has set the goal of becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050, human resource development must be the key priority to invest ensuring competitiveness in the region and the world (Ogisu & Williams, 2016).

So far, the findings by the previous authors pointed at the poor leadership of the commune council regarding local governance in the decentralization reform in Cambodia. Eng (2016) and World Bank Group (2018) discovered that mediocre leadership of the commune councils in Cambodia has been the main challenge to organizational management, affecting the decentralization process and undermining citizen participation in development and decision-making. In addition, Khoun (2018) found that the quality of local goods and services has remained low, leading to citizens' frustration with the commune power and capacity and concluding that local demands cannot be properly addressed through the commune councils. This ultimately led to poor public service delivery (Chakunda, 2015). While Binza (2013) argued that knowledge is one of the most critical drivers to enhance competent leadership of local government in developing visions and innovative development strategies in the face of rapid technological changes, competitiveness, and the rise of new challenges in the 21st century, United Nations (2022) recognized the importance of high quality of local government leadership in rapid demands of urbanization. Thus, the local councils must be equipped with skills, competence, experience and knowledge, preferably a tertiary or professional degree or certificates rather than innate ability, so that they can adapt to any changes that may affect governance and facilitate good communication, management, and rational decision making (Jachi & Yona, 2019; Jonga, 2019). In contrast, the councils would lead to ambiguity of policy on paper and conflict of tasks in practice (Yuan & Schraufnagel, 2020) and even much more serious controversy in the face of what Chen et al (2021) called 'AI-based self-service technology in public service delivery' when the councilors generally came with poor knowledge. Furthermore, Stromquist (2019) and Sheith (2020) averred that winning economic opportunities required priority investment in human capital who had education-based knowledge and three types of skills required for today's labour markets: advanced cognitive skills such as complex problem-solving, socio-behavioral skills such as teamwork, and skill combinations that are predictive of adaptability such as reasoning and self-efficacy. However, poor leadership of the commune council has its own rationales.

With Funga's (2016) recommendation on upgrading the minimum standard of council candidates' education to 12th grade in Lusaka city council and many rationales

above, it is strongly argued that the advancement of the education standard of the commune council candidates in the law is eagerly required as a key to the high capacity of the council leadership. For example, one councilor who completed 12th-grade education and an associate degree in one commune is found to implement local governance affairs more energetically, effectively, and responsively than those who came with lower education. In this regard, the result above showed that the current setting of the educational standard for council candidates has been one of the critical problems to local leadership and change is needed. From this discussion, the research argues that human resource with the educational standard set by the law no longer respond appropriately to current context of governance demand and neither does the 9-year compulsory education of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports 2006 fits in. In this sense, while Ogisu and Williams (2016) argued that completion of 12 years of education in the context of Cambodia can aptly equip students with good knowledge and reasoning and logic skills, this argument on such an education level can be applied as a new education standard for commune council candidates because education is critically fundamental to promoting personal and organizational leadership and is the engine of economic growth in the context of the knowledge-based economy and the catalyst for innovation, transformation and the hope for a sustainable future. In the end, the commune councils with education-based knowledge have strong foundation to their leadership capacity regarding public policy awareness and effective implementation on the decentralization pathway (Heng & Sol, 2022).

Education alone cannot be a strong argument to enhance the quality of the commune council leadership capacity, though. Knowledge and skills do not necessarily come from the institutions of academic education before the candidates become commune councilors. While Mau (2019) recognized the significance of building capacity for public servants, De Lannoy (2022) indicated that developing capacity-building programs in all possible forms, such as in-classroom training, virtual training, and field study helped improve the knowledge and ability of the councilors, build strong institutions, and promote economic stability and sustainable growth. In this regard, it is learned that the Royal School of Administration of the Ministry of Public Service (Buth, 2021; United Nations, 2022) and the National School of Local Administration (NASLA) of the Ministry of Interior Cambodia (Tin, 2021) play a crucial role in strengthening and enhancing leadership capacity of local government officials across the country through short-, medium- and long-term trainings with an abundance of compelling course design at annual basis in return for resilience, effectiveness, and responsiveness of public service delivery. Some of the courses include public policy, public service delivery, decentralization, administration system in Cambodia, human resource development in the public sector, innovation, leadership, immigration management, etc. It is therefore argued that these schools can also play a prominent role in promoting the leadership capacity of the commune

councilors. None of these schools have been explored in building leadership capacity for commune councilors. While Carrasco et al (2023) concluded that the commune councilors in Cambodia did not even rationalize improving public service as their key responsibility, leading to a frequent sluggish response to local demands, it is argued that this should be a good time for the government to expansively think about providing such crucial capacity development programs in these schools or any innovative programs to the councils in return for improved modern knowledge and social awareness of individuals, strong organization, and effective governance.

In connection with the leadership capacity of the council, Lundy and Xinhai (2020) argued that the small scale of the commune council management structure that has only a single body acting dual roles (legislative and executive) was also an impediment to decentralization progress. As explained earlier, the commune council has been legitimately designed to act in dual jurisdictions, legislative and executive actors, to build their political credibility as local politicians and local representatives and capacity to deliver services as service providers to local citizens (Smoke & Morrison, 2011). As mentioned earlier, this structure is different from the designs of the administration of the capital, province, municipality, district and khans, and even the structures of the lowest-tier local governments of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand that have boards of governors and the councils separately. It is even much weaker in terms of power and accountability.

In the study on legislative-executive relations, Rockman (1984) posited that the bodies and human resources between legislative and executive branches should be separate from each other because they have different focuses despite common goals. The author explained that those in the executive constituency were politically centrist and concentrated on local participation, public service delivery, and local development, while those in the legislative focused on politics rather than administration. The management structure paradigm of Indonesia's village government, the local government counterpart of the commune council in Cambodia, could be an example here just to shape better insights into consideration on the commune council management structure in Cambodia. The village government is designed as two discrete paradigms between the council and executive board to perform as local representatives and service providers respectively. Coming into effect since 1999, this government has separate branches, the executive (village head) and the legislative (village representative) (Bebington et al., 2006). This paradigm provides more power to the legislature to control the executive but offers the village community the chance to play a larger role in their development. In this regard, the village head is accountable to the village representative, not the district head, an upper level.

In the case of the commune council management structure in Cambodia, when one person takes both positions and roles as the commune chief as a local leader for service delivery and the commune council

chief as a local politician, conflicts in decision-making and accountability between administration and politics inevitably arise, affecting public trust as local representatives and service providers in a general context. It is precisely understandable that this paradigm provides a more biased opportunity for the chief to expose his/her political advantages from the daily performance of service delivery than those from other parties. It could be argued to be unfair for local politicians in the arena of political competition. As argued by Lidström et al (2016), local councils cannot use the same level of capacity to address the different challenges in the context of rapidly rising demands in the 21st century, and change is needed. Moreover, many scholars, as cited by Right (2023), have argued that in the current context of Cambodian democracy, local politicians must be excluded from the executive branch to avoid their promising power and roles as a check on the implementation of administrative affairs of the executive branch. In this sense, in the study on the implementation of Wilson's theory in the Cambodian context, Seakkeav (2015), cited from Weinberger (1991), proclaimed that in a democracy, power always goes along with political responsibility. Nonetheless, the idea that public administration in the executive branch uses political power in the legislative branch leads to issues of how the administration can be accountable. This precisely implies the contradictions of power and accountability within the commune council, which is designed as a single coalesce with two interchangeable powers and roles. To this respect, Yasak (2016), in the study on Decentralization and De-concentration Reforms in Cambodia, argued that political decentralization needed to be improved in order to enable the local political actors to perform their roles as representatives of citizens and to be accountable to their respective citizens. Thus, the restructuring of the current model of the commune council management that divides discrete jurisdictions of powers and roles should be taken into consideration by the policymakers and the national government institutions in charge for the better future decentralization.

Potential candidates can be selected and recruited when there is a legal procedure. Although the result of this research found no evidence of this, Shen (2022) found that the commune council candidates are recruited based on their loyalty to their political party as a top priority rather than meritocracy and other advantages. Therefore, while the results of this research expressed the importance of the legal procedures for selecting and recruiting the council candidates with appropriate leadership capacity to stand the election, Bauer (2020) recognized that competition is a key component that leads to having strong candidates for the election through screening and challenging their leadership capacity, experience, and strength.

In the United Kingdom (UK), recruitment is one of the most important procedures to ensure potential candidates in the nomination process for the election and takes very serious steps (Meadowcroft, 2001). There are two main serious stages to identifying potential candidates – interviews and debates within the party

before nomination. It is hence believed that having potential candidates for local governance leadership is the hope of sustainable development for the people. The experience of the recruitment procedures in the UK could be implied in the case of this research. Although this experience is taken from the developed country, the process can be adjusted to align with the context of Cambodian paradigm and culture just to ensure that local citizens expect to ultimately have leaders with strong leadership capacity, knowledge, skills, talent, and commitment to service. Besides, all political parties definitely want their candidates to be re-elected in terms of political competition, and this idea should be one of their priorities to consider. In this sense, specific modes of selection and recruitment are not exactly visualized in this research. Nonetheless, it is argued that a legal system or mechanism on punctilious selection and recruitment rather than none should be established as a standard norm and exercised by each political party or any designated obligatory organization in order to have truly potential councilors to represent and serve their people and community. Today, the monthly wage of the commune councilors has risen more than ten times from 25 USD at the beginning of decentralization to around 277 USD plus an additional social aid package, subject to a number of sub-decrees of the Cambodian government. It is, hence, one of the key attractive foundations for the government to activate the legal procedures of selecting and recruiting the candidates who are far much better educated and more competent with knowledge, skills, experience and innovation capability than those who are just literate in reading and writing. It is implied that the higher and more competitive salary, the more potential candidates.

In another study, DCRI (2021) rationalized that the competent candidates who were well-identified by their parties were likely to stand a greater chance of winning the election than the incompetent ones. For example, one of the commune council candidates in the research district from Cambodian People's Party (CPP), a longstanding ruling party, lost his chairman seat to his political opponent in the commune council election 2022, subject to the result announcement by the National Election Committee. Uncovering from the interview and discussion with the respondents at the district, the loss was mainly attributed to his ineffective leadership capacity, the uppermost reason out of the others. He had been the chief of the commune council who was assessed to be at high risk of loss, being rated below the average score ($50 < 54$) among six candidates in six communes (see more detail in Table 3 above).

In the end, promoting the commune council leadership also depends on the application and enforcement of rules and regulations to avoid abuse and external interference on local power of the commune councils on local development (Smoke & Morrison, 2011). In order to promote development in Cambodia, Calabrese et al (2022) indicated that rules and regulations must be commonly understood, respected, and exercised legitimately, fairly, and equally. However, the ASEAN Secretariat (2021) and Backhaus (2020) found that the regulatory quality regarding public

service delivery in Cambodia was generally low. This condition eventually led to critical issues such as corruption, inefficiency of public resource management, external control on decision-making power of the councils on local welfare and development planning, stagnant leadership capacity, especially a neo-patrimonial system which undermined decentralization reform in Cambodia. This would consequently end up corroding public trust between service providers and the citizens, which further undermined and instigated local development and the promise of democracy. From these aspects, a mere argument on lack and low exercise of rules and regulations would lead to a high level of a neo-patrimonial structure, resulting in external interference on commune council power, limited responsibility and accountability on behalf of local representatives, and falling in a condition, 'I do what you tell me' (Babovic & Vukovic, 2014; Barma, 2016; Morgenbesser, 2017).

Additional studies by Eng (2016) and Shen (2022) indicated that despite being elected by the people, the councilors give greater priority on local development to their political party and feel more responsible and accountable to the higher tiers of the government who are usually the heads of their line party levels than the local citizens. By taking bolder and deeper decentralization reforms, this could be well fixed to empower the commune councils to be more autonomous, well-resourced, locally accountable, and able to address emerging challenges more effectively (CDRI, 2021). If such structure cannot be protected by rules and regulations, then the reform may be somehow interpreted like Shen (2022) and beyond as a strategic, surreptitious approach the CPP employs to extend its political ascendancy to local areas by influencing the communes. If this is true, the decentralization reform is only a political roleplay. In other words, Abdule et al (2018) argued that the privation of legitimate frameworks would enforce the decentralized local government to fall at risk in the form of being controlled on local authorities' resources and powers, and this is understandable that precise legal regulations and frameworks must play the roles to prevent the process of local government from being high-jacked by any external groups of elites, and to reduce political dominance, stimulate autonomy and responsibilities on the commune councils, and promote their innovation, initiative and leadership (Young, 2021).

To this end, the leadership of the commune council is poor as a whole, which has undermined the decentralization reform process and slackened governance progress; however, there is big space for the government to improve its local leadership to fit the current situation. The commune council is legitimately obliged to be the sub-national government closest to the people as local representatives and service providers on behalf of the national government. Practically, local government with high leadership capacity inspires good quality of service, whereas the local government with low leadership capacity does not. Thus, the law on commune management, which has been applied for twenty years, has evidently become the major engine to drive any consequences of decentralization and play a

significant role in shaping the quality of commune council leadership in the future when the government deepens its inclination to fix the fragile, sensitive challenges and issues raised above. In this respect, human capital with knowledge, competence, skills, and experience stands at the center of all development. It is required in developing the quality of leadership for both individuals and organizations to provide public service to local citizens effectively, develop community sustainably and economically and meet the promises of local democracy responsibly through the decentralization process.

In order to promote the quality of commune council leadership with such human capital, three recommendations have been arguably suggested to the Cambodian government for consideration. First, upgrading the minimum education standard for the commune council candidates to 'completion of secondary education or grade 12' should be reviewed in the law on commune management 2001 in order to promote the council leadership regarding local governance in the rising demands of the people in terms and the rapid change of the world in the 21st century. In addition, as leadership development is one way of building human resource capacity through the development of leadership capacity and skills, blatant capacity-building programs should be held by experts on a regular basis to ensure that the commune councils' leadership capacity stays effective and up-to-date.

Second, the government should design and exercise the regulations or policies of selecting and recruiting the potential commune council candidates to stand the election. The process of recruitment should be serious to ensure that the candidates have not just loyalty to their political parties but also genuine potentiality and capacity including leadership ability, skills, experience, talent and knowledge to serve their people well.

Third, the current model structure of commune council management is assumed to be controversial in power, roles, responsibilities and accountability between legislative (local representative) and executive (service provider) and weak or even too weak by comparison with the rising demands of the people and the value of democracy. To ensure effective implementation, the current model of the management structure and human resource of the council should be split between the legislative and executive branches in order to avoid controversy of power, focus on responsibilities and promote accountability. In addition, the government should review and design the rules, regulations, policies, and regulatory frameworks and legitimately exercise them to prevent the abuse or external interference of power and promote accountability on local governance affairs.

This research, again, is conducted in Choueng Prey district as a case of decentralization study. Therefore, it is understandable that there is bigger space for the researchers to deepen studies and gain more rationales on decentralization in Cambodia in a wider scope of research to bring further strong evidence on promoting local governance for the sake of people's interest and local democracy.

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