

# Imagining How Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen Might See Their Work

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## Abstract

Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen are public officials with responsibilities ranging from poverty reduction and economic development to maintaining peace and order. Over the last decade, we have posed a series of questions to them to explore their ideas about leading. This paper presents results from questions asking about success, motivation, challenges, leading, why others are or aren't drawn to the position, and mistakes made or observed. These results then are merged with other interviews asking the same questions, other studies, and the literature on leading to ask: how could Chiefs and Headmen shift their thinking in response to rapid social, cultural and institutional changes? We propose six areas: their role as initiators, perceptions of villagers, building social capital, interchangeability of roles, economic development, and what is learned from mistakes. We contend the work done here is relevant beyond Laos and Thailand to many places where local-level officials at the bottom of hierarchies work to fulfill responsibilities important to their communities.

## Keywords

Lao Village Chiefs, Thai Village Headmen, Local Level Leadership, Imagining Leadership, Implicit Leadership Theory, Leadership and Change

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## 1. Introduction

Lao Village Chiefs and Thai Village Headmen are public officials with responsibilities that range from poverty reduction and economic development to maintaining peace and order. Over the last decade, we have posed a series of questions to them that explore their ideas about leading.

This paper first presents results from questions asking about success, motiva-

tion, challenges, leading, why others are or aren't drawn to the position, and mistakes made or observed. These then are merged with other Chief and Headman interviews<sup>1</sup>, other studies and the literature on leading to ask: how could Chiefs and Headmen shift their thinking in response to rapid social, cultural and institutional changes? We consider six areas: their role as initiators, perceptions of villagers, building social capital, interchangeability of roles, economic development, and what is learned from mistakes.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 places Chiefs and Headmen in Lao and Thai governance systems, emphasizing the impacts of decentralization on their roles. The next section describes formal and informal aspects of their positions. Section 4 outlines how interviews were conducted. Section 5 presents interview results organized into themes, and Section 6 discusses them. Section 7 describes the sources for the perspective used in proposing shifts in how they might see their work. Section 8 considers six shifts likely to benefit villages and villagers. The final section addresses limitations, future directions for research, and the relevance for local level officials in other settings.

## 2. System Contexts

Certain elements of the Lao and Thai systems of governance have particular relevance for Chiefs and Headmen<sup>2</sup>. In Laos, the state, in which the Lao People's Revolutionary Party is closely interwoven with the government, reaches deeply into society and responds forcefully to challenges to its authority. The language of socialism remains strong despite the "New Economic Mechanism" adopted in 1986 to temper ideology with greater pragmatism in economic matters<sup>3</sup>. Observers contend the state's power remains balanced between the Party's democratic centralism and a traditional, pervasive system of patron-client relations (Sayalath & Creak, 2017: p. 180; see also Stuart-Fox, 2005, 2006; Baird, 2018).

Despite the shift toward economic pragmatism, sustainable development and widespread poverty reduction, especially in rural areas, are important goals<sup>4</sup> (c.f., Phonevilay, 2020). Reaching these goals entails, among other things, energizing economic activity at the local level while maintaining strong central authority. It also means addressing, "a state bureaucratic apparatus that can lurch toward incoherence, and is prone to ineffective modes of top-down decision making, target-driven policy directives and inefficient implementation" (Creak & Barney, 2018: p. 9).

<sup>1</sup>This article presents results from a subset of questions. Section 7 also draws on what was learned from questions asking about effectiveness, sources of learning about leading, role models for leading, and advice they would give to others in similar positions.

<sup>2</sup>This section describes elements of the Lao and Thai systems that impact the roles of Chief and Headmen in similar and distinctive ways. It is noteworthy that only a few decades ago the villages in which interviews were conducted were part of transnational Isan. The identification of residents of northeast Thailand with it was so strong the Thai government was forced to try and instill a stronger sense of being Thai (Keyes, 2014: Chp 4).

<sup>3</sup>The phrase "market-Leninism" was coined to describe market systems that formed following failures of planned economies.

<sup>4</sup>The goal of leaving Least Developed Country status was postponed again in 2024.

In 2002 a Vientiane English-language newspaper reported that the government expected to escape poverty by 2020, with development decentralized to villages as “implementing units” (Vorakhoun, 2002; see also High, 2006). A SIDA study published in 2003 described initiatives to devolve authority to local levels as two steps forward, and one step backward (Hagnon & Van Gansberghe, 2003). In March 2011 the Four Breakthroughs (*Boukthalu*) and Three Builds (*Sam Sang*) were adopted as guidelines to “break away from entrenched but ineffective ways of thinking and behaving”, devolving responsibility to local authorities to foster an “active administration” (Noonan, 2013: pp. 3, 7). “Active administration” is an ambiguous phrase, one that also could be interpreted as strengthening, rather than reducing, state authority (Creak, 2014: p. 159).

To a degree, Thailand’s history with decentralization and deconcentration parallels Laos ambiguity about devolution of authority. The Thai setting, however, is more publicly disordered and conflicted. In contrast to the “cleaner” formal structure in Laos<sup>5</sup>, what has evolved in Thailand is “quite intricate” (Nagai et al., 2008: p. 4) and “creates confusion and tension” (Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016: p. 173).

The “intricacy” rests in the relationship between the central administration and the thousands of sub districts (*tambons*) and villages (*muban*). From one perspective, the Subdistrict Heads and Village Headmen are quasi agents of the central government, but from another they represent the interests of the villagers who elected them (Nagai et al., 2008: p. 6; Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016: p. 174; Chardchawarn, 2010: p. 26; Haque, 2010: p. 677). This “dual system” has been “the major characteristic of Thailand’s local government system” (Haque, 2010: p. 683)<sup>6</sup>.

The 1990s brought a national tilt toward both democracy and decentralization in Thailand. A military regime was overturned in 1992, followed by an election in which decentralization was a major issue. The Decentralization Plan and Procedure Act of 1999 forced the Provincial Administration, an arm of the national government, to accommodate new Local Administrative Organizations (LAO) composed of elected executives and council members. Since then, the LAO have co-existed with the provincial administrative system (Nethipo, 2021: p. 2).

Movement toward decentralization peaked by the late 1990s. A 2006 military intervention brought laws and regulations that, “tightened the connection between central and local governments” (Dufhues et al., 2015: pp. 798, 800). There was even less support for decentralization after the military’s return to power in 2014 (Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016: pp. 184; Nethipo, 2021: p. 3).

Inconsistency about decentralization impacts what Thai Village Headmen do. LAO brought competition to local “bosses”, but the 2006 and 2014 coups altered local-national linkages (Nethipo, 2021: pp. 3, 17-18; Haque, 2010: pp. 684-686). These divergent forces could have several impacts. They might increase the power

<sup>5</sup>“Cleaner” is meant to convey that the system’s formal structure is less complicated, not that the way things work in practice is less so.

<sup>6</sup>This ambiguity also can be interpreted as reflecting the paternalistic view that local authorities in rural areas are incapable of exercising autonomy (Nagai et al., 2008: p. 10). Keyes contends paternalism applies especially to Northeast Thailand, where this research was conducted (Keyes, 2014).

of traditional family dynasties, create new local political elites, increase corruption when the central government seeks the cooperation of local officials, reinforce or reestablish patronage relationships, and undermine local elections (Haque, 2010: pp. 684-686; Nethipo, 2021: pp. 17-18). Some predicted a gradual *recentralization* in which local administration will be highly centralized (Peerasit, 2020; see also Harding & Leelapatana, 2020).

### 3. Chiefs and Headman in Lao and Thai Villages

In Laos, only approved Party members may be elected Village Chief (*nai ban*). Article 86 of the 2015 constitution assigns them “administrative” responsibilities while heads of provinces, cities, districts and municipalities “govern”. Chiefs are, among other things, “to lead the people towards development on social-economic, natural resources protection, create peace and order, provide education, and to enhance unity among the people creating villages with development goals” (National Assembly, 2015).

Their responsibilities include collecting fees for documents villagers are required to have<sup>7</sup> and, since they receive no salary, deciding which proportion supports them and the Vice Chiefs and which goes into the village fund<sup>8</sup>. Vice Chiefs are responsible for specific areas, commonly culture and education or security. A two-term constitutional restriction notwithstanding, some Chiefs are re-elected many times.

Despite the formal system’s orderliness, Holly High found an “entrenched ambiguity” about authority in an encounter over rice crop irrigation between villagers and proposed state policy (High & Petit, 2013). Jerome Whittington referred to the “ambivalent institution of the village chief” after seeing a Chief caught between government policy and villagers in a disagreement over land use rules. (Whittington, 2014: pp. 104-105). Sarinda Singh described how state officials try to gain villager cooperation and concluded, “marginalized officials often remain committed to the Lao state though they echo villagers in their private criticism.” (Singh, 2014: p. 1062).

In Thailand, Headmen (*phu yai ban*) are elected for five-year terms<sup>9</sup> and have a salary paid by the Ministry of Interior. Historically a Headmen has been a “government assistant” in communicating official information to villagers, implementing policies, monitoring compliance, arranging village meetings, representing villager interests and maintaining community peacefulness (Wiriyasawat, 2009; Ek-Iem, 2021: pp. 466-467). Keyes study of traditional villages in north and

<sup>7</sup>Starting in 2019 individuals may go to a bank and send their land tax payment directly to the government.

<sup>8</sup>Fees now are being standardized and posted. Villages can apply for government support, but must contribute 30% to infrastructure projects.

<sup>9</sup>Whether Headmen should be required to stand for re-election has been a recurring question. Proponents of it refer to accountability and preventing monopolization of the position. Counter arguments include not making the Headman a politician and reducing conflicts in the villages. C.f., Sattaburuth 2017). There are about 75,000 villages in Thailand.

northeast Thailand found they “must labor under the disabilities of being neither significant government agents nor significant local leaders...” (Keyes, 1976: p. 9; see also Moerman, 1969: p. 547; see Nagai et al., 2008: p. 1 and Unger & Mahakanjana, 2016).

Today, some responsibilities have been shifted to the LAO, leaving Headmen “neither a full-time civil servant nor an employee of a local government organization, in an unclear state.” (Ek-Iem, 2021: p. 467). These changes require them to, “adapt and seek more roles”, emphasizing themselves as “the coordinator in bringing government policies into action as well as reflecting people’s problems to the government with efficiency and effectiveness.” (Ek-Iem, 2021: p. 476)<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4. Conducting Interviews

The responses of 15 Village Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs and 14 Village Headmen to the following questions asked in interviews conducted over several days are reported in the next section.

Q1. Successes.

What are your most important successes?

Q2. Motivation.

What motivates you to do the work you do?

Q3. Leader.

What do you think it means to be a “leader”?

Q4. Challenges.

- a. What is most challenging about being a Village Chief or Headman?
- b. What are the main reasons people want to be a Village Chief or Headman?
- c. What are the main reasons people do NOT want to?

Q5. Mistakes.

- a. What mistakes have you made?
- b. What mistakes do you see other local leaders making?

The research team in Laos consisted of a Lao, a Thai and an English-speaking Westerner. Lao Loum speak a dialect familiar to the Thai researcher who is from northeast Thailand. He and the Lao researcher also speak English. In both Laos and Thailand, the Thai researcher asked questions and provided a simultaneous translation of responses into English. The second researcher typed this verbatim into a tablet, stopping to ask for clarification as needed.

Drawing a representative sample of villages was not an option in either country. Though not ideal from a methodological perspective, the results in both places are likely to reflect what would be found in rural villages with similar characteristics.

Each interview was preceded by casual conversation and information about the project. A question about the interviewee’s most important successes—not reported in this paper—was used to establish a level of comfort.

<sup>10</sup>In Thailand much more than Laos it is possible to find studies looking at Village Headmen from a leadership perspective. See, for example, the *Journal of Subdistrict and Village Headmen*.

Conducting the interviews in Laos<sup>11</sup> required using a local non-profit association to identify villages an hour or so by car in different directions from the center of Vientiane. The non-profit association sought district-level approval, which was given with the proviso that questions be sent ahead and then not deviated from. On the second day researchers were joined by a local government staff member who listened in on the first two interviews, then moved out of hearing range to do things on her cell phone.

With a couple of exceptions, the Lao interviews took place in the Chief's office or in an area where village business is done. Most included only the interviewers and the Chief or stand-in Vice Chief. In a few instances, others were in the area, and once several villagers sat nearby and listened attentively, without seeming to affect the Chief.

Concerns that interviewees would give scripted responses proved unwarranted. Responses seemed neither cautious nor mechanical. Chiefs came with their notes on the questions sent ahead, but none read from them. Some were referred to, others glanced at occasionally, and in two instances ignored.

No prior approvals from officials were required in Thailand, where sending questions ahead wasn't warranted. A local researcher helped by contacting villages to see which Headmen were open to being interviewed. All the villages of interest were in rural areas outside the northeastern city of Khon Kaen and shared socio-economic characteristics. Interviews were conducted in a wider range of physical settings than in Laos, including in sitting areas under the home. Some were held where the Headman worked, with one on a covered wooden platform in the middle of rice fields.

Case observed that in Laos there is "no equivalent word to the English term leadership, at least no term that is commonly understood and applied" (Case, 2017: p. 182). Rural farmer representatives viewed *phu nam*, normally used to refer to a leader, as inappropriate for them since they are not Party officials. Because the Village Chief is a public official and must be a Party member, we elected to use *phu nam* to refer to "leader", the same word used in Thailand<sup>12</sup>. This raised no concerns.

## 5. Results

**Table 1** summarizes age, gender, tenure in office and educational background. Ten of the 15 Lao interviewed are Village Chiefs and five are Vice Chiefs. Seven of the ten Chiefs were previously Vice Chiefs. Eleven of the 14 Thai are Village Headmen and three are Subdistrict Headmen who were previously Village Headmen.

The tables that follow are organized into themes emerging from verbatim interview records. These themes were derived by, first, listing the points each re-

<sup>11</sup>Research in Laos, especially in social spheres, is carefully monitored. Studies asking sensitive questions are unlikely to be accepted (Creak & Barney, 2018: p. 6; Singh, 2014: pp. 10-12).

<sup>12</sup>This is roughly translated as, "The person who takes others along." It is different from *hua na*, which means "boss" or "director".

spondent made to a question, eliminating clear repetitions. Next, a researcher examined interviewee responses for each question, tentatively placing highly similar content in the same group. Third, researchers together reviewed those placements to reach agreement on the themes. The tables display all themes, separating those containing 7 or more interviewee responses. Responses exemplifying a theme are in parentheses. “Single Responses” refers to statements not fitting into a theme.

**Table 1.** Demographic information.

	Village Chiefs and Vice Chiefs. (15)	Village and Subdistrict Headmen. (14)
Age <sup>13</sup>	Mean = 54.1. Range = 63 to 36.	Mean = 44.8. Range = 54 to 36.
Gender	All males.	11 males, 3 females.
Tenure	Mean Village Chief = 9.7 years. Mean Vice Chief = 9.0 years. Range = 20 years to less than 1.	Mean = 7.5. Range = 13 to less than 1 year.
Education	3—attended or completed college. 7—attended or completed High School. 4—less than High School. [One is unknown.]	3—attended or completed college 1—diploma. 10—attended or completed High School.

The tables can be viewed in several ways. One is for how the thematic responses of Chiefs and Headmen rank. Another is which themes are most strongly shared. Themes are shared if researchers found the contents of Chief and Headman groupings to be highly similar. These are in bold type<sup>14</sup>. Themes *not* shared provide a third perspective. These are in italics.

**Table 2** summarizes what distinguishes a leader. All nine Headman themes are shared. The strongest overlap is Good Personal Qualities, followed by Sacrifices for the Village and being Knowledgeable. Good Personal Qualities also provides the biggest difference, with Chiefs referring to it more than twice as often. Chiefs alone think a leader is someone loyal to Party and country, a good implementer, and has ability and cleverness. Twice as many Headmen say working closely with villagers defines a leader.

**Table 2.** Meaning of “Leader”.

Lao Village Chiefs (79 responses)	Thai Village Headmen (39 responses)
<b>I. Good Personal Qualities (15)</b> (e.g., fair and sincere; a positive role model).	<b>I. Works Closely with Villagers (8).</b>
<b>II. a. Sacrifice for Village (7)</b> (e.g., sacrifices time and energy for the village).	THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.
<b>II. b. Loyal to Party and Country (7)</b> (e.g., works for the Party; loyalty to the Motherland).	<b>II. a. Responsible for Solving Village Problems (6).</b>
THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.	<b>II. b. Good Personal Qualities (6).</b>
<b>III. a. Good Implementer (6)</b> (e.g., Makes adjustments as needed to get things	<b>II. Knowledgeable (5).</b>
	<b>IV. Sacrifices for the Village (4).</b>

<sup>13</sup>In a few cases it was necessary to estimate ages.

<sup>14</sup>To avoid redundancy for shared themes, the example is provided only for the Chiefs.

## Continued

done).

**III. b. Knowledgeable (6).**

**IV. Ability and Cleverness (5)** (e.g., strategic and clever).

**V. a. Responsible for Solving Village Problems (4)** (e.g., needs to solve every problem).

**V. b. Gets Villagers to be Responsible to the Village (4)** (e.g., Gets the villagers to work hard)<sup>15</sup>.

**V. c. Good Decision Maker (4)** (e.g., makes decisions when needed).

**V. d. Works Closely with Villagers (4)** (e.g., consults with villagers).

**VI. a. Has Ideas About How to Develop the Village Economy (3)** (e.g., has ideas about development).

**VI. b. Gets the Villagers to Work together (3)** (e.g., gets the villagers to be united).

**VI. c. Open Minded (3)** (e.g., don't think you know everything).

**V. d. Good Communicator (3)** (e.g., know how to talk to everyone).

**V. e. Trusted and Respected by Villagers (3)** (e.g., villagers accept and trust).

**VII. Protects Common Property (2)** (e.g., know the difference between common and private property).

**V. a. Gets Villagers to be Responsible to the Village (2).**

**V. b. Good Decision Maker (3).**

**VI. a. Trusted and Respected by Villagers (3).**

**VI. b. Has Ideas About How to Develop the Village (2).**

**Table 3** shows what is identified as success. Two themes with eight or more references are shared: Improvements in the Village and Getting Money and Resources for the Village. Two other themes with eight or more references are not common. Chiefs alone view holding the position *per se* as a success, while only Headmen cite Building Community.

**Table 3.** Successes.

**Lao Village Chiefs (51 responses)**

**I. Improvements in the Village (10)** (e.g., built roads to the rice fields; create a roof-like net for growing vegetables).

**II. Keeping the Village Safe and Peaceful (9)** (e.g., keeping peace in the village).

**III. a. Pride of Having the Position (8)** (e.g., very proud that the villagers elected him).

**III. b. Getting Money and Resources for the Village (8)** (e.g., supporting removal of weeds that restrict the river's flow).

THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.

**IV. Helped Village Economy (4)** (e.g., creates projects supporting the economy).

**V. a. Recognition for Efforts (3)** (e.g., got certificate from UNESCO).

**V. b. Carrying Out Government Policy (3)** (e.g., successful in doing what central authorities want).

**VI. a. Being a good role model (2)** (e.g., a good role model for people in the village).

**VI. b. Helping villagers to understand policies/rules (2)** (e.g., helps them to understand laws and government policies).

**Single Responses (2).**

**Thai Village Headmen (45 responses)**

**I. Getting Money and Resources for the Village (11).**

**II. Building Community (10)** (e.g., more village solidarity).

**III. Improvements in the Village (9).**

THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.

**IV. Helped Village Economy (5).**

**V. Recognition for Efforts (4).**

**VI. a. Keeping the Village Safe and Peaceful (2).**

**VI. b. Work on Women's Issues (2)** (e.g., a woman being accepted as a village leader).

**Single Responses (3).**

<sup>15</sup>VI a. and b. overlap with V. b. but emphasize economic activity and working together, respectively.

**Table 4** summarizes what motivates Chiefs and Headmen. Helping the village and the villagers is mentioned most often by both. Villager support and trust also matters to both, but more to Chiefs. The sources of motivation diverge after this. Only Chiefs refer to the duty to country and society, the unwillingness of others, and the importance of policy and rules. Headmen are alone in referencing economic development, poor examples of leaders and being from the village.

**Table 4.** Motivation.

Lao Village Chiefs (49 responses)	Thai Village Headmen (45 responses)
<b>I. a. Help the Village and Villagers (11)</b> (e.g., wants to help the villagers).	<b>I. Help the Village and Villagers (10).</b>
<b>I. b. Villager Support and Trust (11)</b> (e.g., must fulfill villagers trust). THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.	THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.
<b>II. Use Knowledge and Skills (6)</b> (e.g., studies agriculture and wants to share with village).	<b>II. Villager Support and Trust (5).</b>
<b>III. Responsibility to Country and Society, Duty (5)</b> (e.g., it is the duty of Lao people to help the homeland).	<b>III. Economic Development (4)</b> (e.g., village agriculture is suffering).
<b>IV. a. Others Aren't Willing or Able (4)</b> (e.g., not many wanted to do this).	<b>IV. a. Poor Examples of Leaders (4)</b> (e.g., former leader did nothing).
<b>IV. b. Policy, Administration and Rules (4)</b> (e.g., in the village many do not follow the rules and regulations).	<b>IV. b. Being from this Place (4)</b> (e.g., knows this place, loves this place).
<b>IV. c. Influence of Family (3)</b> (e.g., His father showed when there is a public problem, he should do something).	<b>V. a. Influence of Family (3).</b>
<b>V. Peace and Harmony in the Village (2)</b> (e.g., wants to keep peace in the village).	<b>V. b. Use Knowledge and Skills (3).</b>
<b>Single Responses (2).</b>	<b>V. c. Knowing About Other Villages/Places (3)</b> (e.g., this village not doing as well as others).
	<b>VI. a. Promote Working Together (2)</b> (e.g., be the main person bringing people together).
	<b>VI. b. The Challenge (2)</b> (e.g., being a woman able to lead).

**Table 5** summarizes Chief and Headman views of their biggest challenges. Three are shared—no resources, too much work, and improving the village economy. The Chief theme with the most references—Disagree With or Don't Like the Leader—is not a factor for Headmen. The largest Headman themes, not shared by Chiefs, are Improving Conditions in the Village, followed by Conflicts in the Village.

**Table 5.** Challenges.

Laos—Village Chiefs (36 responses)	Thai—Village Headmen (32 responses)
<b>I. Disagree with or Don't Like the Leader (7)</b> (e.g., villager complaints about him). THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.	ALL THEMES LESS THAN 7.
<b>II. a. No Resources for Making Improvements (5)</b> (e.g., getting more financial support).	<b>I. a. No Resources for Making Improvements (5).</b>
<b>II. b. Too Much to Do (5)</b> (e.g., can't do everything).	<b>I. b. Improving Conditions in the Village (5)</b> (e.g., having no chemicals in the food).
<b>III. a. Villagers Lack of Understanding (4)</b> (e.g., villagers don't understand or follow the law).	<b>II. a. Improving the Village Economy (4).</b>
<b>III. b. Drug Use in the Village (4)</b> (e.g., a lot of buying and selling drugs).	<b>II. b. Too Much to Do (4).</b>
<b>III. c. Improving the Village Economy (4)</b> (e.g., eliminating family debt).	<b>II. c. Conflicts in the Village (4)</b> (e.g., how to handle disagreements at meeting).
<b>III. d. Low Level of Education in the Village (4)</b> (e.g., getting people	<b>III. a. Flooding in the Village (3)</b> (e.g., the village floods every year).
	<b>III. b. Having the Right Attitude (3)</b> (e.g., being satisfied with what was done).
	<b>IV. a. Bureaucracy (2)</b> (e.g., working with the

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to read, write and know culture).	subdistricts).
<b>IV. Getting Villagers to Attend Meetings (3)</b> (e.g., only when government announces a meeting does everyone come).	<b>IV. b. Support from Villagers (2)</b> (e.g., keeping the villagers' love).

**Table 6** shows explanations for why others would want to hold positions like theirs. The strongest duplication is that others look for personal benefits, followed by their wanting power. Seeking status and respect is more of a factor for Headmen. Serving the village is not seen as important by either. Two Chief themes, Show Ability to Do It Well and Support from the Village, are not shared. Only Chiefs reference demonstrating ability as a motivation for others.

**Table 6.** Why others want positions like this.

Laos Village Chiefs (33 responses)	Thai Village Headmen (25 responses)
<b>I. To Benefit Personally (12)</b> (e.g., useful connections; benefit relatives).	<b>I. Status and Respect (8).</b>
<b>II. To Have Power (7)</b> (e.g., show his power).	<b>II. To Benefit Personally (7).</b>
THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.	THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.
<b>III. Show Ability to Do It Well (5)</b> (e.g., to show I can do that).	<b>III. To Have Power (5).</b>
<b>IV. Serve the Village (4)</b> (e.g., do something for the community).	<b>IV. Serve the Village (3).</b>
<b>V. Support from the Village (3)</b> (e.g., village and family support him).	<b>Single Responses (2).</b>
<b>VI. Status and Respect (2)</b> (e.g., be well known).	

**Table 7** summarizes Chief and Headman explanations for why others *don't* want to hold positions like theirs. They agree the hard work required turns people away. Other shared dissuaders are the need to make money and lack of ability<sup>16</sup>. Only Chiefs thought others were put off by having so many people to deal with, while a much smaller number of Headmen referred to the disincentive of dealing with complaints and conflicts.

**Table 7.** Why others don't want positions like this.

Laos Village Chiefs (43 responses)	Thai Village Headmen (31 responses)
<b>I. Hard Work (9)</b> (e.g., don't want to be a slave of the village).	<b>I. Hard Work (11)</b>
<b>II. Too Many People to Deal With (8)</b> (e.g., many people in the village not easy to deal with).	THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.
THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.	<b>II. a. Needs to Make Money (4).</b>
<b>III. Needs to Make Money (6)</b> (e.g., need to support themselves).	<b>II. b. Lack of Ability (4).</b>
<b>IV. Not Motivated to Serve the Public (5)</b> (e.g., people have a small heart).	<b>II. c. No Time (4).</b>
<b>V. a. Lack of Ability (4)</b> (e.g., worry could not fulfill all the responsibilities).	<b>III. a. Dealing with Complaints (3)</b> (e.g., don't agree with the complainer).
<b>V. b. Prefers Doing Business (4)</b> (e.g., if businessman, prefer to do business).	<b>III. b. Dealing with Conflict (3)</b> (e.g., there is disagreement in the village on many issues).
<b>VI. No Time (3)</b> (e.g., no time for own things).	<b>Single Responses (2)</b>
<b>VII. Family Does Not Support (2)</b> (e.g., family must have a big heart for this).	
<b>Single Responses (2).</b>	

**Table 8** displays the mistakes Chiefs and Headmen see themselves having made.

<sup>16</sup>Two of six Chief references to money point to not having a salary. Four Headmen said the salary is low.

The single shared theme is there were no mistakes. Four Chiefs, but no Headmen, acknowledge them, casting mistakes as normal and not serious. Five Headmen portray unsuccessful or unfinished projects as mistakes.

**Table 8.** Mistakes made by chiefs and headmen.

Laos Village Chiefs (24 responses)	Thai Village Headmen (15 responses)
I. <i>Nothing Serious. Mistakes are Normal</i> (8) (e.g., if you do things, you make mistakes).	ALL THEMES LESS THAN 7.
THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.	I. <b>No Mistakes</b> (6).
II. a. <i>Didn't Handle Village Conflicts Well</i> (4) (e.g., tries to solve, but leaves him unhappy).	II. a. <i>Unsuccessful Unfinished Projects</i> (5) (e.g., talks about projects but can't do them).
II. b. <b>No Mistakes</b> (4) (e.g., every activity in the village requires a public hearing).	II. b. <i>Too Strong Opinions</i> (3) (e.g., thinking he has the best ideas).
II. c. <i>Poor Decisions</i> (4) (e.g., made a decision to do something, but not sure how).	<b>Single response</b> (1).
<b>Single Responses</b> (4).	

**Table 9** shows mistakes observed by others. The single shared theme is Self-gain and Corruption, the most referenced by Chiefs. For Headmen, it is Poor Personal Behavior.

**Table 9.** Mistakes made by others.

Laos Village Chiefs (22 responses)	Thai Village Headmen (22 responses)
I. <b>Self-gain and Corruption</b> (8) (e.g., taking money or property that belongs to the village).	I. <i>Poor Personal Behavior</i> (7) (e.g., using drugs, having a second wife).
THEMES OF LESS THAN 7	THEMES OF LESS THAN 7.
II. <i>Small Mistakes, Not Important</i> (4) (e.g., a lot of mistakes, but not to serious).	II. <b>Self-gain and Corruption</b> (6).
III. <i>No Follow-up</i> (3) (e.g., make promises, but don't follow through).	III. <i>Poor Decision-making</i> (4) (e.g., thinks they are right and makes decisions by themselves).
IV. a. <i>Poor Communication and consultation</i> (2) (e.g., a veteran Chief thinking he doesn't need to consult with others).	IV. <i>Not Informed; Don't Follow Policies</i> (3) (e.g., don't join the monthly meetings).
IV. b. <i>Sees Mistakes, But Won't Discuss</i> (2) (e.g., won't tell interviewers what they've seen).	V. <i>Not Transparent</i> (2) (e.g., not being public about village money accounts).
<b>Single Responses</b> (3).	

## 6. Discussion of Results

Chiefs make almost twice as many statements about the meaning of “leader”, by far the biggest difference for any question. Their reservoir of ideas may reflect training given Party members. Party membership also confers the status of being “official” leaders, which may provide greater confidence to speak on this topic. Headmen, in contrast, are less likely to have been in settings that encourage thinking about leadership. Stated differently, the results suggest Thais run to hold the office of Headman, but have thought less about what it means to lead.

Chiefs assign greater importance to personal qualities in defining a leader. It is the most referenced theme for any question, and five smaller are related to it (ability and cleverness; listens to understand villagers; open minded; good communicator; and trusted and respected by villagers). These qualities are consistent with what is needed to obtain Party endorsement. Headmen cite personal qualities only

six times, and just one other theme—being trusted—is related to it.

Chiefs and Headmen highlight success in getting money and resources, but their sources point to system differences. Headmen refer *exclusively* to accomplishments in obtaining support from the government (e.g., to cement the sides of an irrigation canal). Chiefs draw on mixed resources: the government, NGOs, required and voluntary community donations, China, and contributions from Lao living abroad. This is consistent with the smaller budget of the Lao government being less able to provide help.

Both point to successes with the village economy. Chiefs however refer to specific activities (e.g., a woman's weaving group, increased sale of vegetables) while Headmen point to system changes (e.g., better management of garbage, less dependence on agriculture). This may reflect Chiefs' operating in a more orderly, top-down system that discourages initiatives at the local level.

Eight Chiefs, but no Headmen, view holding the position *per se* as an accomplishment. This may result from a typical Chief seeing the years navigating Party and government hierarchies as something to take pride in. Headmen are the winners of elections, which may be judged as a lesser accomplishment. It can, for example, be the result of having money. Winning an election may not bring acceptance by supporters of the losing candidate and they may realize, because of the conflicts in the village and their status, there is a long way to go to achieve their goals.

Nine Chiefs point to success keeping the village safe and peaceful, compared to two Headmen. Both Headman references are to reducing conflict already occurring, while Chiefs are concerned with maintaining stability and preventing conflict. Finally, ten Headmen, but no Chiefs, refer to success in building community. This is surprising since working cooperatively is publicly valued in Lao society. This may reflect maintaining unity having a higher priority than empowering communities.

Helping villagers and the village are motivators for Chiefs and Headmen, as are villager support and trust, although the second is referred to more than twice as frequently by Chiefs. Chiefs alone are moved by duty to country, and by others' unwillingness to hold the position. Six Chiefs refer to using knowledge and skills and four to policy, administration and rules. Headman, in contrast, point to economic development, poor examples of other leaders, familiarity with place, and knowing other villages. This difference may be the result of Thais addressing local concerns to win elections, while Chiefs are closer to being Party-approved appointments.

The challenges of no resources, too much work and improving the economy are shared, but the difference is more noteworthy. Chiefs point heavily to problems with villagers—disagreeing with or not being liked by them, lacking understanding, low level of education, and not attending meetings. This may be a consequence of Chiefs implementing rules and laws that villagers don't think relevant, don't care about, and are unwilling to help with. Other factors may be the villagers

having little time to think about government policy and what the Chiefs want, or that those policies are not communicated in the right way.

Twelve Chiefs and seven Headmen think others, but not themselves, seek these positions for personal benefits and to have power. Eight Headmen but only two Chiefs think others are looking for status and respect. This may result from Chiefs already having respect by virtue of being an approved Party member, and Thais, especially wealthy Thais, seeking the respect that money doesn't bring.

It is not surprising both Chiefs and Headmen think others are turned away from these positions because of their hard work. More noteworthy, almost the same number of Chiefs, but no Headmen, believe having to deal with so many people turns others away. The Chiefs make no reference to conflict, but phrases like "Many people in the village are not easy to deal with" may reference wanting to avoid having to reconcile different opinions among villagers.

The question about their mistakes generated the fewest responses, indicating both Chiefs and Headmen were reluctant to answer. Seven Chiefs concede mishandling conflicts and making poor decisions, and three Headmen hold too strong opinions. The most frequent account is that they made no mistakes, or they were inconsequential.

The last question inquires about mistakes made by others in similar positions. Both Chiefs and Headmen, while forgiving of their own mistakes, attribute errors of self-gain and corruption to others. Headmen describe poor personal behavior in others more often than corruption. Chiefs, on the other hand, make no mention of poor behavior they've observed. Several things may account for this stark contrast. It may be that the training Chiefs receive as Party members reduces behavior considered objectionable. It could also be that the same behavior Headmen see as bad—such as drinking, drugs, and small wives—is present in Lao society but for cultural and policy reasons not interpreted negatively.

## 7. Perspectives on Leading

Village Chiefs and Village Headmen hold roles at the bottom of formal structures that define neither as formal leaders. Leadership-as-practice and implicit leadership theory, however, assert that issues related to leading are inherent to what they do. Leadership-as-practice interprets many of their activities as the groundwork from which leading emerges, whether intentionally or not (Raelin, 2016, 2019; Taekova, 2021). Implicit leadership theory in turn focuses on the tacit and precursor ideas they hold about leading (Schyns et al., 2011; Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021).

Starting from this point, we now focus on what could increase their future effectiveness. The perspective we employ is formed from this and parallel studies of Chiefs and Headmen (Pratt et al., 2023, 2024), points of consensus in the literature on leading, findings from a well-known cross-cultural survey, closely related research on individuals working in INGOs in southeast Asia, supplemented by our contextual understandings of these roles.

The literature on leading does not produce a tight consensus on what is re-

quired to be an effective leader, or the basis of great leadership. There are differences about what is most important, as well as contextual demands on what kind of leadership needed. These attributes, however, surface repeatedly (c.f., See [Bellman, 2001](#); [Bennis, 1989](#); [Block, 2013](#); [Chaleff, 2009](#); [Goleman et al., 2013](#); [Kouzes & Posner, 2022](#); [Likert, 1967, 1981](#); [Newstrom & Pierce, 2011](#))<sup>17</sup>.

- Vision.
- Creating a sense of ownership.
- Risk-taking and willingness to question the rules.
- Humility and admitting mistakes.
- Decisiveness.
- Listening and openness to feedback.
- Honesty and trustworthiness.
- Developing the talents of others.

The literature from which this list is derived, though globally influential, is dominated by Western scholarship. To diversify the point of view, we use the Globe Study ([House et al., 2004](#)). A primary GLOBE goal was to answer the question, “Are there leader behaviors, attributes, and organizational practices that are universally accepted and effective across cultures?” ([House et al., 2002](#): p. 4). To answer this, research was conducted on the implicit leadership theories held by 17,000 private sector managers in 62 countries.

The GLOBE Study’s cross-cultural leadership attributes fell into “universally endorsed” and “culturally contingent” ([Den Hartog et al., 1999](#): p. 230). They found 22 “universally” positive qualities. When overlap is taken into account, these “universal” attributes emerge: ([Den Hartog et al., 1999](#): p. 239).

- Charismatic (inspirational, visionary, confidence builder, dynamic, motivational).
- Integrity (trustworthy, just, honest).
- Administratively competent (administratively skilled).
- Diplomatic (win-win problem solver).
- Decisive (decisiveness).
- Team integrator (informed, communicative, coordinator, team builder).
- Performance oriented (excellence oriented).

“Universally” negative attributes also surfaced ([Den Hartog et al., 1999](#): p. 240).

- Self-centered (asocial, loner).
- Malevolent (irritable, non-cooperative).
- Face saver (nonexplicit).
- Autocratic (dictatorial).

The perspective we apply to how Chiefs and Headmen might think about their roles is also informed by the responses of Laotians and Cambodians working for internationally funded nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) who were asked the same questions as the current study. These Laotians and Cambodians were heads of programs or were likely to move into such positions. Like Chiefs and

<sup>17</sup>The literature on leadership is enormous. These sources, drawn from graduate courses on leadership taught by one of the authors, represent major works in the field.

Headmen, their work focused on local and community issues<sup>18</sup>.

Lao INGO themes duplicated those found for Chiefs and Headmen (Pratt, Sananikone, & Yongvanit, 2023; Pratt & Yongvanit, 2014, 2016).

- Honesty and integrity.
- Passion for the work.
- Not a big ego.
- Supported by the community served.
- Not wielding power over people.
- A positive role model.
- A problem solver.

Other Lao INGO themes, however, appear marginally or not at all for Chiefs and Headmen:

- Having a broad vision.
- Mentoring and increasing peoples' capacity.
- Not making unwarranted assumptions.
- Accepting responsibility for mistakes<sup>19</sup>.

Cambodians working for INGOs also shared some themes with Chiefs and Headmen (Pratt & Yongvanit, 2018).

- Emphasis on integrity and moral authority.
- Not being self-important.
- Motivated by passion rather than self-interest.

They too differed, seeing a leader as:

- Setting direction and building individual, organizational and community capacity.
- Not relying on seniority, hierarchy or connections.
- Bridging differences between staff and villager experiences and expectations.

## 8. How Village Chiefs and Village Headmen Could See Their Work, Now and in the Future

This section asks: what would increase Chief and Headman effectiveness on behalf of their villages and villagers? In responding, we have no interest in “pie in the sky” advice irrelevant to current or future Chiefs and Headmen. Nor is this intended as a criticism of those interviewed. The work of Chief and Headman is shaped by institutional frameworks and done in response to the demands of everyday issues. Instead, our suggestions build on views already expressed in these and other interviews, which, if given a greater emphasis, are likely to be beneficial now and in response to future system or community level changes.

### Chiefs and Headmen as Initiators

Inspiring, direction-setting and vision virtually always appear in considerations of what distinguishes a “leader” from a “manager”. Chiefs and Headmen, how-

<sup>18</sup>It is likely that in both settings views were influenced by international exposure, the less bureaucratic organizations, and in general being younger than Chiefs and Headmen.

<sup>19</sup>Another quality was accepting the government can be controlling and paternalistic, not surprising given they work for civil society organizations.

ever, make only a few references to either<sup>20</sup>. In these interviews they are mentioned indirectly in smaller themes that highlight making decisions, thinking and solving problems, and possessing an open mind. Greater emphasis is placed on, for example, behavior that earns villager trust and respect, acquiring resources, and success in making improvements in village infrastructure.

The lack of attention to direction-setting suggests self-identification as administrators who are tasked with implementing system policies and managing their villages. This is unsurprising given that their positions are at the bottom of system hierarchies. Little in their institutional or cultural environments encourages reaching beyond being implementers.

It is, however, not unrealistic to propose that Chiefs and Headmen could identify opportunities for direction setting and then try to act on them. This shift would open the door to making better use of their on-the-ground knowledge to shape goals, policies and programs that fit better with local conditions and needs.

#### When Are Villagers Customers, Subjects, or Partners?

Self-identifying as implementers who administer and manage reinforces a one-dimensional view of an inherently multifaceted role. This has implications for how Chiefs and Headmen interpret their relationship to villagers.

Through one lens the villagers are “subjects.” “Subjects” are expected to comply with the actions and requests of authorities. When Chiefs and Headmen define a leader as someone responsible for solving all village problems, they are holding a subject view. When they instruct villagers to follow a new government policy, attend meetings, or end a conflict they are relating to villagers as subjects.

The subject lens is employed for multiple reasons. One is the expectation of higher-ranking government officials that their policies will be implemented. Another is that, since Chiefs and Headmen are the lowest level public officials, treating villagers as subjects may enhance their managerial authority. Additionally, Chiefs are approved by and then expected to be responsive to the wishes of the Party. In Thailand, public officials are accustomed to presenting themselves as “bosses” rather than public servants.

The predisposition to apply the subject lens disregards other ways of relating to villagers. One of these understands villagers as “customers”<sup>21</sup>. A customer is someone with whom there is a service relationship and an expectation that things will be done in response to requests or needs<sup>22</sup>. Villagers are customers when they seek assistance in filing required reports, advice about agricultural problems, understanding of policy changes, help in resolving conflicts, or a push to start a small business.

Another lens understands villagers as “partners”. Many things are beyond what Chiefs and Headmen are capable of handling by themselves, no matter how ded-

<sup>20</sup>We draw attention to this absence in an earlier article (Pratt et al., 2023: p. 131).

<sup>21</sup>For work that explores different ways of defining the public, see Clarke et al. (2007), Fotaki (2011), Monrad (2019), Sahani et al. (2024) and Thomas (2013).

<sup>22</sup>Laotians generally have little experience as customers in the private sector. This is changing gradually.

icated. Partners bring additional resources to address an issue. In this study four Chiefs and eight Headmen were thinking in partnership terms when they defined a leader as someone who works closely with villagers. Villagers are acting as partners when active on committees, joining together to keep the village safe, and giving time and energy to new programs.

Subject, customer and partner roles each come with rights and responsibilities, differing only in what they are. None take away rights from Chiefs, Headmen or villagers, or exempt them from fulfilling their responsibilities. The question facing Chief and Headmen is: in any given situation, should I see villagers as customers, subjects, or partners? Rather than consciously or unconsciously hold a preference for one lens, the Chief or Headman can ask: at this moment, what relationship to villagers is best for this community and what I hope to achieve on its behalf?

#### Building Social Capital

Social capital refers to relationships enabling people to function effectively together by building their knowledge, skills and talents and then drawing on these. A social capital perspective, for example, focuses on building shared knowledge about the role self-care and hygiene play in good health and contrasts with seeking external funds to expand a clinic.

Prioritizing outside funds and improving physical infrastructure are valuable as well as being visible to villagers and upper-level officials. The development of social capital is a longer-term proposition with a less easily seen outcome. Still, building relationships and skill sets while rewarding initiative and innovation are particularly important for rural villages whose legal systems typically are not as well developed. Increasing social capital helps direct efforts toward common benefits and can hasten village development. Further, by empowering villagers it builds a sense of ownership that can energize policies and programs.

Finally, building village social capital may be a way to reduce the burden of hard work that Chiefs and Headmen report. Engaged and skillful villagers who have an “ownership” orientation offer more opportunities for sharing responsibilities.

#### Interchangeability of Roles

None of the fifteen Chiefs interviewed were female while three of the fourteen Headmen were. One female Headman listed being accepted in the role as a success; another said she was motivated by the challenge because 15 years ago it would not have been possible.

Women are already filling leadership roles with home and family responsibilities that require intelligence and a range of skills<sup>23</sup>. There is no reason to think they are unable to handle Chief and Headman responsibilities, and many to expect they would bring broad public benefits. These benefits include, in addition to having a larger pool to choose from, having more Chiefs and Headmen experienced in providing services and building relationships; that is, in seeing villagers as cus-

<sup>23</sup>Respect for women’s capabilities was shown several times during the interviews. The Chief or Headman would glance in the direction of his wife sitting or standing nearby, looking for a reaction to what he was saying.

tomers and partners. Moreover, men and women are equally capable of seeing villagers as subjects, when that is needed. Their approaches of course differ, with women relying less on authority and more on social pressure to enforce rules and gain cooperation.

Some women in rural villages face a difficult choice between being a Chief or Headman and being responsible for a family. Only a few may be able to do both, and there are not many role models. It also is difficult for an older woman with children no longer in the home to be a Chief or Headman since her experience as a family leader is not viewed as a qualification. Their husbands are not likely to step in to cover family responsibilities out of concern for how others will view them.

Social change is gradual, local wisdom is valuable, and traditions and customs are important. There is no necessary contradiction between respecting them and, in the longer-term, women benefitting villages and villagers by serving as Chiefs and Headmen. Culture and societal values can shift toward women being respected with village leadership and men with greater family leadership responsibilities. Shifting toward this interchangeability acknowledges the importance of both roles to society, gives women who are interested a choice, and increases social capital.

#### Economic Development

Chief and Headman responsibilities include economic development, but in this study relatively few references were to it. Four Chiefs and five Headmen listed helping the village economy as one of their successes. This contrasts with nine Chiefs who saw success as keeping the village safe and peaceful, and eleven Headmen for whom it was bringing in government monies, mostly to meet infrastructure needs.

Maintaining order and acquiring outside resources to support infrastructure and social programs are valuable, and visible, markers of success. Moreover, infrastructure development doesn't carry the risk of undertaking new economic activities in a fluctuating market. This is easily left to outside advisers—e.g., district or provincial level policy makers, professionals in agricultural, local and international NGOs—who don't have to run for re-election.

Giving economic development more attention promises broad benefits for villagers and villages when it is undertaken to foster initiative and innovation, develop social capital, and generate income. Government can support this by incorporating the voices of villagers in development. Villagers then can be participants in shaping plans, not passive inheritors of them. Chiefs and Headmen in turn can, consistent with their multifaceted relations with villagers, support their ownership of these activities.

#### Greater Openness About “Mistakes”

Chiefs and Headmen consistently downplayed mistakes that contributed to failures or did harm. Four Chiefs and six Headmen admitted to no mistakes. Eight Chiefs said any they'd made were not serious. Five Headmen redefined “mistake”

to mean unsuccessful or unfinished projects. In contrast to this, they were very forthcoming about the mistakes of others in positions similar to theirs. Eight Chiefs and six Headmen reported observing self-gain and corruption. Seven Headmen had witnessed personal behavior that qualified as a mistake.

Admitting mistakes is difficult in general. Holding a public position makes it harder because the negative consequences can be severe. It is not surprising responses about mistakes are often of a political nature, strategically intended to skirt or redefine the question. An example of this is, “I follow the system, so it is not a mistake.”

These Chiefs and Headmen don’t associate a good leader with failures, or with doing harm. Instead, a leader is someone who, among other virtues, has good personal qualities, is knowledgeable, and sacrifices for the village (and, for Chiefs, is loyal to Party and country). Only three Chiefs, and no Headmen, see a leader as someone who does not think they know everything, is open-minded, and accepts criticism.

Their reluctance to accept responsibility for negative consequences may be understandable but warrants reconsideration. First, someone unintentionally causing harm can still be a good person. Next, “mistakes” can be a sign of strength. Effective leading includes taking risks to accomplish something of value. This invites the possibility of failure, a calculation that did not work out and an acceptable mistake. Third, admitting mistakes makes it possible to learn from them. Finally, openly sharing, rather than strategically denying, actions that did not go well creates an environment in which others feel safer innovating and experimenting. Chiefs and Headmen, by shifting to more transparency about their own failures and awareness of what qualifies as a “mistake”, can be role models for dedication and good behavior as well as for trying but “failing”.

## 9. Limitations, Future Research and Broader Implications

The research reported here is limited by the small number of interviews and by the constraints placed on follow-up questions. In addition, since there are hundreds of villages in Laos and Thailand, choosing the interviews at random would have allowed greater confidence in the generalizability of results. A larger number of interviews, follow-up questions and a greater degree of randomization would have strengthened this work.

Further research will be valuable. The rate of change is accelerating and its effects reach from global to local. Villages are impacted by, among other things, an ever-expanding social media, new technologies that invite local applications, levels of poverty that are not maintainable, climate changes that demand adaptation, and demographic shifts that affect the supply of labor, the need for social services, and can pit young against old. These challenges will only increase, as will the consequences of how well or how poorly they are dealt with. Villages will need to adapt quickly and wisely to avoid a downward slide in their quality of life.

We know that different leadership styles impact organizations and communi-

ties. What Chiefs and Headmen do, or don't do, will become more important because of their role in responding to change. Filling that role to benefit village and society will draw on their implicit ideas of leading and a sense of agency. Turning change into opportunity will come from taking small, thoughtful steps in a consistent direction.

Several directions will be valuable for future research. One is using follow-up questions to explore the issues raised in these studies. These questions could ask, for example, about the kinds of changes that are affecting villages, where partnerships with villagers are possible, and where local initiatives would be both valuable and feasible.

Another direction is to measure the impact on villages of Chiefs and Headmen whose leadership shifts in the direction we propose. Judging by our interviews, there are already such individuals doing these things. This research would support or question our assertion that what we propose will make a positive difference in village life.

Third, there is a place for research on the challenges Chiefs and Headmen will face in adopting the shifts we recommend. These challenges will come from a variety of places, and understanding which are the most serious opens the door to addressing them.

Finally, research is needed to understand the images of leadership held by public officials who oversee Chiefs and Headmen, and by villagers. Knowing how compatible or incompatible these are with images held by the Chief and Headmen will help to anticipate what shifts are likely to be accommodated or resisted.

The relevance of this research goes beyond Laos and Thailand and is another reason it is important. In many places, local level officials at the bottom of hierarchies work to fulfill responsibilities important to their communities. Too little is known about their understanding of leading, especially in times of rapid change. These explorations into effective local-level public leadership and how it might change provide a model for use in other settings.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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