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# A Conceptual Framework of ICT4D Champion Origins

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**Abstract.** Where do ICT4D champions come from? The paper explores this question because, as is demonstrated from literature, knowledge and understanding about the origins of champions are insufficient, yet these individuals are known for their decisive contributions to ICT4D initiatives. An empirical exploration of the origins of three ICT4D champions is reported. Following an inductive methodology, the paper proposes an ICT4D Champion Origin Conceptual Framework; it demonstrates that this model both synthesises and extends existing understanding about champion origins thereby contributing to the identified knowledge gap. The model is significant because it lays the foundation for future ICT4D champion research and suggests to practitioners that champions can be identified, developed and deployed in ICT4D initiatives thereby harnessing the potential positive contributions these individuals can make to digital development.

**Keywords:** ICT4D Champions, Champion Origin, Champion Genesis, Champion Identification, Champion Development, Champion Deployment, ICT4D Champion Origin Conceptual Framework

## 1 Introduction

ICT4D champions are “*individuals who make decisive contributions to ICT4D initiatives by actively and enthusiastically promoting their progress through critical stages in order to mobilise resources and/or active support and cooperation from all stakeholders*” [12:1]. Such individuals can be found in ICT4D initiatives of various kinds and across diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Yet we do not know where they come from; what factors have led to them becoming champions? Did their upbringing play a part, or did circumstances and opportunities shape them into becoming ICT4D champions? A better understanding of their origins holds the potential to help practitioners better identify these individuals and potentially involve them in ICT4D initiatives, because their contributions are mostly associated with positive outcomes [5]. Furthermore, a better understanding of their origins might suggest interventions, such as relevant skills training, which could lead to the development of more people into ICT4D champions. It is for these reasons that this paper seeks to contribute towards this knowledge gap about ICT4D champion origins.

The paper starts with a brief analysis of the literature aiming to demonstrate the insufficiency of knowledge about champion origins. Next will follow a brief outline of

the inductive methodology that was followed to explore the research question: where do ICT4D champions come from? A conceptual framework of ICT4D champion origins will be introduced in the findings section, before concluding with a discussion of the key implications of this new framework.

## 2 Literature

Very little research is available on ICT4D champions to date and within the small pool of literature almost no explicit attention is given to their origins. Even within cognate disciplines – Information Systems and Innovation Studies – where champion research is better established, few studies explicitly address this. As such, this theme still represents an important gap in conceptualisation of champions that future work needs to address [13]. This paper seeks to address this gap, firstly, by offering a synthesis of literature on the origin of champions.

From the reviewed literature it became evident that authors characterise champions' origins in different ways and that there is little agreement on this matter. One perspective proposes that some individuals are predisposed to champion behaviour on the basis of their personality traits (e.g. [7], [8]). As such, champions are seen to be born with the inclination to adopt a particular cause or initiative and actively promote it; they would argue that these predisposed individuals would emerge as champions when exposed to favourable contextual factors and influences. Beath [1] largely agrees with this notion, however, studies are not in agreement about how context shapes champion emergence: the earlier studies by Howell and Higgins [8] and Beath [1] pointed to organisations with many barriers to innovation as a favourable context, while Mullins et al. [9] found that the need to overcome organisational resistance is less important in champion emergence than was previously thought. Slightly more light is shed on this by Howell and Boies [6] who found that the emergence of champions can be linked to early involvement during the idea generation stage of a new initiative.

Others see the origin of champions less in individuals and more within particular organisational roles. Esteves and Pastor [4] and Negoita et al. [11], for example, see champions deriving internally and mainly from senior-level project sponsor roles. Thus, unlike the personality-based argument, champions are seen to emerge from positions of authority. Others construe variants of this – Dong et al. [3] see champions emerging from a wider variety of managerial roles; Van Laere and Aggestam [14] offer an interactive perspective forwarding the view that championing is catalysed within the informal but intensive collaboration between people working on the same initiative; and Kamal [10] also sees IT champions as being appointed rather than originating from a more organic route, but in this case arguing those appointments are best made on the basis of a mix of domain knowledge and expertise as well as personality-based factors.

In sum, champion origins are conceptualised in diverse ways; notions about champions being born or made, or that they spontaneously emerge or are appointed can be distilled from the literature, but little evidence of progressive building of knowledge

or convergence of ideas can be found. It is for this purpose that an inductive exploration of the origins of champions – specifically in ICT4D initiatives – was deemed necessary and important.

### **3 Methodology**

Nine candidate cases – ICT4D champions – were identified in South Africa (SA) using a multiple peer nomination and verification protocol. Based on alignment with the definition above [12] three (anonymised) champions were selected for inclusion in the study:

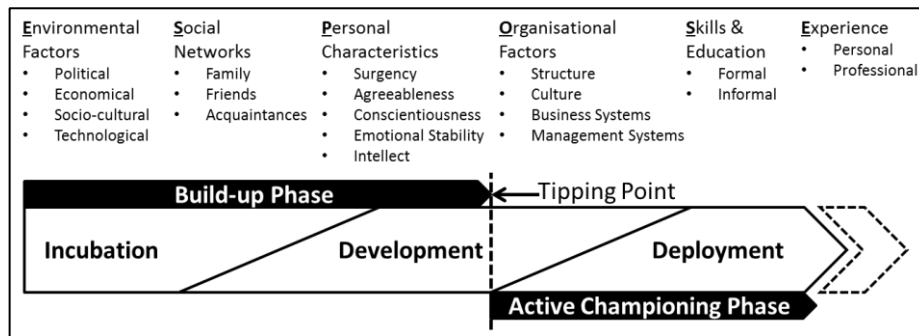
1. Mandisa: She is in her early thirties and pursued the opportunity to become involved with a Broadband Access Initiative (BAI) in The Village where she grew up. Her involvement in BAI brought together a passion to see the social ills in the community alleviated together with her enthusiasm for ICTs, and in the end led her to become the ICT4D champion that she is today.
2. Kagiso: He is in his early thirties and persisted for more than ten years in a quest to narrow the digital divide by trying to find ways to reduce the cost of telecommunications and extend access to previously disadvantaged and under-served sectors of the community. His breakthrough finally came when he built a relationship with someone that could assist him with the needed resources that led to the establishment of the Wireless Connectivity Initiative (WCI) in The Township.
3. Sarah: She is in her late fifties; her transitioning from being an ordinary maths teacher to become a champion of ICTs for education was enabled by the rise of social media. The technology-enabled means to disseminate resources and interact with the SA teaching community was the final link that connected her passion to improve the education system and her enthusiasm for ICTs. It was for this reason that she was invited to become involved in the Tablet Teaching Initiative (TTI) in The District and made a decisive contribution to the success thereof.

In-depth interviews with the three champions themselves, as well as semi-structured interviews with a total of 29 initiative stakeholders, formed the pool of qualitative data. Interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed – these were subsequently analysed following the six phased approach to thematic analysis outlined by Braun & Clark [2]. NVivo 9, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software tool, was used to manage the data and facilitate the thematic analysis.

### **4 Findings**

Analysis of the case data showed that ICT4D champion origins can be linked to all four of the notions synthesised from literature – being born or made, or that they spontaneously emerge or are appointed. None of these perspectives on their own accurately or adequately represents the origin of champions; at best the four notions can be seen as mutually constitutive as a means of describing their origins. Moreover,

multiple factors, beyond those portrayed in literature, were found to influence champion genesis (see empirical examples in Table 1). It also became clear that it is inadequate to conceive champion genesis as an *event*, which is how literature mostly portrays it, as opposed to a *process* that unfolds over time. Drawing on the empirical case evidence, Figure 1 proposes a framework to characterise and analyse ICT4D champion genesis.



**Fig. 1.** ICT4D Champion Origin Conceptual Framework

Three aspects are captured in the Figure 1 framework. Firstly, a spread of factors has been identified from the case data that could potentially characterise or influence ICT4D champion origins; these are captured in the acronym ESPOSE. Lists of sample qualifiers are included with each of the factors in Figure 1, but it is quite conceivable that different qualifiers can be used to analyse a particular factor. The same factors did not underpin the genesis of all three ICT4D champions in this research, but a more accurate description of their origins can be constructed by identifying and analysing different combinations from this collection.

**Table 1.** Empirical examples of ESPOSE factors influencing champion genesis

<b>Environmental Factors</b>
The social motives of all three champions – to bridge the digital divide (Mandisa & Kagiso) or to improve the education system (Sarah) – can be linked to the influence of the Apartheid era in South Africa ( <i>Political</i> ). New <i>technology</i> also played a key role in these champions' genesis.
<b>Social Networks</b>
The influence and importance of key enabling relationships, such as meeting an investment partner (Kagiso – <i>acquaintances</i> ) or encouragement and support from <i>family</i> members (Mandisa), were instrumental in developing these individuals into the champions they are today.
<b>Personal Characteristics</b>
The champions differ somewhat from one individual to the next, but the three individuals studied can be characterised as highly <i>agreeable</i> – amiable and cooperative in nature (team players). They are also creative, intellectually stimulating and innovative.
<b>Organisational Factors</b>
The <i>organisational culture</i> in BAI (Mandisa) and TTI (Sarah) were conducive to enthusiastic

contributions from champion-type individuals; the lack of steep hierarchies, bureaucratic red tape, or strict control over individuals provided them the freedom to become champions.
<b>Skills and Education</b>
Formal tertiary education played a key enabling role in the genesis of Mandisa (graduate certificate in management) and Kagiso (ICT and business customer relationship management studies at degree level). Sarah did a technical certification (A+ webmaster) after being a teacher for 20 years – this equipped her to effectively use social media in her championing endeavours.
<b>Experience</b>
Kagiso <i>personally experienced</i> consequences of Apartheid – discrimination, unequal opportunities and poverty. His championing is motivated to bring correction to some of these.

Secondly, ICT4D champion genesis can be considered in three sequential stages: an initial, passive, incubation stage – the personal characteristics, competencies and motivations of ICT4D champions are shaped by various ESPOSE factors; a developmental stage – formal studies or informal acquisition of skills and knowledge needed for championing; and an active deployment stage – a specific cause, innovation or ICT4D initiative is adopted and actively promoted. The stages overlap as indicated in Figure 1. This implies, for example, that while the champion is shaped by environmental factors (e.g. the influences of a political regime such as Apartheid) in the early incubation stage, they can already gain valuable personal and professional experience. They can also continue developing, through formal and informal education and training, as well as being influenced by other work and personal experiences, while already actively championing an ICT4D innovation. Combining the three stages and the ESPOSE factors in an analytic framework therefore enables a longitudinal, *process-based* analysis of ICT4D champion genesis.

Thirdly, the process of becoming a champion can be considered in two phases: an initial phase that builds up to a tipping point, followed by the active championing phase. These tipping points – *events* or changes in their environment, social networks, or organisational settings that trigger the individual into championing action – have been observed in all three of the empirical cases. It is proposed that a combination of the ESPOSE factors, a three stage process view, and the notion of tipping points, offer a richer and more accurate descriptive and analytic framework to characterise and analyse ICT4D champion genesis.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

By proposing the ICT4D Champion Origin Conceptual Framework, the paper seeks to make three contributions. Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of current literature about the origin of champions and offer empirically-based findings as a step towards filling this knowledge gap. The key notion is that ICT4D champion genesis is a *process* shaped by environmental factors as well as key *events*; this finding thereby both synthesises and extends earlier knowledge about champion origins. Secondly, it proposes the inductively developed framework as a theoretical contribution that aims to anchor current understanding and future research on ICT4D champion genesis.

Important next steps would be to test the framework in other empirical settings and to improve / enhance it. Finally, the framework suggests important implications for ICT4D practice. To start with, it holds the potential to assist with the identification of champion-type individuals. On the organisational level it suggests the potential for a champion development programme to be established whereby key individuals can be empowered to become champions. It is hoped that the results reported here will lead to further research and practical impact.

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