

Community Engagement for Public Space Upgrade during the COVID-19 Situation: Case Study from the Lockdown Period in Bangkok

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Abstract (English)

The coronavirus 2019 or COVID-19 pandemic situation has a significant impact on human society. The Thai society has adopted the new social norms in a short period, including, but not limited to, increasing self-awareness of self-hygiene or social distancing as precautions to prevent the spreading of the disease. In Thailand, citizens strictly followed these precautions, especially during the city lockdown period from 22nd March to 31st May 2020. The conventional face-to-face public engagement and other social gathering process were canceled during the period. Many of the public space upgrading projects needed to adapt their public participatory procedure acutely. We observed and interviewed community-based, urban-design practitioners from 3 organizations who managed to arrange four community engagement processes during the lockdown. The adapted participatory tools were analyzed to find their efficacy for different scenarios of community engagement and their suitability for the organization's resources.

For the result, the tools can be classified into online-based and paper-based. The online-based tools are likely to be suitable for engaging a small group of participants who are willing to participate and are already digital literate. While the paper-based tools are more suitable for engaging with the larger group who are less digital literate, have low motivation to participate, and should be practicing in parallel with other incentive programs.

keywords: *Public space, Public participation process, Smart placemaking, COVID-19*

Background

The coronavirus 2019 or COVID-19 pandemic situation has disrupted the human society on every facets. The health safety issues became most urgent during the spreading of the virus, including both quarantine and post-quarantine periods. It introduced the whole society to the city lockdown, disinfection measures, as well as social distancing practice which obstructed the conventional face-to-face public engagement and other social gathering process. Despite the need to strictly follow the precautions, many of the public space upgrading projects needed to keep up with their initial timeline. Many of these projects also committed to include community engagement process to maintain the democratic and inclusive practice, if not required by law. The organization with community-based approach, therefore, needed to acutely adapt their public participatory procedure to align with the COVID-19 safety precautions. In response to the spread of COVID-19 and the coming pandemic in the future, it is the time that both academia and practitioners who practice on community-based approach cannot only focus on the new normal of public space typology where health precaution is adopt, but also the safe and inclusive collaboration process as the bases for these space as well.

1. Community engagement in design and planning

Urban development paradigm in the global North has been shifting from technocratic to democratic approach since the 1900s. This means the decision-making powers were being transferred from the politicians and technicians to the public. In this sense, the role of professionals working in the public space upgrading such as urban designers, architects, landscape architects or artists, was shifting from providing final solutions to developing the solutions in collaboration with the stakeholders who will later use or get impact by the solutions. The solutions would come from the activities and conversations between the professionals, who provide technical information and predict the consequences of the alternatives, and the citizens, who express their opinion and share the local insights (Sanoff, 1999:12). The collaboration process can be called public participation, community engagement, or citizen involvement.

The benefits of the participatory process could distribute to both participated citizens and authorities. The process could be educational for both parties. It can catalyze the awareness towards societal issues or help communicate the technical information to the public. The process would empower the citizens and create sense of ownership, where could later lead to the community-based public space management. While the authorities could avoid litigation cost and get legitimacy for their decisions (Irvin and Stansbury, 2014). Above all the benefits, the fundamental rational for the citizen engagement is the principle of democratic society. Many of the democratic countries, including Thailand, require public participation process for policy-making as well as large scale construction projects by law (Churchman, 2012) Deshler and Sock (1985, referred by Sanoff, 1992: 8) identified two types of participation: *Pseudoparticipation* and *Genuine participation*. The pseudoparticipation refers to the participatory process where the solutions of the project are developed solely by the technocrats and the public being presented to be informed. Many of them were organized with an aim to fulfill the legal requirements not for the benefits of collaboration. While the genuine participation referred to the collaboration process where the

citizens are empowered to co-create, implement, or assess the solution. Another indicator that justifies the genuine participation is that the solutions for the project respond to the public comments (Creighton, 1981:4). Since this paper interests laid in the merit of the collaboration process, the term *community engagement* in this paper will only refer to the genuine participation. There are several activities that could lead to community engagement, including, but not limited to: charette, community action planning, focus group, game simulation, group interaction, participatory action research, public forum, strategic planning, visioning, and workshop (Sanoff, 1999: 102) The conventional practices of these methods require the present and participation of the stakeholders as well as the facilitators. This could be considered as social gathering whereas the spreading of COVID-19 in 2020 has forced the organizers to rethink the process for these methods.

2. The COVID-19 outbreak

The global concern towards the outbreak of COVID-19 have been developing since the report of the cluster cases of “pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan, China from the late 2019. It became a global issue and required attention from all governments and the healthcare sectors when the World Health Organization (WHO)’s formal declared the statement of the novel coronavirus outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30th January 2020. With the distressing level of spread and death rate, and insufficient level of action, WHO later assessed that the outbreak could be pandemic, which the spreading will impact all of the global citizens from every sectors, and call for action from the society (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a). WHO also issued and regularly update the “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public” as precautions for safety practice against the spread of COVID-19. The precautions suggested personal hygiene, keep at least 1-meter social distancing, as well as avoiding crowded places (WHO, 2020b). As of the time writing this document, it has been 6 months since the WHO declaration. There are more than 16 million confirmed cases, 650,000 deaths, and the rate is increasing (John Hopkins University, Center for Systems Science and Engineering, 2020).

In Thailand, Department of Disease Control took action to prevent the spreading of the new virus since the beginning of 2020, before the first case was found. The public health sector has been working hard on both policymaking and implementation level. On 29th February 2020, The Ministry of Public Health added the COVID-19 as a “Dangerous communicable disease” under The Royal Thai Government Gazette (Thai Public Broadcasting Service [Thai PBS], 2020). The number of cases increased at an alarming rate in March and caused the enforcement of the lockdown measure where many of the public spaces were temporary closed and social gathering events were cancelled as shown in Table 1. During the lockdown and the easing of lockdown measures period, the precautions including, social distancing, and personal hygiene practice, became the new living standard. The public acceptance of these new practices is one of the reasons that Thailand could control the spreading situation while the rate of confirm cases is increasing globally. (Department of Disease Control, 2020).

Table 1 Shows the timeline of relevant COVID-19 situation in Thailand and Global (Thai PBS, 2020)

Date	Event
30 December 2019	Report of the cluster cases of “pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan, China to WHO
4 January 2020	Department of Disease Control established Emergency Operation Center
30 January 2020	WHO declared the statement of the novel coronavirus outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)
29 February 2020	The Ministry of Public Health added the COVID-19 as a “Dangerous communicable disease”
11 March 2020	WHO announced that the COVID-19 is pandemic
12 March 2020	The establishment of Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) in Thailand
22 March 2020	Announcement of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) Subject: Order of Temporary Closure of Premise (No.3) and the control measures of the spreading of COVID-19 : temporary closure of 26 types of public places, encouraging work from home policy, and cancellation of social gathering events
3 April 2020	Thai Prime Minister announced curfew and closure of premises throughout the country.
3 May 2020	CCSA announced the first phase easing of lock down measures: six groups of businesses and some public activities to restart
17 May 2020	The second phase easing of lock down measures: Reopen the malls, curfew shorten
1 June 2020	The third phase easing of lock down measures: Cinema and exhibition center reopen, travel between provinces allowed
16 June 2020	The fourth phase easing of lock down measures: Social gathering events allowed
1 July 2020	The fifth phase easing of lock down measures: Educational institutes resume operation

According to the COVID-19 lockdown measures shown in Table 1, the conventional offline public engagement events in Bangkok were enforced to canceled from the 22nd March and in Thailand from the 3rd April until 1st June 2020; if not canceled before due to the precautions measure of the organizers. This situation came to attention of the author who had been consulting with a few of the community-based public space upgrading projects where community engagement process is committed, and deadline of the projects are approaching. As these projects could adapt their engagement techniques and uphold to deliver public engagement process with integrity, other community-based projects might adapt to uphold their approach as well. Hence, this study observes the impact of COVID-19 situation on the engagement practice for the public space upgrade projects to gather the immediate practical solutions that could mediate between the health safety practice and public participation practice. The collected solutions will be classified according to their suitability for different purposes of community engagement as well as the resources of the organization. The author hope that this study could provide immediate insights to both practitioners and academia who need to adopt the COVID-19 precautions, or likewise, for their need to conduct satellite public engagement process in the future

Objective and Methodology

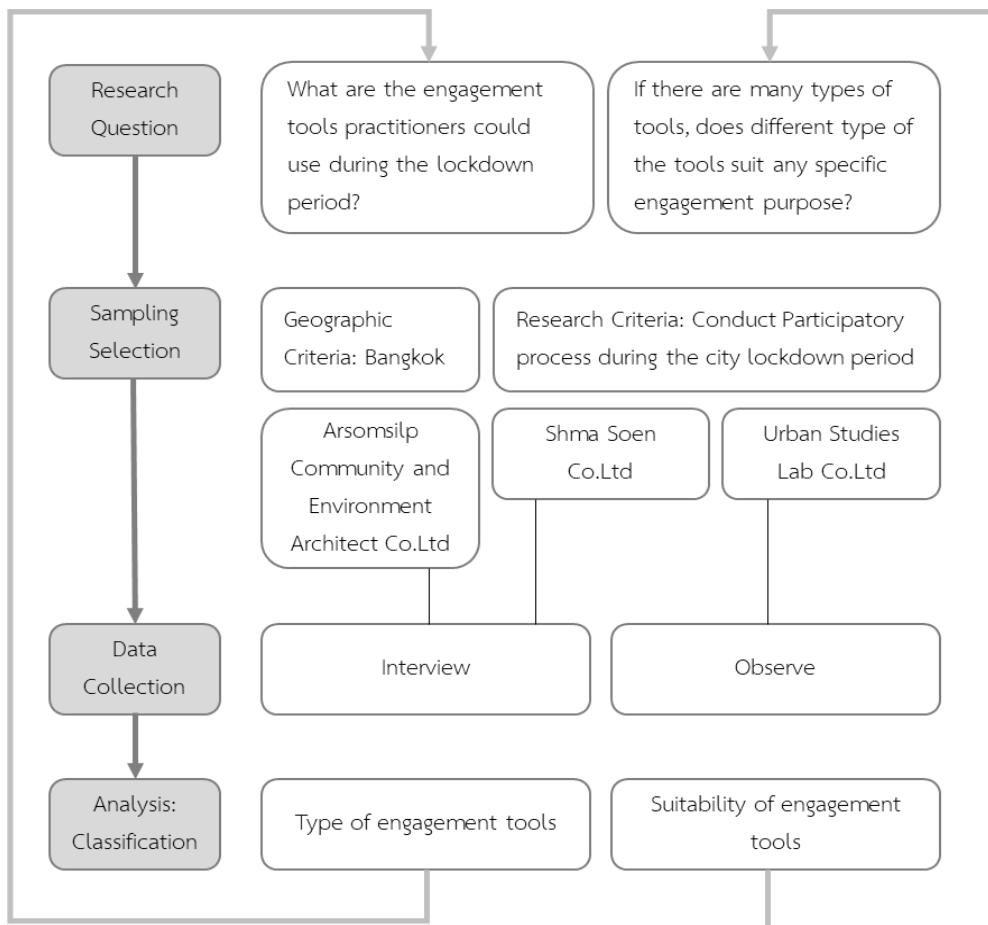
This research aims to study the practical tools used by community engagement practitioners during the lockdown period. This paper aims to answer two research questions:

1. What are the engagement tools practitioners could use during the lockdown period?
2. If there are many types of tools, do different types of tools suit any specific engagement purpose?

To answer the above questions, this research used the following methods for sampling selection, data collection, and classification. First, the author used a case study analysis to explore the tool options for community engagement practice during the lockdown period (22nd March – 31st May 2020). The cases were selected through purposive sampling methods, including the cases where the author was participating and the cases collecting from other community-based urban design practitioners. The author observed the participated cases and used the open-structure interview with other cases. The collected data were analyzed and classified into the engagement process's objective, the scale of stakeholders involved, the selected tools, and the reflections from the engagement organizer side.

With the purposive sampling method, the author observed and interviewed the community engagement organizers from 3 organizations in Bangkok, where the spreading of COVID-19 is the most severe in the country. The selected organizations are those who conducted the public participation process during the lockdown period. Even though they had many cases during the study period, 4 cases were selected due to their relevance to the research purpose. The selected three organizations are: Arsomsilp Community and Environment Architect Co. Ltd (Arsomsilp), Shma Soen Co. Ltd (Shma Soen), and Urban Studies Lab Co. Ltd (USL). The first two organizations were selected base on their merit in practicing community engagement, as defined in the background section. The last organization, USL, was selected due to the opportunity that the author got to observe and participate in their two community-based placemaking projects in Bangkok during the lockdown period. The experimental projects with USL are the placemaking project near Mahanak canal and community garden design for the Chakrapaddipong community both projects are in the Pomprapsatrupai district, Bangkok.

The author requested the interviewer from Arsomsilp and Shma Soen to select their most relevant cases to this research with the two following criteria. First, the engagement process was done during the study period. Second, the engagement purpose was to allow the local collaboration for the public space upgrading project. With these criteria, the interviewer from Arsomsilp suggested their community development plan project with a fisherman village of the Na Jomtien municipality in Chonburi province. At the same time, Shma Soen suggested their placemaking project for a market in Saraburi, Thailand, in collaboration with Thai Health Promotion Foundation. The interview were conducted with the open-end structure, which asked for the details of their engagement process including, the tool in which they are using, the number of participants, the benefits of these tools, the negative side, and ask them to compare the tool with face to face engagement activities.



Picture 1 The overall research process

Data collection

1. Arsomsilp's project at the Na Jomtien municipality

At the beginning of 2020, Arsomsilp was developing the community development plan with a fisherman village at the Na Jomtien municipality. The organization held a public forum for the co-creation process of the development plan in January. They supposed to continue with focus group activities. However, the COVID-19 precaution policy (Order of Temporary Closure of Premise (No.3)) would not allow them to do the activities conventionally. They have tried to use online video conference tools to engage with the locals, but it was not practical or engaging. Even though the locals were willing to participate, but they were not keen with the online tools. Thus, they decided to postpone all the engagement activities until the second phase, easing lockdown measures where the health precautions were still applied. They resumed the focus group activities by using an online video conference with online engagement tools. To address the technical issues, Arsomsilp also had several onsite staffs who are keen with the online tools to accompany the small groups of locals for the engagement process. They also prepare a prototype testing of their online engagement tools to ensure that they are accessible despite the locals' age or digital literacy. The interviewee commented that this hybrid use of tools is practical for engaging with small groups of

people but not with groups larger than 40 people since the facilitator cannot see the overall participants' response. The staff capacity and device limitation are the barrier of using the online tools.

2. Shma Soen's project at Saraburi Market

Shma Soen was working with the Healthy Space Forum and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation to activate the historical Saraburi Market and led the people in the community to a more active, hence healthier, lifestyle during the beginning of 2020. They were expected to organize a tactical urbanism and place activation event at the market for the project. Thus, they had visited the site several times and face-to-face engaged with different stakeholders before the city lockdown period. They planned to conduct a focus group activity during the lockdown period. However, the country-wide city lockdown order announced on 3rd April 2020 led to the market's temporary closure. Therefore, Shma Soen used the online video conference to conduct a focus group activity. They found out that the locals from the market were keen on using the online conference tool and online participation led to the ease of face-to-face communication after the ease of the lockdown policy. The interviewee noted that this online tool is suitable for informing stakeholders with smaller groups or large groups of digitally literate people.

3. USL's project at Mahanak Canal

USL was working with Pomprapsatrupai District to activate an abandoned public space next to Mahanak canal under Ford Resource and Engagement center's city-wide program. The project started at the beginning of 2020 and expected to finish by April. There were meetings with community leaders to discuss the design. From the meeting, the participatory process was planned to be done by inviting the locals to paint the walls with the artist around mid-April. This painting process needs to gather the crowd and was not allowed during the city lockdown period. The team decided to shift the participation process to be more satellite by having online meetings via video conference tool and sending out art packages to children in the communities; inviting them to share their vision and visualizing the vision to the wall mural. From the observation, this paper-based tool did not only engage youth in the design process, which would otherwise not be included, but also give them activities to do during the lockdown. It also toned down the conflict within the meeting about the work's appropriateness the team designed previously. However, this process was a mixture of top-down, and the number of packages or the way they were distributed was limited to the local resources.

4. USL's project at Chakrapaddipong community

USL held an international workshop with UDDI, Thammasat Design School, Thammasat University, Saga University, Japan, and Paññasastra University of Cambodia (PUC) to address the issue along the historical Satrijulanak canal that runs through Chakrapaddipong community during the winter of 2019. The outcome of the workshop leads to the actual construction of the community park. The park was expected to be done by the middle of 2020, and the team was supposed to facilitate a participatory design workshop with the community during the lockdown period. At first, USL used an online - group chat in a messenger application created during the workshop as a communication channel. However, the community did not respond to this form of engagement. The community leader commented that the locals were too stressful

by the COVID-19 situation, and building a community park cannot be prioritized. The team then came up with a satellite engagement idea of sending paper worksheets as a participatory means. People who participate and return the document will get food coupons from the local stores as an incentive for participation. This paper-based tool, together with incentives, increases willingness to participate among the locals and enables the team to get insightful information to adjust the park's design. However, the number of packages or the way they were distributed was limited and dependent on the local resources.

Result and Discussion

From the interview and observation, we can identify two types of participatory tools used by practitioners in Bangkok, Thailand, during the city lockdown period, and their suitability to the different criteria of participatory processes. The participatory tools can be classified into online and paper-based tools. While all the participants used the online video conference tool, Arsomsilp is the only one that use an online engagement platform. It should also be remarked that Arsomsilp has tested the prototype and used these online engagement tools with on-site staff to accompany the locals during the participatory process; to ensure an engaging experience. Another remark is that USL is the only organization that uses the paper-based tool as a mean of engagement. The organization also included incentives with their package, whether it is stationary in the art package or food coupons to ensure the locals' response.

All the research participants commented that online tools are excellent for engaging with a small group of people who were willing to participate. While the solely use of an online video conference tool is more suitable for meeting with a selected group of decision-makers or informing them, the mixture usage of other online engagement platforms could encourage the participants to respond and share their insight with the facilitators. However, using online or digital platforms without having an on-site assistant could exclude many community members who were not digital literate. The solution of sending additional staff to the site is both labor and budget intensive. It can give pressure on the capacity of the organization. The limitation of the digital device such as the screen size of the laptop or tablet, could also affect the participants' ability to engage with the activity. Despite all the technological barriers, all the interviewees remarked that online tools are beneficial for keeping the locals in the momentum of the engagement process during the lockdown period. They were able to reconnect with the locals with ease. Even the case where the relationship between the organization and the locals were not strongly formed before the lockdown period.

The only organization that used paper-based tools is USL. It should be strongly remarked that all of USL's projects are within a short distance from the organization. This spatial proximity is the key that allows USL to distribute and collect the tools without exceeding its capacity. From the observation, the paper-based tools were not their first option when planning for process adaptation. The tools were selected when it was clear that there were no viable online tools to build engagement with the locals. The paper-based tools seem to suit the participatory criteria where the willingness to participate were low since they could be distributed along with incentives. It is also suitable for engaging with more than 40 participants if the

staff capacity to digitize the paper-based survey was allowed. However, the distribution processes were dependent on community leaders, and the paper-based tools were also one-way communication if there is no follow-up process. The following table summarize suitable conditions of both types of the tools.

Table 2 Shows the suitable conditions for both online and paper-based participatory tools

Type of tools	Number of participants	Level of participant's digital literacy	Willingness to participate	Organization's resource
Online	<40	High	High	Labour intensive but does not require physical material or transportation
Paper-based	>40	Low	Low	Both labour and material intensive

If not carefully utilized, both paper-based or online tools could turn the participation process from "genuine" to "Pseudoparticipation". From the observations and the interviews, we learned that the participant's responsiveness to the participatory design's satellite engagement process, whether it is done through online or paper-based, is yet to compete with the conventional face-to-face engagement process. With this limitation, the satellite engagement process seems to fit better with informing or discussing with the participants rather than including them in the design development process where tangible tools are conventionally used. The increasing numbers of the follow-up processes become crucial for these community-based organizations to receive and deliver the participatory process results to the participants during the city lockdown period. The preparation process also needs intensive attention and resources from the organizations that could limit their resource capacity, including, but not limited to, staff, budget, time, and tools. These barriers could restrict the organization's intention to create the bottom-up, inclusive process and turn the practicality into the top-down, technocratic process.

The digital economy and the smart city were trending in the urban development regime since before the pandemic. The ideology suggested utilizing the satellite tools and online crowdsourcing platform to engage people with their community development process, including public space upgrading. However, it had not been pushed to practitioner regimes. The COVID-19 pandemic acts as an accelerator to drive practitioners from several community-based organizations to test these tools. Even though the available resources were not compatible with the conventional engagement method, this study's results would be beneficial for tools developers and other community-based practitioners to develop their satellite engagement process. Not only for the utilization during the next pandemic but also the coming digital age.

Conclusion

The study concludes that community-based organizations adopted satellite engagement during the city lockdown period in Thailand. The two types of tools, online and paper-based, had helped these organizations to keep up the engaging momentum with the communities during the study period. While the online tools were suitable for engaging a small group of willing participants, the paper-based tools were suitable for engaging the more extensive group where strong dependence on the community leaders is acceptable. However, the satellite engagement will not completely substitute the face to face engagement process in the near future. Especially the landscape of local community participatory design due to the limitation of the technology, its users, as well as the capacity of the organizations. Further study on these limitations is suggested for other research to build-up the body of knowledge for the public participatory process. The COVID-19 situation had pushed the public space designers to rethink the typology of public space. It also pushes the practitioners to rethink the way people could engage with the upgrading process as well.

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