

USING ONLINE PLATFORM FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The spread of the Coronavirus disease across the world remains unstoppable with destructive negative impacts on health and the socio-economic life of communities. Government, organizations and impacted communities have established various development programs to overcome these impacts. However, multiple protocols in combating the virus (wearing mask, social distancing or staying 6 feet apart and avoiding crowds) have hampered the distribution of these programs to the communities. This study aims to examine how community engagement process has been conducted by using online platform. The study sourced data from fifteen community development programs conducted by undergraduate students. Before the pandemic, these programs were distributed to the communities offline. This study found several online platforms which were used mostly by those students including webinar and meeting software, such as zoom, website and social media like Instagram and Facebook. These platforms were employed to conduct webinar, inform, and involve other groups or communities in the programs. As a result, the communities have become more active and familiar in utilizing online platforms to establish various development programs. However, this study also identifies some problems which hinder the community engagement process including online communication issues and lack of the accessibility of communities using the internet.

Keywords: community engagement, covid-19, pandemic, community development

INTRODUCTION

The spread of the Coronavirus disease of Covid-19 across the world remains unstoppable with destructive negative impacts on health and the socio-economic life of communities. This pandemic has been caused by a new strain of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus or SARS-Co-V (Lu, et al., 2020; Nishiura, et al., 2020). The first outbreak was emerged in December 2019, in Wuhan, China, as pneumonia (Lu, et al., 2020). To break the chain of virus transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) has established Covid-19 protocols including wearing mask, social distancing or stay 6 feet apart from others and avoiding crowds (Wong & Kohler, 2020; Makridis & Wu, 2020; Xu, et al., 2020). These protocols have caused a complex impact on people's livelihood. Including in these impacts are health deterioration and psychological aspects of life, such as severe illness and weight gain or obesity during lockdown and mental breakdown (Bian, 2020; Sun & Lu, 2020).

Others are socio-economic impacts particularly affecting individuals and households with middle and lower income as illustrated in the picture below (Chawa, 2021):

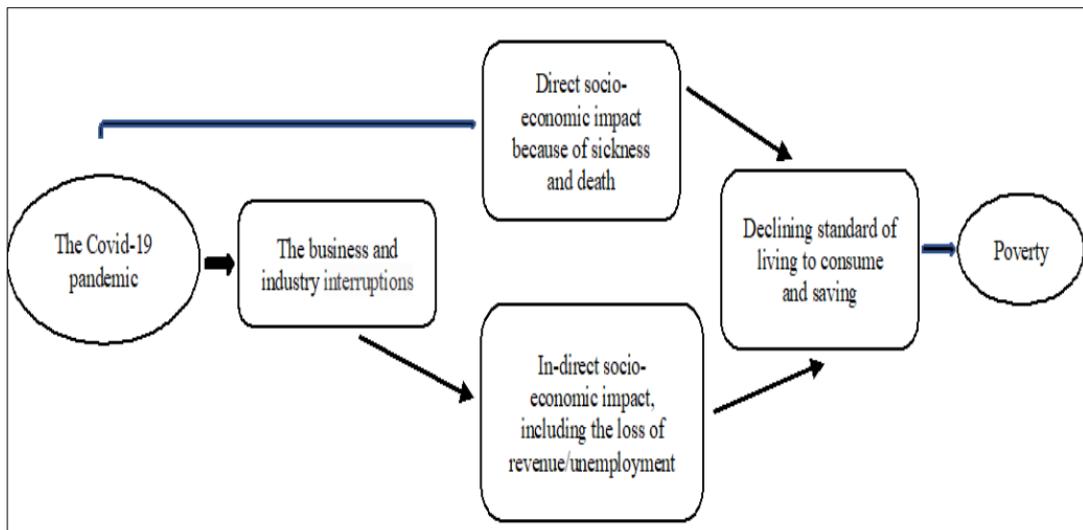


Figure 1: The Flow of the Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Figure 1. shows two kinds of impacts, first is direct impact in which households lose revenue because of the illness and the death of their breadwinners due to the pandemic; second is indirect impacts which emerge especially when social distancing through quarantines, lockdown and curfew continues (Buheji, et al., 2020; Chawa, 2021). During this time, those individuals and households have lost their jobs or revenue, decreasing their standard of living, particularly in saving and consuming, then pushing them into poverty.

Various strategies have been conducted by countries around the world to response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Several countries put their effort on the capacity of government to break the chain of virus transmission as well as to overcome the impacts of Covid-19. The countries which have succeeded in conducting this strategy are New Zealand (Baker, Wilson, & Anglemeyer, 2020) and China (Lu, et al., 2020; Lu, Ji , Zhang, Zheng, & Liang, 2021). Other countries have involved community participation to response to the pandemic by using community-based approach or other kinds of community engagement strategies. Community engagement has required the willingness and responsibility or collective action of its members as coined by Putnam as social capital (Putnam, 1993). Community members have participated to ensure the distribution, availability and access of marginal groups toward public facilities during the lockdown (Miao, Schwarz, & Schwarz, 2021; Zollet, et al., 2021). Research studies show that community engagement approach is effective to break the chain of corona virus transmission as well as overcome various impacts which caused by the pandemic.

However, the implementation of community engagement approach could be problematic. The engagement process could imply greater personal interaction and risk of virus transmission (Makridis & Wu, 2020). This problem has challenged the implementation of various community engagement projects (Lucas, Targema, Jibril, Samboa, & Istifanus, 2020; Sinclair & Vestrheim, 2020). Several questions were raised during these projects, such as which methods and tools are used to amplify community voices when face-to-face meetings were not possible, how digital solutions benefit community engagement and what the main challenges are in engaging the communities during Covid-19 (Sinclair & Vestrheim, 2020). This article aims to show the implementation of community engagement projects which had been conducted during the pandemic. These projects were run by some undergraduate students as part of their course namely *Praktek Kerja Nyata* (PKN) by doing community service or internship to put their knowledge into practice. Before the pandemic, these projects were done offline by face-to-face meeting with the community members. However, following the outbreak, the students started to transform their strategy by using online platform to engage with the community members. This article aims to demonstrate online platforms chosen to undertake the project as well as various issues that hinder the implementation of the projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community engagement has been defined as a process by which community members come together to reflect on and make decisions about the future of their community (Fedorowicz, Arena, & Burrowes, 2020, p. 2). Several parties including government, organizations and academics have employed this strategy to encourage people to take collective action and responsibility related to various issues as well as to find the solutions to address them without the need to be compelled (Enwereji & Ezeama, 2020). Moreover, Enwereji and Ezeama explain that community engagement is a proven strategy of co-producing knowledge, capacities and actions to address issues affecting people's well-being. In relation to the pandemic, community engagement is assumed to have been effective to respond to public health emergencies, critical in the making of effective health policies and properly improving governance in health systems because it is appropriate with the needs and expectations of vulnerable people (O'Mara-Eves, Brunton, Kavanagh, Jamal, & Thomas, 2012; O'Mara-Eves, et al., 2015; Ramsbottom, O'Brien, Ciotti, & Takacs, 2018).

Many countries are experienced with community engagement strategy to respond to various health crisis, including pandemics. In Kenya, government involves community leaders to provide data base related to economic or food resilience of their members during the quarantine (Gerard, Imbert, & Orkin, 2020). In South Africa, local community members have involved intensively to address Ebola pandemic because they are in the best position to have appropriate information regarding the needs and preference of these members (Anoko, et al., 2020; Marshall,

2016). Related to the Covid-19 pandemic, Italy and China have involved community members to ensure the process of distribution, availability and accessibility of powerless people toward public services during the lockdown (Miao, Schwarz, & Schwarz, 2021; Zollet, et al., 2021).

Community engagement strategy requires its practitioners to build a good relationships with and among the community members before starting the projects or development programs. This engaging process is also needed to 'help create new connections between diverse community members and make resource available within the community, encouraging community member to become involved in the lives of their neighbor' (Fedorowicz, Arena, & Burrowes, 2020, p. 2). This engaging community process could be conducted in various common forms, such as community mapping, community action planning, surveys, community-based participatory research and focus groups (Fedorowicz, Arena, & Burrowes, 2020).

However, the engaging community process has been challenged by several issues during the Covid-19 pandemic. The most challenging issue is related the communication and interactions process with and among the members of community due to the fact that face-to-face meetings are not possible to be conducted during the pandemic. To address this issue, several online platforms are available for engaging community. The community engagement practitioners should consider the target audience and the key messages which are going to be delivered to determine the most appropriate tool to use (Fedorowicz, Arena, & Burrowes, 2020). Fedorowicz, Arena and Burrowes give some examples of how to use digital or online platform to engage with community as follows:

1. Social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Tik tok

Social media platform can offer a quick way to informally engage with community members, particularly young people. This tool can be employed to give information and provide consultation with and among community members.

2. Webinar and Meeting Software, such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, Google hangouts, Loom and WEBEX.

Webinar software can be a great tool to engage community members in deeper conversations, and they can help build and maintain connections while people are social distancing. Meetings can also be recorded, which helps record discussions. Moreover, not only can these kinds of digital tools be used to inform and consult, but it can also be employed to involve the community members in various projects and development programs.

3. Collaborative Project Planning Tools, such as Shape, Miro, Whimsical, Idea flip.

These tools can be used to make collaboration with community in conducting the projects. All of these platforms allow users to create visual brainstorming spaces and organize ideas for strategic planning. Some include tools such as flowcharts, mind maps, workflow organizers, and surveys. Because many of these tools are

quite advanced, they are best used by the main project team or by an advisory committee.

4. Survey Platforms such as Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, Google Forms

Surveys are a great way to gather information about community members and their needs or gather feedback on proposed plans and ideas. They can also be used to generate ideas, but they generally work best when both the questions and response choices (if not open-ended) are clear and direct.

Moreover, Oxfam provides a guideline the way by which engaging community can be conducted by using online platform (Oxfam, 2020). First, engaging community should be conducted by employing different technologies to communicate via online or by phone. Second, the community engagement practitioners should ensure that communities have the means, capacity and accessibility to use these technologies and if internet connection is needed. Third, ensuring the engagement of all groups is also necessary in both host and displaced communities, in environments where everyone can feel comfortable to speak up.

METHODS

This study employed secondary data that involved the review of fifteen project documents of community services which were conducted by undergraduate students as part of their course namely *Praktek Kerja Nyata* (PKN). To conduct these projects, the students were required to use community engagement strategy. Before the pandemic, the community engagement projects should be conducted offline that requires face-to-face interaction. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, all those projects should be changed into online platforms by utilizing various kinds of digital tools.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Using Online Platform in Conducting Community Engagement Projects

Praktek Kerja Nyata (PKN) is a compulsory course which should be programmed by undergraduate students at the end of their studies. The students could choose whether running a community service projects or doing an internship programs in several businesses and government institutions as well as NGOs. This course would provide practical lesson for students so they can apply the knowledge which they have learnt in campus. To undertake PKN, the undergraduate students should build engagement with various people including community. During the pandemic, these students should transform the engagement process from offline or face-to-face meeting or door-to-door activities to online-based communications by utilizing several digital tools. This study found common community engagement projects as well as online platform that have been conducted by most of the undergraduate students in conducting these projects.

Campaigns

Most the students ran several campaigns as part of community engagement projects. A campaign is defined as an intended of communication strategy to generate specific outcomes of effect, and it is addressed to a relatively large number of individuals, usually within a specified period of time and through an organized set of communication activities (Rogers & Storey, 1987). The main objectives of these campaigns are to educate, inform and socialize people regarding crucial issues including the alleviation of stigma on people with disabilities and mental health, people with HIV AIDS and also people with problems related to violence against women and children. Several strategies were employed by the students to run the campaigns as follows:

Website Seminar (Webinar)

Webinar was chosen because it could reach relatively large audience by using most common online platforms such as zoom and YouTube live. This picture below is an example of webinar which was conducted by the students with the topic Family Life during the Pandemic.



Source: *PKN* document

Picture 1. Poster and Webinar of Family Life Issues During Covid-19 on Zoom and you tube

Picture 1 shows a webinar as a campaign run by the students on Zoom and YouTube to deliver their project related to violence against women and children that happen in many families during the pandemic. In this project, the students delivered the message that violence against women and children could happen in a family and anywhere.

Social Media Campaign

Beside webinar and meeting software, the students used social media to run the campaigns to attract larger audience. The favorite social media used includes Instagram (IG) and Facebook (FB). Picture 2 and 3 show some social media campaigns established by the students via Instagram and Facebook. The students provided various attractive content such as photos, audio and videos to deliver their message.



Source: *PKN* document

Picture 2. Hashtag for Reducing Stigma on People with Mental Health Issues



Source: *PKN* document

Picture 3. Local Food Product Marketing

Picture 2 and 3 show social media campaigns run by the students on Instagram and Facebook. Picture 2 shows a project delivered by the students using Instagram to alleviate the stigma on people with disabilities and picture 3 illustrates a marketing project run to promote local food products of *Desa Aenganyar, Giligenting Island, Madura*. By using Facebook, the students have built an online marketing place for local community, allowing them to sell products and reach many customers living off the *Giligenting Island*.

Virtual Training

The undergraduate students also established online training program for their *PKN* projects. During pandemic, most learning process has been conducted online through various digital tools, such as google meet and zoom. However, many teachers have a lack of capacity to run a distance learning by using various digital tools or online meeting software such as zoom, meet and Microsoft Teams and google classroom. To overcome this issue, the students established a virtual training project to increase skills and capacity of teachers to make various learning contents such as audio, videos, files, pictures, links and deliver all these contents to the meeting software.

Online Survey

Online survey also becomes a common community engagement chosen by the students for their *PKN* projects. This survey was conducted to gather information related to the community members or some crucial issues such as political issues. Students employed Google Forms as the common survey platform for their *PKN* project. Picture 4 shows a google form employed to gather data from the online survey.

Source: *PKN* document

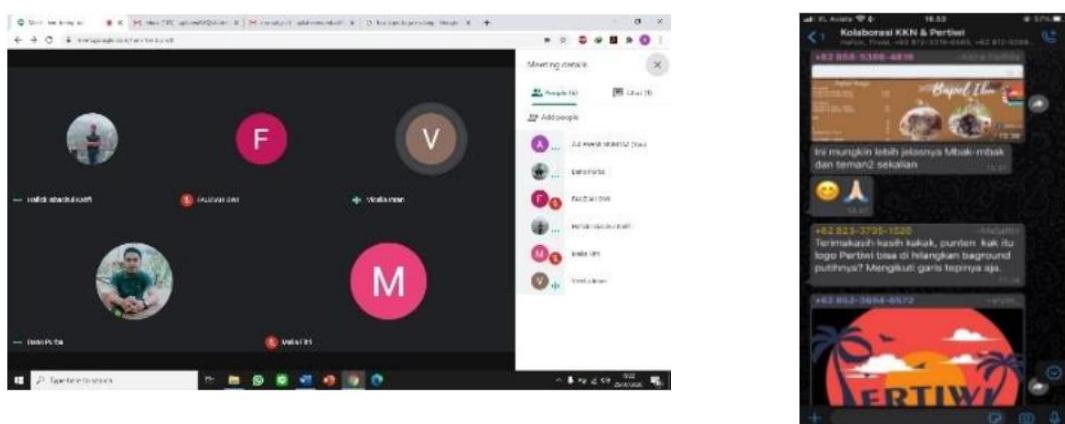
Picture 4. Survey of Community Participation to Monitor Local Election in Batu

Picture 4 shows a survey project conducted by the students to gather data related to participation of community to control or monitor local election in Batu, Malang, East Java. Due to the pandemic, survey activities should be conducted online using google form or survey monkey shared through Email, WhatsApp, Facebook and other kinds of online media. This online platform was deemed to more appropriately comply with the Covid-19 protocols, particularly social distancing and avoiding crowds to break the chain of virus transmission.

The above explanation illustrates how undergraduate students employed various online platforms to undertake the community engagement projects as part of their PKN. These platforms are expected to reach larger and diverse community members. However, the students have been challenged by various issues in engaging process with community members to establish PKN projects, particularly during pandemic due to the Covid-19 protocols which requires less face-to-face and door-to-door communication and social interaction.

Engaging Communities During a Pandemic: Some Issues

Online platform is deemed more effective to be employed as a strategy for conducting community engagement projects during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the establishment of these projects would be challenged by crucial issues related to the Covid-19 health protocols. This study found that the students who undertake their PKN projects have difficulty communicating with the members of the community because they have to follow all the health protocols. To overcome this issue, the students have to use online communication via internet using digital media in numerous methods including email, SMS and instant messenger, particularly WhatsApp as well as zoom meeting to have discussion regarding the planning and monitoring of the PKN projects.



Source: PKN document

Picture 5. Zoom Meeting and WhatsApp Discussion in the Project Planning and Monitoring Proses

Picture 5 illustrates online communication employed by PKN students in the planning and monitoring of their PKN project. However, if face-to-face meeting should be conducted, the students are required to follow strict Covid-19 protocols as illustrated in picture 6.



Source: *PKN* document

Picture 6. Offline Meeting with the Covid-19 Protocols

Picture 6 illustrates face-to-face meeting or interaction conducted by PKN students in a strict Covid-19 protocols. However, this study reviews other crucial issues explained by PKN students in their documents. These issues arose due to the fact that they found many knowledge gaps of community members elaborated in the following:

1. Capacity and accessibility of community members in using digital media

The students found that some community members have a lack of capability of using digital media for online communication. For instance, several members are not familiar yet with digital media such as website, email, Instagram, Zoom meeting and Facebook. Other community members do not have enough accessibility to the Internet because they cannot afford to subscribe data plan for Internet access. Some live in a remote area with limited internet connections. This study also found that some community members do not have smartphone for online communication. All these limitations have hindered the participation of the community in the PKN projects.

2. Lack of knowledge and information related to the Covid-19 pandemic and its protocols

This study found the fact that not all community members do understand and accept the information about the Covid-19 pandemic and its health protocols. As a consequence, the members of community want to have face-to-face meeting with the students without complying the Covid-19 protocols. As a result, PKN students should

give information to those members related to the health protocols during the pandemic and why it is important to follow the protocols.

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed every aspect of people live, particularly in terms of communication and social interactions with other people. Although in a different way, online platform still becomes the most effective way by which people could communicate with others without impinging the Covid-19 protocols. This platform has been used by PKN students to establish their community engagement projects although some issues still hamper the implementation of these projects.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that online platform could become the most effective way to conduct community engagement projects during the Covid-19 pandemic. The implementation of these project could employ numerous online platforms such as instant messengers and meeting software. This study found there are common community engagement projects which have been conducted by undergraduate students using online platform including campaign projects in various forms, such as webinar and social media campaigns, virtual training projects via zoom meeting and online surveys using the google forms. However, the implementation of community engagement projects using these digital media during a pandemic has been challenged by a crucial issue or problem related to knowledge gaps among community members regarding the capacity and accessibility of community members in using digital media as well as lack of knowledge and information related to the Covid-19 pandemic and its protocols. It would be better for community engagement practitioners to consider these gaps as well as finding solutions to this problem before initiating or conducting their projects and development programs.

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