

Economic Resilience and Crisis Management: Local Government Responses to Covid-19 In Thailand's Deep South

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the responsibilities and preparedness of local government in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic while analyzing the factors influencing their readiness in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Employing a mixed-method research approach, data were gathered through a questionnaire completed by 171 representatives and interviews with 13 key informants from local administrative organizations in the multicultural community of southern Thailand. The findings indicate that local governments exhibited high overall performance in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they were less effective in promoting and addressing occupational issues than their efforts in preventing the spread of the virus. The study also revealed that these organizations were well-prepared regarding facilities, coordination, networking, and public communication. Notably, public communication and community participation emerged as key factors significantly impacting their performance in promoting and resolving occupational problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic, across the southernmost provinces.

Keywords: COVID-19, Economic Resilience, Crisis Management, Local Government, Deep South of Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Thailand's initial COVID-19 case was identified on January 22, 2020. During the first wave, the number of infected cases experienced a gradual and relatively slow increase until March 2020. Subsequently, after mid-March, there was a sharp surge in new cases, with the daily average rate peaking at 25.1% (Tantrakarnapa and Bhopdhornangkul, 2020: 1). In April 2020, Thailand's southernmost provinces experienced a significant increase in COVID-19 cases. This increase was primarily linked to the arrival of Thai citizens who had participated in religious activities in Indonesia, known as the Dawah citizens.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on Thailand, particularly economically. A 2021 survey by the World Bank revealed that over 50% of respondents faced job losses, temporary work stoppages, and reduced working hours or pay. More than 70% of surveyed households experienced a decrease in income since March 2020, with around 80% of rural, southern region, and low-income households affected. Both farming activities and non-farm businesses saw significant income declines, with approximately 50% reporting income reductions of over half. Additionally, King Prajadhipok's Institute report (2021) shows that household debt continued to grow by 3.90%, and there remains a need for the government to closely monitor bad debts, which have been driven by declining household incomes in the country's struggling economic situation.

Controlling the spread of diseases and the effect of COVID-19 relies not only on the policies set by the central government but also significantly on the active involvement of local government. These organizations bear a crucial responsibility in improving the well-being and quality of life for the people within their authority. Despite

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the establishment of decentralization and local administrations aimed at addressing the needs of local communities, it remains apparent that significant authority for management and decision-making continues to be concentrated within the central government (Muangming, 2018: 36). Particularly during the coronavirus pandemic, local administrative organizations have emerged as crucial first points of contact with communities. Their engagement has involved delivering essential services such as public health initiatives, community support, and efforts to revitalize local economies, underscoring their pivotal role in enhancing the well-being of residents. However, despite their critical role, local governments are grappling with numerous challenges. Research by Dzigbede et al. (2020: 635) highlights that in times of disaster or crisis, smaller and resource-constrained governments often struggle to mount an effective response, resulting in an exacerbation of socioeconomic disparities. It becomes imperative for public policy strategies, across all government levels, to recognize and address these disparities to enhance preparedness for future biological disasters.

The scope of this study encompasses the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. According to the 2022 report on the analysis of poverty and inequality in Thailand launched by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) collaborating with the World Bank, found that these three provinces are among the top ten provinces facing the issue of chronic poverty in Thailand. An ongoing conflict in the south region since 2004 has taken a toll on the lives of thousands of individuals, impacting not only their property but also the regional economy. In 2020, a new crisis emerged, shifting from violent conflict to the outbreak of an infectious disease that claimed a significant number of lives. The Thai government's centralized system faces limitations in fully addressing the unique characteristics of local communities in this region. These include differences in economic, geography, ways of life, as well as the diverse problems and needs of the local population. Consequently, these unique and complex circumstances have posed additional challenges in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic within these areas.

This article has three primary objectives: to delineate the extent to which local governments have assumed roles in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, to assess their preparedness in dealing with the pandemic, and to elucidate the factors influencing their readiness, particularly in promoting and resolving occupational problems related to the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will explore the roles of local government in managing the pandemic of the COVID-19 and the factors that contribute to the readiness of local governments in managing pandemic-related challenges.

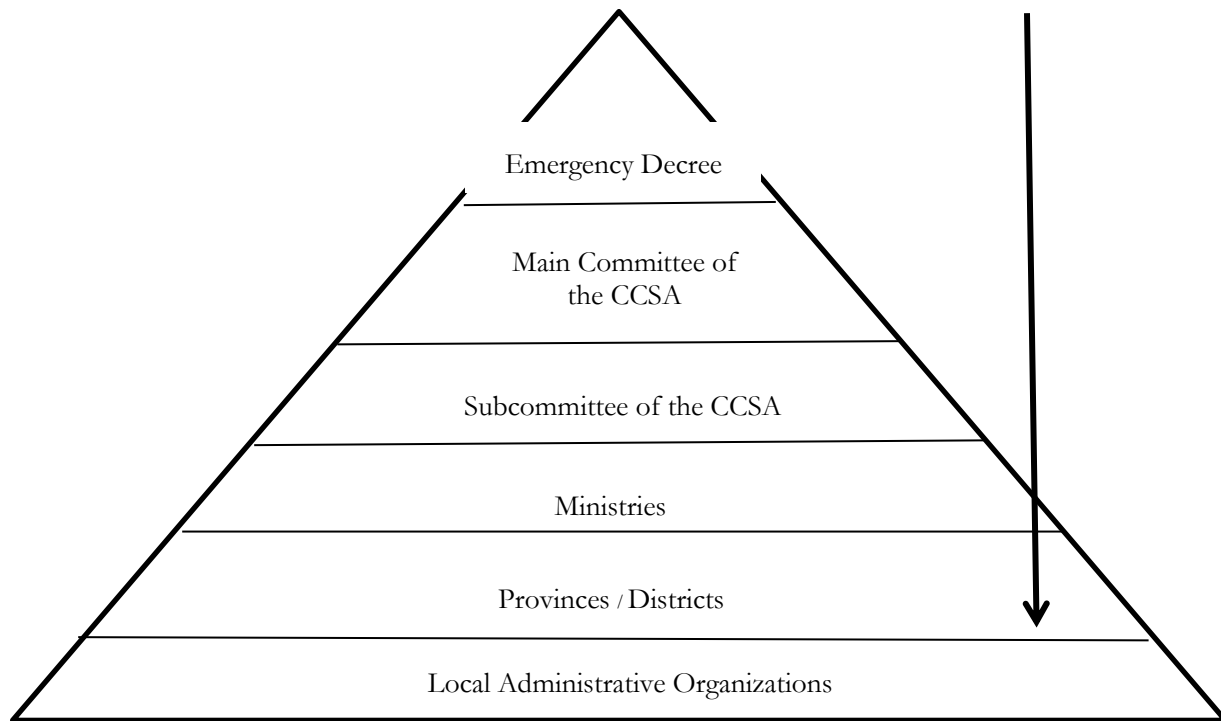
The Roles of Local Government in Managing the Pandemic of the COVID-19

Local administrative organizations have been previously observed to be involved in handling various outbreaks such as dengue fever and influenza, or their role in responding to natural disasters. However, the COVID-19 outbreak was something new that these local organizations had never dealt with before. It required them to play a role in responding to and managing a public health disaster at the community level.

In managing and coordinating strategies addressing the COVID-19-induced health, economic, and social crisis, regional governments have taken the lead. (Erkoreka & Hernando-Perez, 2023: 138) According to Kim & Jeong (2021: 122), local government also contributes a significantly by providing suggestions for overcoming challenges to adopting national initiatives in local communities. According to the Thai laws and regulations, local government is assigned two roles, including the role in preventing and treating COVID-19 together with the role in promoting and addressing occupational problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While all sectors have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, local government plays a crucial role as the first stage in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19. This role is defined by an official

communication dated December 27, 2020, issued by the Department of Local Administration. This communication outlines the guidelines and budget allocation for combating communicable diseases, particularly in the case of COVID-19. The guidelines encompass various budgetary provisions, including resources allocated for quarantined individuals, state-run quarantine facilities, and personnel necessary for disease prevention and control.



Source: Report on the Decentralization Situation for the Year 2021: A Survey on the Role of Local Administrative Organizations in Managing the COVID-19 Crisis (King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2021: 18)

Around January 2020, after the government announced an escalation in its response to COVID-19, in order to prevent and control the spread of the virus nationwide, a state of emergency was declared, requiring all sectors to be ready to respond swiftly. The next significant point was the beginning of various orders, measures, and practices issued from the central government, the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), ministries, and departments, which were then passed down to local administrative organizations to take proactive action in their areas (see Figure 1). These measures included surveillance, prevention, and containment of the virus. (King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2021)

The roles of local administrative organizations during the outbreak included conducting training on mask-making and hand sanitizers, collecting data on surveillance groups and at-risk groups in the area, setting up checkpoints to screen people entering and leaving the area, distributing survival kits to alleviate people's hardships, providing education on preventing the spread of the virus. Thus, the role of local administrative organizations during the first wave of the pandemic was to implement disease control measures and guidelines in accordance with directives from the Ministry of Interior and provincial agencies, as well as disease control measures according to the government's guidelines.

In addition to their role in preventing and treating COVID-19, local administrative organizations also play a vital role in promoting and addressing occupational issues that arise during the pandemic. This role is underscored by the Ministry of Interior's urgent communication, dated March 21, 2020. In situations where individuals, affected by the preventive and control measures of COVID-19, have become unemployed and are returning to their hometowns, local government organizations are instructed to facilitate this process. They are tasked with informing individuals interested in seeking employment opportunities within their respective areas to register with the local government organization. This initiative aims to support and address the occupational challenges faced by individuals during the pandemic. Basically, these roles in promoting and addressing occupational challenges during disease outbreaks contribute to the overall economic resilience and well-being of the affected community members.

The Readiness Factors of Local Government in Managing the Pandemic of the COVID-19

The readiness of local government in managing the pandemic of the COVID-19 is divided into seven key factors as follows: budget and regulations, facilitation, community participation, officer, technology and application, public communication, and coordination and networking. These readiness factors provide a framework for assessing and enhancing preparedness at the local level.

Budget and regulations play a crucial role in responding to varying infection rate scenarios. Wongpreedee (2015: 3) examined the state of readiness in public finance among local administrative organizations in Thailand's upper northeast region. The research revealed that the level of readiness in public finance, particularly regarding adequate income, significantly influences the effectiveness of health outcomes. Additionally, in-depth interview data indicated that financial commitments to other public services have placed added strain on local government budgets, underscoring the urgency of addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Communicable Diseases Act B.E.2558 designates the heads of local government as members of the Provincial Communicable Disease Committees. Consequently, when the COVID-19 outbreak emerged, local government assumed a pivotal role in both prevention and management of the pandemic. This responsibility was reinforced by the Cabinet Resolution on March 17, 2020, which emphasized the urgent need for the government sector to swiftly adapt to the crisis. Simultaneously, local administrative organizations themselves had to establish a COVID-19 prevention-oriented work environment.

The active participation of local residents plays a pivotal role in democratic decentralization. As elucidated by Kaewmoonkam in 2017, this participation should ideally be characterized by freedom, fairness, and the ability of individuals to engage in community affairs. Additionally, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP) has delineated a five-level framework known as the Public Participation Spectrum, which encompasses the stages of "inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower". In the current phase of the pandemic, the initial stage of "inform" is likely the most important, as it involves furnishing the public with balanced and objective information to aid their comprehension of the issues, alternatives, opportunities, and potential solutions.

The preparedness of local administrative officers in the context of COVID-19 presents notable challenges. Human resources are a critical factor in effectively managing COVID-19 situations and preventing the spread of the pandemic. These officers have had to adapt significantly to a new and unconventional way of life. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, officers are undeniably facing an increased workload due to their additional responsibilities related to the pandemic. Their readiness and emergency response skills must be continuously developed because the situation is constantly evolving, as highlighted by the Pan American Health Organization in 2020.

The shift towards remote work has compelled local government to swiftly adopt modern and efficient methods for work, collaboration, and communication. This adaptation is crucial to ensure their ability to support the new work-from-home environment necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is evident that their technological infrastructure is not currently up to the task of supporting the evolving needs. Shaw et al. (2020) showed the technological advancements in use by local governments abroad, particularly in China. Notably, institutions like Fudan University and the Shanghai Municipality, in collaboration with the Center for Disease Control, had harnessed AI, Big Data, 5G technology, Health Barcodes, and applications to effectively manage and respond to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The World Health Organization's 2020 findings emphasize that every country faces significant challenges in public communication while managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective public communication during a health crisis like this comprises both internal and external communication components, as highlighted by Zhang et al. (2020: 9). An effective public communication system during a pandemic should encompass not only the content and methods of communication but also involve the right individuals and partnerships. Reddy & Gupta (2020: 3794) underscores that effective communication in such circumstances should possess attributes like being proactive, innovative, professional, progressive, transparent, and technology-friendly. However, it is important to recognize that various factors, including social and cultural characteristics, generational differences, language, religious beliefs, and literacy levels, all influence how people respond to information. Additionally, common reactions during a pandemic include fear, distrust, and resistance, making trusted and credible information sources vital in guiding individuals from awareness to taking appropriate actions.

Coordination and networking play a pivotal role in effectively managing a new pandemic. As part of the national strategy for preparing, preventing, and addressing emerging infectious diseases (2017-2021), there is a deliberate emphasis on enhancing participation from civil society and the private sector in the prevention and control of these diseases, as outlined by the Ministry of Public Health in 2016.

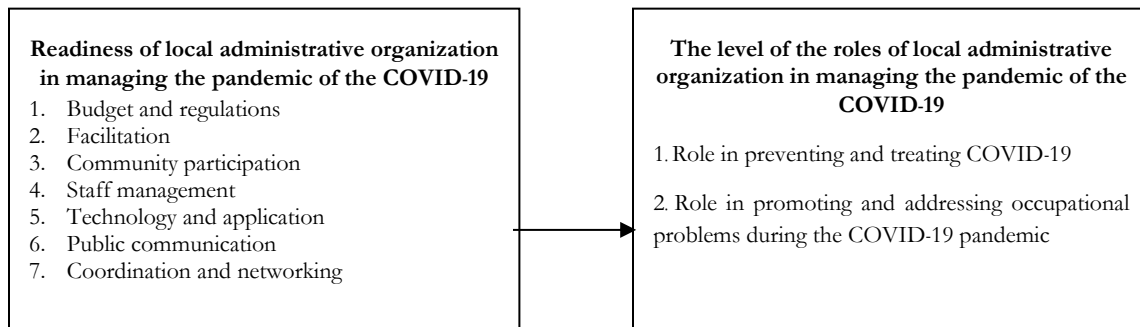


Figure 2. Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed-methods research approach, specifically using a sequential exploratory design. The study began with qualitative research to understand the phenomena by interviewing 13 key informants from the prominent heads of local administrative organizations, the governor, and provincial public health. The findings from the qualitative phase were then used to design the subsequent quantitative research. In the quantitative research, the target population encompassed all 267 local administrative organizations located in the three southernmost provinces. To ensure a representative sample, stratified sampling was applied. According to the Yamane formula, the calculated sample size was a minimum of 160 organizations. Ultimately, questionnaires were received from 171 organizations, thus exceeding the calculated sample size. (see Table 1).

Research ethics approval was granted by the Center for Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, Prince of Songkla University and all participants were fully informed and consented to participate in the research study.

Table 1. Sampling Size

Provinces	Provincial Administrative Organization	City Municipality	Town Municipality	Sub-district Municipality	Sub-district Administrative Organization	Total
Pattani	1	-	1	9	58	70
Yala	1	1	2	11	28	43
Narathiwat	1	-	2	8	48	58
Total	3	1	5	28	134	171

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Roles of Local Government in Managing the Pandemic of the COVID-19

Overall, local governments in Thailand's deep south have a critical role to play in supporting economic recovery efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By implementing targeted policies and programs, local authorities can help mitigate the economic impact of the crisis and pave the way for a more resilient and sustainable economic future for the region.

Table 2. Timeline of Roles of Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs) During the Pandemic

Timeline	Roles of LAOs
January 2020: Monitoring	- Instruct all local administrative organizations to closely monitor the spread of the outbreak in educational institutions, and if necessary, the decision to close schools shall be at the discretion of the local administrators.
February-March 2020: Prevent and contain the outbreak	- Elevate surveillance and prevention measures to the highest level - Educate the community on disease prevention - Distribute face masks and hand sanitizers - Close high-risk areas and suspend group activities
April 2020: Beginning to ease	- Consider waiving or reducing fees related to hotel laws or rental rooms, as appropriate in each area. - Survey areas for implementing the sufficiency economy in the community.
May-July 2020: Rehabilitate the community	- Provide financial aid to individuals with disabilities. Survey those affected in the area. - Proceed with the procurement of supplementary food (milk) for school children. - Instruct the local administrative organizations to transfer funds from the Comptroller General's Department to eligible recipients for financial aid in the following three groups as soon as possible: (1) Child support for newborns (2) Elderly living allowance (3) Disability living allowance.

Source: Applied from Report on the Decentralization Situation for the Year 2021: A Survey on the Role of Local Administrative Organizations in Managing the COVID-19 Crisis (King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2021: 20)

From the data collection in the southernmost provinces, it was found that the overall role of local administrative entities is quite important during the pandemic. However, their contributions in preventing COVID-19 ($\bar{x}=3.77$, S.D.=0.90) were greater than their roles in promoting and solving occupational problems ($\bar{x}=3.08$, S.D.=1.01). The results of this study indicate that local government has only a medium level of involvement in addressing occupational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 3). To improve livelihoods and mitigate the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, it is crucial for these organizations to take proactive measures.

They should play a central role in enhancing economic resilience and minimizing the adverse effects of the pandemic by focusing on several key initiatives.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of Roles of Local Administrative Organizations in Managing the Pandemic of COVID-19

No.	Roles of local administrative organization	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level of comments
1	Roles in preventing COVID-19	3.77	0.90	High
2	Roles in promoting and solving occupational problems during the pandemic of COVID-19	3.08	1.01	Medium
Overall		3.46	1.17	High

Based on the findings, it appears that local administrative organizations were less active in increasing employment to support their regular work during the COVID-19 pandemic ($\bar{x} = 2.47$, S.D.=1.02). However, they were more active in assisting people affected by the pandemic, particularly through initiatives such as the distribution of survival kits for low-income groups, ($\bar{x} = 3.95$, S.D.=1.06) (see Table 4). This suggests that while they played a significant role in providing immediate relief and support to affected individuals, there was room for improvement in terms of creating employment opportunities to help bolster the regular functions of the local government.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviation of Roles of the Local Government in Promoting and Solving Occupational Problems during the Pandemic of COVID-19

No.	Roles in promoting and solving occupational problems during the pandemic of COVID-19	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level of comments
1	Assisting people affected by the pandemic of COVID-19 such as distributing survival kits for low-income groups	3.95	1.06	High
2	Gathering data about people affected by the pandemic of COVID-19	3.76	0.82	High
3	Providing a convocational training course for the community and people affected by the pandemic of COVID-19	2.70	1.04	Medium
4	Assisting those fired during the pandemic of COVID-19 and send them back to their hometown	2.52	1.02	Low
5	Increasing employment for people affected by the pandemic of COVID-19 to support regular tasks of local administrative organization	2.47	1.09	Low
Overall		3.08	1.01	Medium

Readiness of Local Government in Managing the Pandemic of the COVID-19

This section presents an analysis of the overall readiness of local governments in addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the factors influencing their ability to promote and resolve occupational issues arising from the crisis.

Table 5. Readiness of the Local Government in Managing the Pandemic of the COVID-19

No.	Readiness	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level of comments
1	Facilitation	4.07	0.82	High
2	Coordination and networking	4.02	0.82	High
3	Public communication	3.83	0.80	High
4	Community participation	3.66	0.82	High
5	Budget and regulation	3.59	0.87	High
6	Technology and application	3.38	0.86	Medium
7	Staff Management	3.27	0.88	Medium
Total		3.69	0.95	High

The data analysis in Table 5 indicates that the readiness of COVID-19 management across seven factors is generally high. The highest-rated factor is facilities ($\bar{x} = 4.07$, S.D. = 0.82), indicating a strong level of preparedness

in terms of facilities. This is followed closely by coordination and networking ($\bar{x} = 4.02$, S.D. = 0.82) and public communication ($\bar{x} = 3.83$, S.D. = 0.80), both of which also exhibit a high level of readiness. However, the two aspects of technology and application ($\bar{x} = 3.38$, S.D. = 0.86) and staff management ($\bar{x} = 3.27$, S.D. = 0.88) are rated at a medium level of readiness.

Table 6. Multiple Regression of the Influence of Readiness of Local Government to the Roles of the Local Government

Readiness Factors	B	Standard error	β	t
(Constant)	.159	.228		8.077**
X2 _{Facilitation}	0.177	.069	0.171	0.695**
X3 _{Participation}	0.223	.072	0.239	2.581**
X4 _{Staff}	0.217	.065	0.223	3.089**
X6 _{Communication}	0.273	.074	0.282	3.353**

R=.770, R²=.592 Adjust R²=.582, **P<.01

The multiple regression analysis revealed that the four readiness factors had a significant influence on the overall roles of local administrative organizations at the 0.01 level of significance. The forecasting equation from the analysis can describe the influence of the four readiness factors on the role of the local administrative organizations at 59.2%. The four factors included readiness in communication ($\beta = 0.282$), community participation ($\beta = 0.239$), staff management ($\beta = 0.223$) and facilitation ($\beta = 0.171$) (see Table 6). These areas may require further attention and improvement to enhance the overall preparedness for COVID-19 management.

If considering the factors that had a significant influence on the role of local administrative organizations in promoting and solving occupational problems during the Pandemic of COVID-19, it was found that two readiness factors including public communication ($\beta = 0.377$) and community participation ($\beta = 0.308$) at the 0.01 level of significance. To enhance their effectiveness in managing the pandemic, local government should consider the following recommendations based on these key factors, public communication and community participation.

Public Communication

Public communication readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic is generally strong, with various communication channels and tools in place. Here are the key findings related to public communication readiness:

Local government provides a variety of communication channels, including community voices and other online platforms ($\bar{x} = 4.13$). This indicates a proactive approach to reaching the community through multiple channels. Notice boards and signs to educate about COVID-19 are readily available ($\bar{x} = 4.02$), showing efforts to disseminate information through visual means, which can be effective in conveying important messages. Local government can communicate with the community quickly and make information accessible to everyone ($\bar{x} = 3.90$), highlighting their responsiveness and inclusivity in disseminating information. In the context of religious considerations, such as vaccination, local governments have been successful in developing awareness about preventing COVID-19 ($\bar{x} = 3.88$). This suggests that they have effectively addressed religious concerns and communicated the importance of preventive measures. There are defined procedures for transferring information to other agencies and individuals, with a means to verify the accuracy of received information ($\bar{x} = 3.73$). This demonstrates a systematic approach to information sharing and validation.

The only area of concern is the absence of a specific channel to quickly respond to COVID-19 questions ($\bar{x} = 3.33$). Having a dedicated channel for addressing questions and concerns could enhance public communication further.

Community Participation

Community participation readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic is generally at a high level. Local administrative organizations have offered channels for discussions with people's sectors and provided opportunities for participation in joint decision-making regarding methods for handling the spread of COVID-19 ($\bar{x} = 3.75$). This indicates a collaborative approach to decision-making involving the community. There are channels available for people to voice their opinions on the implementation of COVID-19 measures ($\bar{x} = 3.73$). This suggests that local government values and encourages feedback from the community.

People in the area strictly follow measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as wearing masks and conforming to state quarantine requirements when returning from high-risk areas ($\bar{x} = 3.70$). This reflects a high level of compliance with preventive measures among the community. People actively engage in campaign activities related to the management of COVID-19 organized by local authorities ($\bar{x} = 3.68$). This indicates that community members are willing to participate in awareness and prevention efforts.

One of the more challenging aspects is inspiring residents to carry out missions on behalf of their communities in the fight against COVID-19 ($\bar{x} = 3.42$). This suggests that motivating community members for active involvement in community missions during the pandemic may require additional efforts.

Yala Market Place Model

According to in-depth interviews, most respondents mentioned an online platform local market initiated by Yala City Municipality. This example illustrates how public communication and community participation influenced the local government's role in promoting and addressing occupational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The "Lard Yala" (Yala Market Place) project is an exemplary model for solving economic challenges at the local government level. This online platform leverages technological innovation to assist those affected by COVID-19 while stimulating the local economy through the efficient management of available resources. The project's primary goal is to promote economic growth and enhance the quality of life for residents. The Yala Market project specifically targets service providers—such as motorcycle taxi drivers, repair workers, and housekeepers—who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. The municipality acts as the back office, offering behind-the-scenes support, while improving the value chain by adding value to goods and services. This approach helps increase shop owners' income without imposing any fees. Additionally, the platform facilitates faster circulation of money within the system, expedites disbursements, and fosters trust between buyers and sellers, with the municipality acting as a reliable intermediary.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis provides valuable insights into the roles and preparedness of local governments in tackling the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights their exceptional performance in various aspects of the response. The study finds that local governments are well-prepared across seven critical factors, particularly in facilities. Effective coordination, networking, and public communication are also crucial for disseminating accurate information and promoting collective action. The main challenge after the COVID-19 crisis is improving people's quality of life, jobs, and incomes. Local networks have done an excellent job in prevention and have also been important in helping communities recover. Local government should prioritize job creation by supporting local businesses, promoting entrepreneurship, and implementing workforce development programs. Additionally, these local organizations contribute to skill enhancement by offering training programs, particularly in digital and remote work areas, to empower community members for the evolving job market.

This can include training programs for new job opportunities or retraining programs for industries that are experiencing growth during the pandemic.

To further support economic stability, local governments should facilitate microfinance, aiding them in overcoming financial obstacles and investing in their enterprises. By implementing these recommendations, local government can not only alleviate occupational challenges but also contribute to the long-term well-being and economic recovery of their communities. These efforts will not only address immediate needs but also foster sustainable growth and development in the post-pandemic period, ultimately benefitting the community as a whole.

The implications of these findings are significant for policymakers, public health practitioners, and administrators involved in crisis response and management. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of pandemic management by emphasizing the important role of local administrative organizations and identifying critical factors that enhance their success during times of crisis.

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