



Towards a Creative Old Town District: A Process Evaluation Study of the Creative District Development of Sakon Nakhon in Northeast Thailand

by
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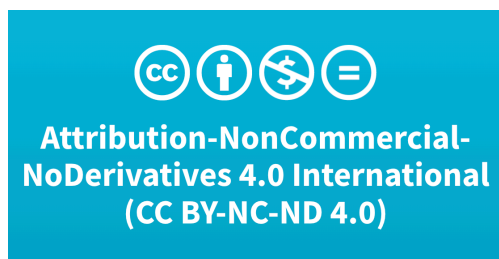
September 2023

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About the cover photo:

The cover photo was taken at the Klang Thong Chai community in the Old Town district, Sakon Nakhon during the authors' fieldwork in March 2023. The street art scene in this community was initiated by Rajabhat Sakon Nakhon University. It was a cooperation between local and national artists who aimed to convey the stories of beliefs and history of Sakon Nakhon through their artwork. Airatda Mahachai from Local Art Space also designed and painted the Old Town mascot 'Nong Gum,' which was inspired by the E-Gum fish, the local fish of Sakon Nakhon.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	6
List of Figures	7
List of Acronyms	8
Executive Summary	9
1. Introduction	11
2. Background	13
2.1. Thailand 4.0	13
2.2. Creative Economy Agency	13
2.3. Case Study: Sakon Nakhon	14
3. Evaluation Approach	23
3.1. Objectives	24
3.2. Logic Model	24
3.3. Process evaluation questions	27
3.4. Methodology	28
3.5. Ethical considerations	28
4. Key Findings	30
4.1. Contexts	30
4.2. Implementation.....	35
5. Conclusion	43
6. Recommendations	44
7. References	48
8. Appendices	52
8.1. Appendix 1: (Named) Research Participants	52
8.2. Appendix 2: Interview and Focus Group Protocol/Guide.....	53

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List of Figures

Figure 1	Old Town Sakon Nakhon Mapping	16
Figure 2	Map of the Old Town District, Sakon Nakhon	17
Figure 3	Indigo-dyed products at the Mann Craft shop	19
Figure 4	“Mann” Prach Niyomkar, owner of Mann Craft shop in his indigo garden and studio	20
Figure 5	Airatda Mahachai, founder and owner of Local Art Space	21
Figure 6	Logic model for evaluating the creative district development process of the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon	25-26
Figure 7	The walls of an abandoned and semi-demolished old prison in Sakon Nakhon	39
Figure 8	Paintings on the old prison walls in Sakon Nakhon	39
Figure 9	The sign that prohibits any form of marking on the old prison walls in Sakon Nakhon	40
Figure 10	Atcha Somphong and Tat Wattanamethee, proprietors of the traditional Thai wooden guesthouse Baan Sangiam-Manee	41

List of Acronyms

BOI	Board of Investment
CEA	Creative Economy Agency
GI	Geographical Indication
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NESDC	National Economic and Social Development Council
NSTDA	National Science and Technology Development Agency
SWOT	Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat
TAT	Tourism Authority of Thailand
TCDC	Thailand Creative and Design Center
TCDN	Thailand Creative District Network
Thai PBS	Thai Public Broadcasting Service
UCCN	UNESCO Creative Cities Network
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
YEC	Young Entrepreneur Chamber of Commerce

Executive Summary

This is a process evaluation report on the creative district development of the Old Town District in Sakon Nakhon in Northeastern Thailand. The development project is spearheaded by the Creative Economy Agency, which is tasked to promote and develop Thailand's creative economy. One of its main approaches to operationalising its strategic objectives, which in this case is the creative placemaking agenda, is through the creation of event that will highlight and showcase the cultural and creative assets of the district being developed. For the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon, the event is called Sakon Junction.

This report utilises the logic model for its process evaluation framework. It aims to identify the full development process from planning to implementation to community reception. It uncovers the blind spots in the creative district development process and indicates the areas of improvement to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its implementation.

This report answers two main process evaluation questions in terms of context and implementation. These are:

1. How do the contexts of Thailand and the Northeastern region contribute to or hinder the creative district development process of the Old Town in Sakon Nakhon?
2. To what extent is the main output or programme developed (Sakon Junction) implemented and delivered guided by the Creative Economy Agency's strategic framework (as indicated in the prototype document)?

To answer these questions, we primarily use semi-structured in-depth interview and focus group discussion with stakeholders from the Creative Economy Agency as the implementer of the creative district development project and the local community members. Our analysis and findings are further supported by previous studies and key policy documents.

These are the key findings of the process evaluation we have conducted:

1. There is efficient and effective coordination internally amongst the different departments within the CEA and externally amongst the different creative individuals and groups.
2. The strong network of creative individuals and organisation in the Old Town district proves to be a key element in the success of its creative district development.
3. While the political context of Thailand is not within the control of any stakeholder, it is a major barrier to the creative district development process.

4. The economic context is highly interlinked to and influenced by the political context because budget planning and appropriation is tied to the country's fiscal policy.
5. In terms of the social context, there has been too much focus on the creative members of the community and minimal engagement with the 'non-creative' members and older generation of the community that they feel neglected or left out of the creative district development process, which has eventually compromised their belongingness, community ownership and citizenship.
6. The lack of understanding and low awareness level of the community about the creative district concept impede the creative district development process, including the possible legislation of creative district policy at the regional level through the National Economic and Social Development Council.

This process evaluation report concludes that the creative district development has generally been successful. There is no failure in theory or in implementation throughout the process, but it could have been strengthened and made more efficient and effective.

To this end, we propose the following recommendations that can be taken forward in the ongoing and future development of creative districts in Thailand:

1. Increase engagement with the local community further, especially with the 'non-creative' people and older generation or long-time residents in the area.
2. Make the engagement process more inclusive, egalitarian, and accessible to everyone.
3. Make access to public spaces, facilities, and services for the local community more accessible, democratic, and less bureaucratic.
4. Launch a more active publicity and awareness campaign for the creative district development.
5. Creative district development initiatives should ideally be locally led, and government supported.
6. Make the elements of creative district development more authentic and truly local.
7. Make community participation in the creative district development voluntary and not mandatory.
8. Ask the local community members of their creative district development wish list.

1. Introduction

This report evaluates the creative district development process of the Old Town District in Sakon Nakhon in Northeastern Thailand. The development of creative districts in Thailand is one of the flagship projects created under the Thailand Creative District Network (TCDN) through the leadership of the Creative Economy Agency (CEA). Established in 2018, the CEA is a public organization tasked to lead and manage the Thailand's creative economy development agenda. The TCDN is one of CEA's primary tools for city development and its pathway to producing more creative cities in Thailand. It is a platform that calls on local communities from all provinces that want to take the step forward to developing their area in becoming a 'creative district'. Through the support of the national government and guidance from urban development experts, TCDN aims to sustainably improve the people's quality of life (CEA, no date, "About Us").

The CEA defines creative district as "an area designated to promote businesses and services in creative industries through a link between the district, people, and traditional businesses, coupled with creative business promotion measures and participation from the government, the private sector, and the public" (CEA, no date, "Creative Districts"). It emphasizes infrastructure development and knowledge exchange as pathways for local people to create and see more "opportunities and possibilities" for local businesses to thrive and in stimulating the district's creative economy (CEA, 2019).

While there is no single nor agreed definition of the creative economy, this term broadly refers to the utilization of the arts, cultural or creative industries as growth drivers of national economic development. This broad definition is similar to how CEA defines and uses the term in its context, which is primarily using creativity as a tool for economic development to boost Thailand's economy and get the country out of the 'middle-income trap' (CEA, 2019).

As of writing, the CEA is targeting to develop more than 30 areas as creative districts in 33 provinces across the country. This report evaluates the process that CEA undertakes in developing the creative districts it has identified but only looks at one creative district as a pilot case study. It is important to note that this project is independent of the CEA and intends to produce objective and academically critical research on the development of creative districts. It provides a non-commissioned third-party external assessment and removes any un/conscious bias that an internal evaluation or commissioned report might have.

This report aims to serve as an evaluation model that can be used in assessing the process for the other creative districts. This report is not only for CEA's use but also caters to any organisation that is also looking to develop a creative space in their locality. By documenting CEA's process in implementing and achieving its strategic objectives through its creative district programmes and presenting the evaluation results, this report also aims to share the insights learned through this process and facilitate a more inclusive, holistic, efficient, and effective process for any institution that might want to launch similar initiatives.

In the wider context, this study also aims to enrich the knowledge exchange component of the creative economy discourse by filling in the data gap on the global south. It goes beyond the basic profiling data available by including, detailing, and evaluating the development process, which eventually contributes to the creation of a more accurate database of the global creative economy that can inform future policy development.

This report begins with the background and context of the project, followed by the evaluation approach we have taken, then the presentation and discussion of key findings, conclusion, and recommendations.

2. Background

2.1. Thailand 4.0

Among all the developing Southeast Asian nations, Thailand has been the most active and consistent in working towards the achievement of its creative economy agenda. Thailand is also the second largest economy in Southeast Asia and has been working actively to surpass its upper middle-income status through its long-term strategic economic development blueprint dubbed as “Thailand 4.0” (Kongbuamai, Khoifin and Uttama, 2022). It focuses on investment promotion policies as a way of responding to and aligning with the progressive changes brought about by the fourth industrial revolution or Industry 4.0.

Thailand 4.0 is focused on driving the country’s economy forward through innovation, as it hopes to escape the so-called “middle-income trap,” which is commonly experienced by developing countries trying to move up the value chain. The strategy highlights innovation as a key component of the creative economy that will advance the country’s growth. It puts strong emphasis on the development of creative hubs and creative districts in provinces across Thailand (Anuroj, 2018).

Since 2016, the Thai government has put emphasis on the ‘new economy’, which for them is comprised of the digital economy, bio economy, and the creative and cultural economy. It prioritizes Thailand’s economic and environmental sustainability as part of its economic reform plan in reducing social disparity while increasing the country’s competitiveness. This is attached to urbanizing and developing the rural areas in order to create more sustainable cities that can actively contribute to the national economic development, which can take Thailand out of the ‘middle-income trap’ and pave the way for the country to become a developed country by 2032 (TCDC, 2016). One of the ways that Thailand intends to achieve this is through its creative district development.

2.2. Creative Economy Agency

Prior to the establishment of the CEA, it was the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) that was in charge of propelling the country’s creative economy. It was founded in 2004 but officially opened on 14 November 2005. It offered a range of resources and services including libraries, creativity workshops, and spaces for exhibition, makers, and co-working (CEA, no date, “About Us”).

On 14 August 2018, it was upgraded to become the CEA with the same mission of promoting and developing Thailand’s creative economy. It is a public organisation under the Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand and aims to promote the rural creative industries by developing their capabilities in using creativity as capital in product and service development and connecting them to the manufacturing sector. The CEA has four main areas of focus: Creative Business, Creative People, Creative Place, and Creative Economy Database.

The CEA later created the Thailand Creative District Network (TCDN) to operationalise its strategies and to serve as a platform for areas in Thailand that have significant potential and assets in terms of people, cultural capital, or facilities. It has five main objectives: 1) Strategic planning and development, 2) Creative place making, 3) Strengthen creative business, 4) District branding, and 5) Co-creating a creative community (CEA, 2019, p. 4).

In Thailand, there are 15 ‘branches’ of creative industries: handicrafts, music, performing arts, visual arts, film & video, broadcasting, publishing, software, advertising, design, architecture, fashion, Thai food, Thai traditional medicine, and cultural tourism (CEA, no date, “Greater with Creativity”).

2.3. Case Study: Sakon Nakhon

In 2019, the CEA published a summary of 15 creative district prototypes under its phase 1 development plan. Eight more provinces have been added to the network in its second year, and another seven provinces in its third year. This document also illustrates its development flowchart with an end goal of “co-creating a creative community” by eventually joining the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) and be ‘officially’ recognized as a creative city.

Amongst the first 15 creative district prototypes, three districts have been identified as those in a more advanced stage of development. From these three, we narrow it down to one that will best serve as our pilot case study based on the following selection criteria:

- Listed as a targeted area of development by the Thailand Board of Investment (BOI)
- District’s readiness based on the health check criteria set up by the CEA. The district should score at least 3 out of 5 for two elements, which we consider key take-off points for creative district development to take place:
 - o availability of public/creative space
 - o presence of creative cluster
- District’s clear vision towards becoming a sustainable district (and eventually city)
- District’s utilization of creative strategies for its further development
- Data availability of phase 1 development progress (such as previous studies and CEA’s documents)

Based on these elements, Sakon Nakhon Old Town District is best suited as our pilot case study. It is one of the 20 poorest provinces in Thailand and listed as a targeted area of development. It has a score of 5 for both availability of public/creative space and presence of creative cluster. Based on CEA’s initial SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat) analysis, it has a development potential to build a zero-carbon transportation system. It has also mounted other creative festivals such as the “Sakonhed Festival: Sakon Made, Sakon Craft” and “Sakonchan | Sakon Junction”, aside from the established festivals that they are commonly known for like the Wax Castle Procession and Long Boat Race. There are also substantial literature and secondary data that can be used to build on this study.

Overview of Sakon Nakhon

Covering an expansive 9,600 square kilometres, Sakon Nakhon stands as one of the largest provinces in Northeastern Thailand. Through the study of fossils and archaeological records, the province's captivating history reveals a timeline of over 2,000 years (British Council, 2020). Situated in the northern vicinity of Sakon Nakhon are the provinces of Bueng Kan and Nong Khai, while Udon Thani, a prominent city in the Isan region and a hub for Isan Buddhism, lies to the west. Moving towards the southern direction, Sakon Nakhon shares borders with Kalasin and Mukdahan provinces, with the nearest province being Nakhon Phanom, a mere 93 kilometers away. Additionally, the region is in close proximity to the Laos border, with Vientiane being just 236 kilometers away via the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (ibid).

The population of Sakon Nakhon Province currently stands at approximately 1.1 million, with around 113,000 individuals residing in the city centre ('Hug Phaeng to Build the City of Sakon', 2022). The predominant language spoken in this area is Isan, which represents a fusion of Thai and Lao and is widely used in Northeastern Thailand. Sakon Nakhon is home to six distinct tribes: Saiyor, Taiyoy, Taiso, Taikaleang, Tai-Loa Isan, and the oldest and largest tribe in the region, Phutai (British Council, 2020).

In terms of religious demographics, Sakon Nakhon exhibits a significant Buddhist majority, with 1,056,857 adherents, representing 96.94% of the population. The province boasts an impressive 993 temples. Meanwhile, Christians account for only 3.02% of the population, with 33,054 individuals and 62 churches. Muslims make up a minute fraction, with 181 followers and one mosque. Furthermore, there are 4,523 individuals (0.41%) who belong to various other religious groups (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a).

The main source of livelihood in Sakon Nakhon Province is primarily agriculture, with most occupations revolving around farming activities, including rice and glutinous rice cultivation, sugar cane and vegetable farming, and ornamental plant cultivation. Livestock farming such as cattle fattening, pig farming, chicken rearing, freshwater fisheries, and fish farming is also prominent. Additionally, handicrafts like mat weaving, weaving, pottery making, silk weaving, cotton production, and indigo dyeing contribute to the local economy. A significant portion of the population in the area is engaged in trading, bringing products from the province to trade within the city (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a).

Old Town District, Sakon Nakhon

The Old Town district of Sakon Nakhon is located in Mueang Sakon Nakhon District within the Sakon Nakhon Province (See Figure 1). Geographically, the province has a distinctive characteristic as it is situated in a basin, surrounded by the Phu Phan Mountain range on its northern, western, and southern sides. The Old Town district is adjacent to a large swamp called Nong Han, which serves as the largest natural water source in the Northeast region (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a).

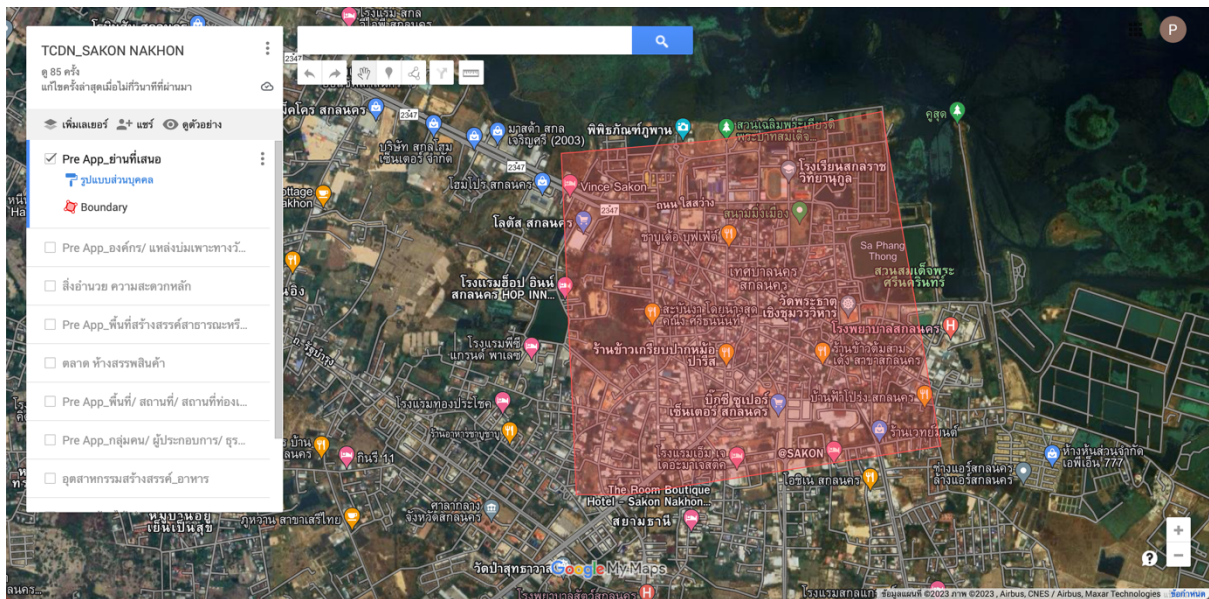


Figure 1: Old Town Sakon Nakhon Mapping by the Creative Economy Agency (Creative Economy Agency, 2020b)

Within this area, the land is mainly utilized for commercial and residential purposes. Most buildings are concentrated within the boundaries of the ancient city. The architectural style of these buildings follows the principle of “Khum Ban, Khum Wat,” which means houses are built around temples (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a). The urban area is well-equipped with infrastructure and a grid-like road network. Settlement expansion has occurred from the eastern part of the city, near Phra That Choeng Chum, towards the western region. Consequently, old buildings are predominantly found on the east side, while the new commercial districts are concentrated in the west (ibid).

Currently, many vernacular wooden buildings remain in the area. There are a total of nine temples that serve as focal points for various communities within the old city of Sakon Nakhon, namely: Wat Phra That Choeng Chum Worawihan, Wat Pho Chai, Wat Si Saket, Wat Chaeng Saeng Arun, Wat Si Chomphu, Nuea Temple, Saphan Kham Temple, Si Phon Mueang Temple, and Wat Sri Sumang (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a). Nestled next to the scenic Nong Han Lake, Wat Phra That Choeng Chum, one of the nine temples in the old town, serves as a highly revered city temple within Sakon Nakhon. It attracts a significant number of both local devotees and tourists who make pilgrimages to the temple to offer their prayers (British Council, 2020).

Located in front of Wat Phra That Choeng Chum is Pha Kram Road (Indigo Street or Kram Walking Street), which serves as a hub for local craftsmanship and showcases a variety of products made from indigo-dyed fabric (See Figure 2). These include sarongs, tie-dyed shirts, skirts, bags, shoes, and many other items. The road gained prominence in 2016 when the apparel cluster of Sakon Nakhon Province, Kasetsart University Chaloe Phrakiat Campus, Sakon Nakhon Provincial Commercial Office, Sakon Nakhon Municipality, and the Wat Phra That Choeng Chum Worawihan community collaborated to promote and support local indigo fabric manufacturers and distributors (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a). As a result, Pha Kram Road has become widely recognized among customers and the national media. Based on the previous year's performance, the overall revenue on Pha Kram Road

reached THB 1-2 Million (GBP 23,000-46,000) per month, with indigo fabric entrepreneurs earning an average of THB 20,000-30,000 (GBP 460-690) per month. The growing popularity of “Kao Sakon, Pha Kram Road” (Sakon Nakhon’s rice, Indigo Street) has also led to its inclusion in the Northeastern tourism routes promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) through various newspapers, television, and online media channels (ibid).

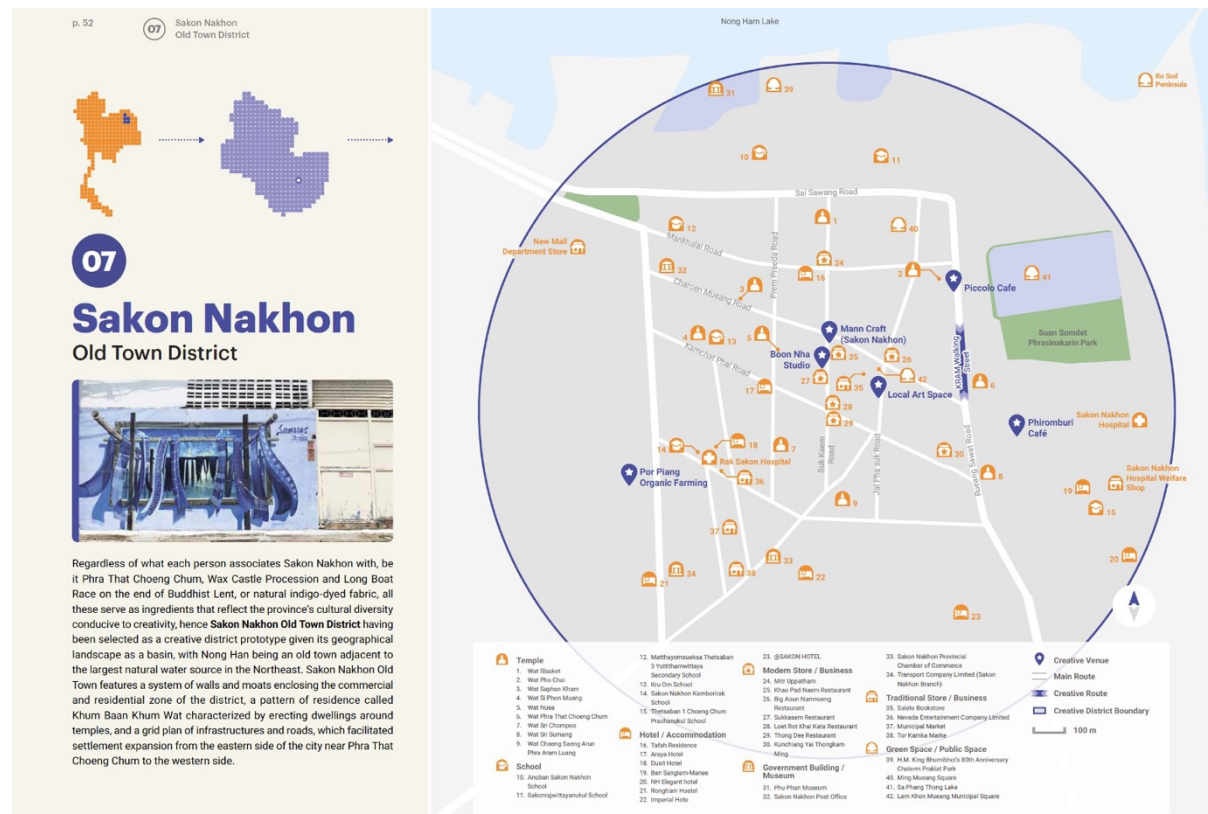


Figure 2. Map of the Old Town District, Sakon Nakhon (CEA, 2019, p. 52)

Tourists flocking to the district comprise both daytrip and overnight guests. Their main objective is often centred around paying their respects at Phra That Choeng Chum and venturing out to discover other captivating tourist spots within the province. The festival season, featuring grand processions like the Prasat Phueng parade and the Star parade from Tha Rae District, further adds to the allure for visitors (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a). Additionally, there is a notable rise in walking tourism, as visitors opt to explore the city on foot. On average, the district attracts approximately 120,000 tourists per month, with a balanced distribution of overnight visitors and non-overnight visitors, each accounting for 50 percent of the total (ibid).

According to the tourism statistics of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2019), the total number of visitors in 2018 was 1,308,282 people, consisting of 1,302,852 Thai tourists and 5,430 foreign tourists. This marked an increase of 4.53% compared to that of 2017 (ibid). In terms of tourism revenue, Sakon Nakhon Province generated a total income of THB 2.334 Million (GBP 53,098) in 2018. It ranked 10th in the Northeastern region and 55th in Thailand overall. The income from Thai tourists amounted to THB 2.318 Million (GBP 52,734), accounting for 99.34%, while the income from foreign tourists was THB 15.3 Million (GBP 348,000), representing 0.66% (ibid). Hotel accommodations were preferred by 55.56% of

tourists, which indicated a 2.61% increase compared to that of 2017. On average, tourists spent approximately THB 1,104.96 per person during their visit (ibid).

According to the Creative Economy Agency (2020a), the Old Town district of Sakon Nakhon holds significant importance for the province, not only in terms of tourism but also in terms of the local economy and the livelihood of urban residents, as follows:

1. The Old Town serves as a trading hub and is a major employment centre, particularly in the government sector.
2. It is a crucial area for trade, facilitating the exchange of goods and renowned products of the province, such as the Pha Kram Road trading area and the Phon Yang Kham Cooperative in the city, among others.
3. It holds immense cultural importance, housing ancient sites, valuable antiquities, and archaeological treasures.

Overall, the Old Town district of Sakon Nakhon contributes significantly to the province's tourism and economy, and it serves as a cultural hub due to its diverse neighbourhoods and attractions.

Educational Institutions

Located within the city, Kasetsart University and Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University have played a significant role in the revival of indigo-dyeing traditions. These universities have effectively combined indigenous knowledge with modern science and technology, serving as catalysts for its revival. Additionally, local schools organise indigo workshops for students, and the Indigo Centre, situated at the Research and Development Institute of Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University, provides essential support to individuals from nearby communities in enhancing their craft skills (Tinnaluck, 2005; cited in British Council, 2020). Following the government's policy implemented in 2000, Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University was entrusted by the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) to collaborate with a community-led initiative on revitalizing the indigo craft (British Council, 2020).

Dominant creative industries

Sakon Nakhon is renowned for its several cultural and creative assets. Most notable and popular amongst them is the indigo-dyed fabric, some food products like Maoberry, Khao Hang rice, beef brisket, and its visual artistry. Based on these, the CEA has identified the three dominant creative industries in Sakon Nakhon.

1. Crafts, folk art and fashion

Sakon Nakhon province stands out for its registered products with Geographical Indication (GI), which indicate having a specific geographical origin, high quality, and notable reputation. It is also home to crucial hubs for indigo fabric distribution such as the indigo fabric road retailers and Mann Craft shop (See Figure 3), whose owner "Mann" Prach Niyomkar also conducts indigo dyeing workshop in his indigo garden and studio (See Figure 4). Furthermore, there are ample opportunities for fostering creative industries in

handicrafts and fashion to stimulate innovation and further evolve existing products, catering to the diverse needs of a broader user base within the region. Additionally, the Sakon Hed group (discussed in the next section) is comprised of active participants who hold significant roles and possess the potential to extend contemporary artistic endeavours linked to handicrafts (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a).



Figure 3. Indigo-dyed products at the Mann Craft shop



Figure 4. “Mann” Prach Niyomkar, owner of Mann Craft shop in his indigo garden and studio

2. Gastronomy

Sakon Nakhon province boasts an impressive variety of food raw materials such as Phon Yang Kham Beef, Mak Mao, Mak Mao Nam, and Khao Hang. These ingredients hold GI registrations, underscoring their importance. Moreover, the province serves as an important

hub for their direct cultivation and acts as a significant marketplace for these products. Additionally, the area is inhabited by a diverse community representing different nationalities, capable of expertly crafting a diverse array of dishes using these raw materials (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a).

3. Visual arts

The Old Town district of Sakon Nakhon possesses a long-standing tradition of the Prasat Phueng procession, which has been a distinctive cultural practice with the potential to boost tourism and stimulate the local economy. The region is also home to skilled local crafts people who specialize in crafting traditional bee castles, further supporting the preservation of this tradition and the artistry involved in bee castle design. There are also some art studios and spaces such as Local Art Space (See Figure 5), which offers workshops to those who want to develop their arts skills. All these play a key role in conserving and expanding arts and culture in the area, enabling them to embrace a more diverse and contemporary art form (Creative Economy Agency, 2020a).



Figure 5. Airatda Mahachai, founder and owner of Local Art Space

Creative Networks

In 2016, the first Sakon Hed festival was held. Derived from the Isan language, 'Sakon Hed' translates to 'Sakon Nakhon made' or 'Made in Sakon Nakhon'. It was organised by a group of creative producers and innovators who are originally from Sakon Nakhon but dispersed to different cities. The 18 founding members reunited after years of separation and created this platform that brought together local artists, artisans, and creative individuals. Since then, the Sakon Hed network has successfully raised awareness about the arts, crafts, and creative enterprises, providing them with an opportunity to showcase their work (British Council, 2020).

The Sakon Hed festival serves as a platform for showcasing a distinctive blend of indigo-dyeing techniques and sustainable agricultural products from throughout the province. It champions community-produced goods and services, celebrating locally sourced creations. The festival also includes workshops, discussions, and networking opportunities, attracting artisans, exhibitors, and tourists from both the province and the entire country (ibid).

The Sakon Hed network operates independently without any ties to the government or private entities, and thus has the freedom to curate the festival according to their own vision. As a grassroots initiative however, the Sakon Hed festival is led by volunteers and lacks significant financial backing. The festival's increasing popularity is a testament to the commitment of the organizers, leading to its relocation to a larger venue in 2019 (ibid). However, this would later be replaced by the CEA-led event Sakon Junction (but still in cooperation with the Sakon Hed network).

Another important group in the creative district development of the Old Town in Sakon Nakhon is the Young Entrepreneur Chamber of Commerce (YEC), which is a network operating at a national level, with a local branch in Sakon Nakhon dedicated to assisting businesses that take part in the Sakon Hed festival (now Sakon Junction). Comprised mostly of second-generation business owners, the YEC primarily supports small-scale enterprises in the region (ibid).

3. Evaluation Approach

A process evaluation is a quality assurance and improvement check that helps identify any operational issues that might affect future implementation of a programme. It focuses on the inputs, activities, and outputs—the three components of a process evaluation using a logic model. This determines whether the whole process is successful, or whether there is failure in theory or in implementation—in which the former has no expected outcomes because of an incorrect theory, and the latter has unmet targets because of poor implementation practices.

This process evaluation report highlights the much-needed attention to the study of creative economies in non-European and emerging and developing economies of the Global South (O'Connor, 2019). It assesses the creative district development process of the Old Town District in Sakon Nakhon—one of the 20 poorest provinces in Thailand, which the Thailand BOI identified as an area for targeted development as part of “Thailand 4.0.” This report addresses two of the more common pitfalls of creative district or city development (especially in the global south). First is the tendency to use a cookie-cutter approach and adopting this as a ‘fast-policy’, and second is the lack or absence of (local) community and industry involvement in the policymaking process. Our previous research shows some of these concerns, including issues on governance, through the different case study sites explored in our book *Re-imagining Creative Cities in Twenty-First Century Asia* (2020).

Thus, this report analyses whether the CEA is falling into the usual trap of churning out creative city ‘templates’ one after another. It looks at the efficiency and effectiveness of a programme’s implementation in reaching its target outcome and objectives. This evaluation report identifies the bottlenecks and growth barriers during the development process, and thereby allowing the CEA to develop mitigations to minimise delays or more intractable barriers. In effect, this will facilitate a more efficient and effective use of time, money, and human resources, which would strengthen the sustainable growth of the creative industries, and thus the creative economy.

This project also responds to the lack of detailed data being used in several global reports. In the most recent Creative Economy Outlook report, UNCTAD (2022) has again cited this gap that remains unaddressed. This is especially evident in developing economies including Thailand. It notes, “The lack of harmonised definitions and methodologies and lack of data remains a challenge for measuring the creative economy” (p. 5) and that “These countries’ creative services values were estimated for inclusion into regional and global totals but cannot be presented separately for individual economies” (p. 89).

Therefore, this report produces the necessary qualitative data to understand how creative district (and city) development works in the global south in terms of definitions and methodologies. By describing, detailing, and evaluating the development process (through an ethnographic approach), it sheds light on and provide better understanding

of the approach/es undertaken by developing countries—which are commonly western-centric and -borrowed—and how these are applied and implemented or translated into reality. This also means that the stakeholders and beneficiaries—which are the residents and districts themselves, who are commonly excluded from evaluation studies—will be foregrounded and actively involved in both the development process and evaluation process by getting their voices heard through semi-structured in-depth interviews, and focus group discussion. To this end, this research is intended to serve the local community and the emerging creative clusters/industries in the district being developed.

3.1. Objectives

In the CEA’s creative district development process, the monitoring and evaluation mechanism is not very clear. This is a critical step in documenting the learning process for both stakeholders—the CEA and the local community itself or the creative district being developed. It is important to note what worked well and what did not in the development process because the insights gained from this assessment exercise will be useful for the local creative industries in making informed decisions on how to sustain their own activities independently, which is one of the main goals of the TCDN. Having a monitoring and evaluation stage integrated into the whole process means that it could ensure clear communication of goals and expectations between the government, the industry and local community, which will create a bigger impact for the stakeholders.

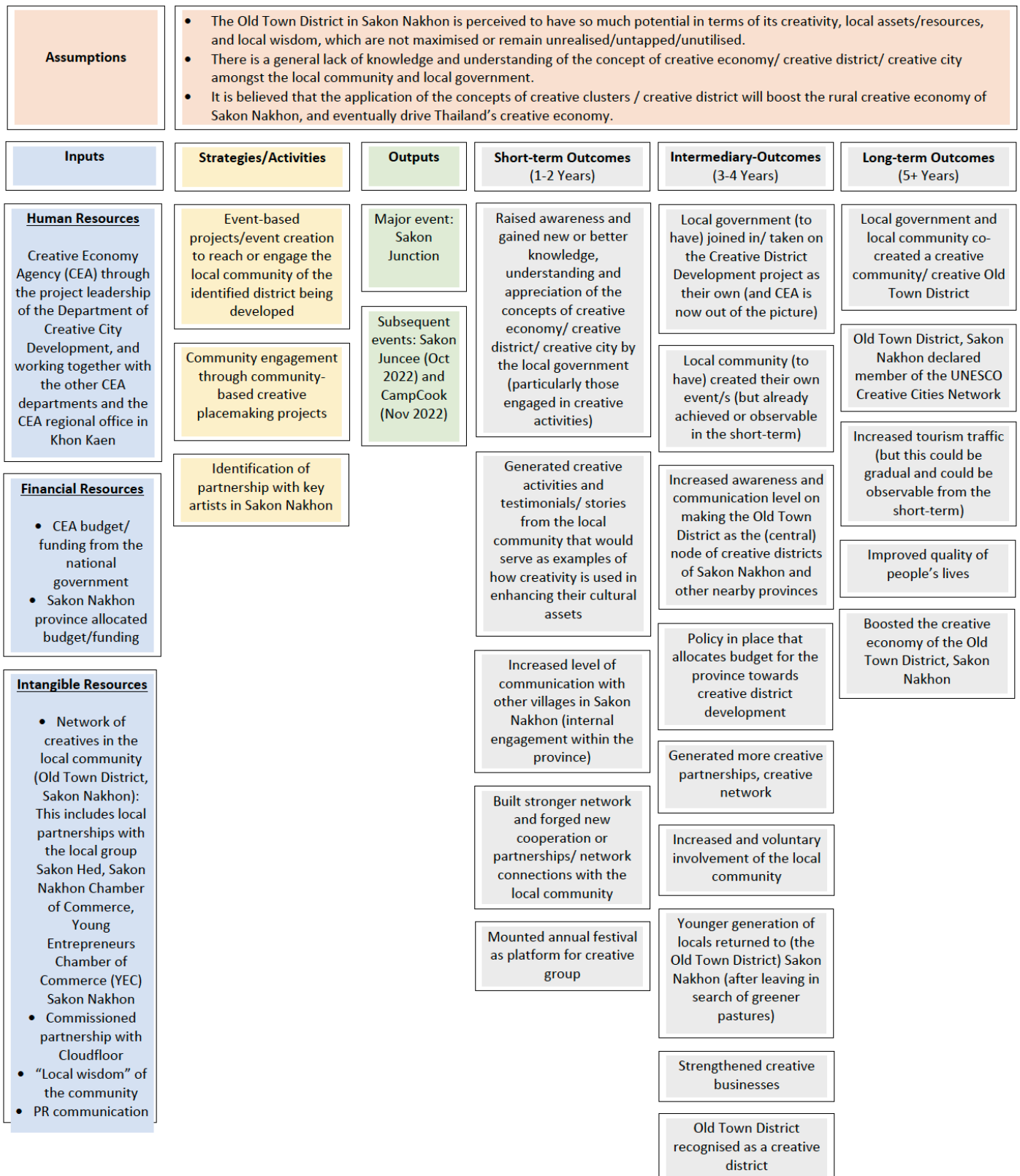
As such, this process evaluation report aims to:

- Develop an evaluation framework that will strengthen the creative district development process of the Creative District Network
- Determine how the development process was planned, how it is being rolled out and delivered to the community, and how the community is receiving this development intervention
- Uncover blind spots in the development process and identify key areas of improvement to increase efficiency and effectiveness in its implementation
- Provide an early intervention in improving the development process of creative districts
- Identify and analyse the learning curve that can be applied to other district development
- Serve as an evaluation model or guide in monitoring and assessing other districts being developed

3.2. Logic Model

This report uses the logic model as its framework for the process evaluation. A logic model is a graphic representation of the relationship of all the elements of a programme from the inputs to the outputs to their impact (Renger and Titcomb, 2002), and how the programme will work under certain assumptions or context. It is like a roadmap that

shows the ‘logical’ flow and maps out the whole process of a programme (McLaughlin and Jordan, 1999). Using the logic model for evaluation is important in understanding how a programme has achieved its intended outcomes and impacts. The insights gained from this process evaluation will be helpful for possible programme replication or application to other similar or related programme/s in the future. Below is the logic model that we, in consultation and factual verification with the CEA, have produced for this process evaluation exercise (See Figure 6).



Material Resources

- CEA building (Bangkok head office)
- CEA satellite offices (Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Songkhla)

Supporting Policies

- Thailand’s National Strategy (2018-2037)
- Thailand’s long-term strategic development plan: Thailand 4.0

External Factors

- Local government / municipality is unresponsive and Indifferent towards project proposals that are perceived to be not generating income or economic value.
- CEA’s budget is subject to the approval of the Bureau of Budget, Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, and Ministry of Finance.
- Changes to the political administration at the local level affects project continuity (because it’s not yet part of the national strategy (20-year plan)).

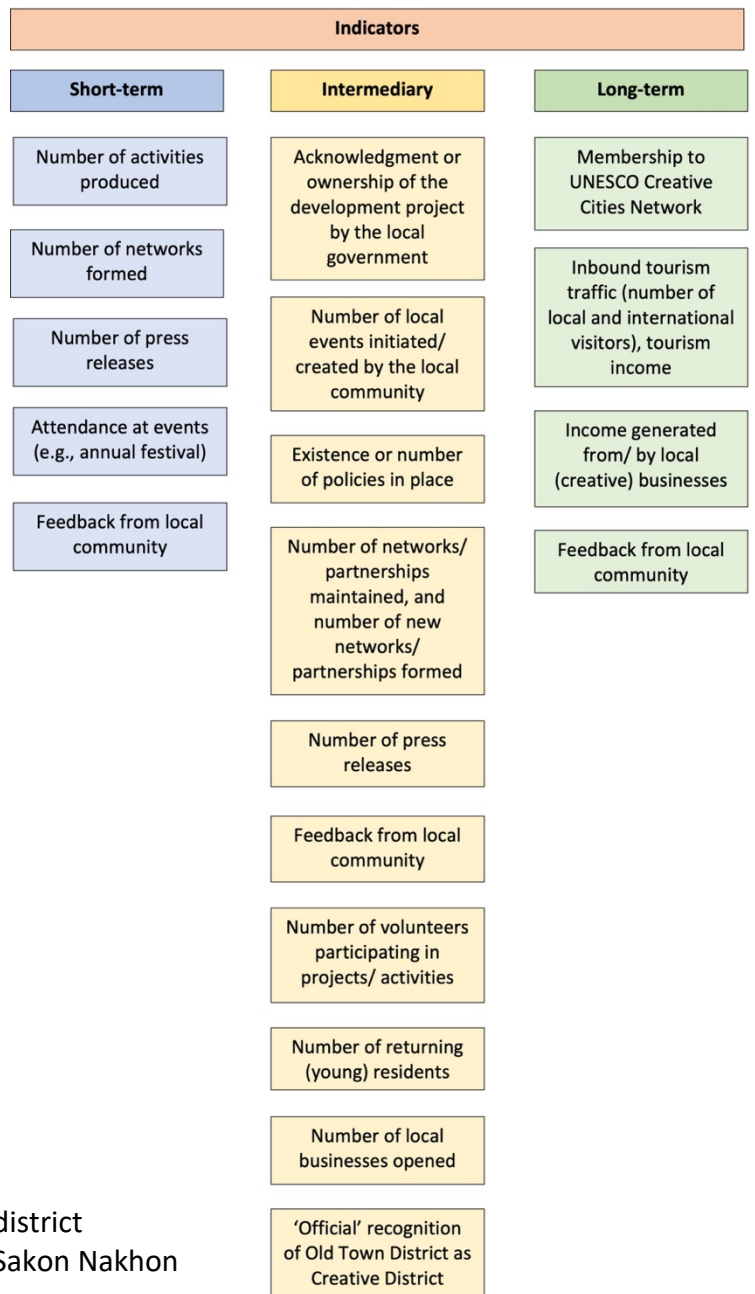


Figure 6. Logic model for evaluating the creative district development process of the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon

3.3. Process evaluation questions

The process evaluation questions of this report revolve around the **context** and the **implementation** of the creative district development of the Old Town District in Sakon Nakhon by the Creative Economy Agency.

1. The **context** questions look at both national (Thailand) and regional (Northeast) contexts, where Sakon Nakhon is situated and in which the Creative Economy Agency operates.

The main context question is:

→ How do the contexts of Thailand and the Northeastern region contribute to or hinder the creative district development process of the Old Town in Sakon Nakhon?

The sub-questions are:

- 1.1. Given the national and regional contexts, how does the Creative Economy Agency approach and address the issues described in the Assumptions of the logic model framework?
 - 1.2. How does the Creative Economy Agency relate with the local community of the Old Town District? How engaged are they with the community? Is the process inclusive or exclusionary?
2. The **implementation** questions examine how the Creative Economy Agency has implemented and delivered its main output (Sakon Junction) in developing the Old Town District in Sakon Nakhon as a creative district.

The main implementation question is:

→ To what extent is the main output or programme developed (Sakon Junction) implemented and delivered guided by the Creative Economy Agency's strategic framework (as indicated in the prototype document)?

The sub-questions are:

- 2.1. How is CEA utilising its partnerships with creative organisations (e.g., Sakon Hed group, YEC, Mann Craft, Local art space, etc.) in developing the Old Town District as a creative district?
- 2.2. How effective is their engagement with the 'non-creative' local community in developing the Old Town District as a creative district?

3.4. Methodology

This project utilises qualitative data collection methods based on the exploratory nature of the process evaluation questions. These are primarily in-person and online semi-structured in-depth interviews and a hybrid focus group discussion. These include four department heads of the CEA (Creative City Development, Creative Industry Development, Policy and Strategic Planning, Communication and Marketing), heads or founders of selected creative organisations (in crafts and folk art, and visual arts), and residents. A total of 16 key informants participated in the interview and focus group, six of whom chose to be anonymous.

The interviews were audio recorded, while the hybrid focus group was video recorded via Zoom. These were conducted in Thai and English. We hired an interpreter to facilitate better communication and understanding and a bilingual transcriber to transcribe the recordings. These were conducted across different days between March and April 2023.

We also analysed documents from the CEA, local government units, and the creative organisations. These will include policy documents such as the national strategic development plan, CEA's strategic plan, prototype summary reports, and previous studies on Thailand's cultural and creative districts.

The small sampling size and short time frame for the fieldwork and the whole project are the limitations of this project.

3.5. Ethical considerations

All materials relating to this study have been reviewed and approved by the members of the University of Glasgow College of Arts Research Ethics panel. All data and information generated from this research project have been handled with care and responsibility in accordance with the UK's Data Protection Act 2018 and Thailand's Personal Data Protection Act.

All research participants involved in this project have been treated with courtesy and respect. They have been fully informed about the project and the different processes involved before taking part. All forms and documents presented to the participants are written in English and Thai. Their participation is based on informed consent and is voluntary. Each participant is of legal age and has the competence or capacity to give consent. No children or individual considered part of a vulnerable group have been involved in this project. Most of the key informants are identified because of the roles or positions they hold in the community or organization, and these are generally publicly available information. Private individuals or community members who have no publicly available information have been asked about their preference for anonymity. No personal data of special characteristics information are asked nor published at any point in this project.

All research activities have been coordinated with the CEA's point person in the local community, who also served as our local guide. The interpreter is also a long-time resident in Sakon Nakhon and has also served as another guide who helped us ensure that that we observe cultural protocols and nuances during our fieldwork.

4. Key Findings

4.1. Contexts

We have identified four contextual factors that affect the creative district development process of the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon. These are political, cultural and creative, economic, and social contexts.

Political

The context of Thailand's national policy distribution affects how the CEA approaches each province. As a promotional agency, the CEA does not have the power to form legislation (Buakeow, 2023). Since there is no supporting policy, the budget for each project is limited. Due to this limited annual budget, the CEA needs to collaborate with other governmental offices to operate fully and efficiently and to sustain all their projects. However, there is a limitation due to the allowable term of office for each government body. For municipalities, the term is four years, which means that if the CEA proposes a project towards the incumbent's end of term, it is highly likely that the proposed project will be denied.

For the TCDN initiative, the CEA initiated the selection process. The CEA's Creative City Development Director Montinee Yongvikul (2023) explains that the CEA first sent out invitations to all 76 provinces of Thailand and Bangkok to join the network. These invitations were mainly directed to government offices such as the Provincial Office, the Municipality Office, and the Cultural Provincial Office. The CEA then waited for replies from these government offices. Interested provinces are then asked to fill out an application form, so that the CEA can evaluate the provinces' potentials and assets. The selection process begins as soon as the CEA receives the completed application forms.

In the case of Sakon Nakhon, none of the government offices replied to the CEA's invitation. However, the CEA has identified the Old Town district to have very strong potential, particularly through the Sakon Hed network (Sinpibul, 2023). Consequently, the CEA sought a partner in the province, and they eventually collaborated with Kasetsart University (Sakon Nakhon campus), which suggested the Old Town district and Tha Rae district to be considered for potential creative district development. The CEA then hired the architectural firm Cloudfloor to conduct preliminary field research on both districts. Eventually, the Old Town district was selected for the TCDN project (Sinpibul, 2023).

Based on the assumptions outlined in the logic model, the CEA posits that the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon exhibits substantial potential in terms of creativity, local assets, resources, and local wisdom. However, these attributes are presently not fully utilized or remain untapped. The CEA believes that the strategic implementation of creative clusters and creative district concepts within the Old Town district will serve as a catalyst for enhancing the rural creative economy of Sakon Nakhon. It is also anticipated to have a positive ripple effect on Thailand's overall creative economy in the long run. However, there is a prevailing deficiency in knowledge and comprehension concerning the concepts of

creative economy, creative district, and creative city within the local community and the local government. This continues to be a barrier for the CEA despite its numerous efforts to increase the awareness level of the public.

According to the CEA's Director of Policy and Strategy, Jaroenpong Suppatheerathada, the CEA operates within two main strategic development plans: the annual plan and the five-year plan. The National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) needs to approve the CEA's five-year plan to ensure alignment with the national strategy (Suppatheerathada, 2023). Both annual and five-year plans also lead to budget approval from the Budget Bureau and NESDC. Each year, the CEA needs to propose to the Budget Bureau and the Cabinet. The Cabinet then determines the budget allocation, and the CEA defends this in the parliament. Throughout this process, the support from NESDC is immensely important (Yongvikul, 2023).

In terms of the TCDN funding, Yongvikul (2023) mentions that the budget comes from two sources. First is the CEA's own allocated budget from the government, but this is not sustainable as it cannot always fund each creative district continuously. Second is through the NESDC funding, which is more sustainable because it oversees the regional plan and the regional budget. Thus, if the CEA could secure the NESDC funding, then it will be able to "utilise the district's cultural assets, its creativity to create value" (ibid). The CEA usually needs to do it both ways because it is a very small support agency.

Cultural and creative

One of the main reasons that the CEA has chosen to develop Sakon Nakhon as a creative district is the strong network of creators or the creative people. Before the CEA's involvement, these people had grouped together and called themselves 'Sakon Hed' (as discussed in the background section). They serve as a good starting point for the creative district development project (Niyomkar, 2023). Cloudfloor, as CEA's representative, primarily collaborated with Sakon Hed to create programmes and explore the potential of the Old Town district by walking around the city (Informant 2, 2023).

Apart from the Sakon Hed group, many government entities and universities have been actively involved in the development of the Old Town. In 2016, Sakon Nakhon City Municipality initiated the development of the Indigo Fabric Road (Pha Kram Road) in front of the Phra That Choeng Chum Worawihan Temple, which is considered the main temple in the Old Town district. This road transforms into a walking street market and is temporarily closed from 15:00 to 20:00 from Fridays to Sundays. It hosts several shops offering indigo-based products, along with other stalls that sell food and other local products.

Additionally, there is a master plan preparation project in Old Town, Sakon Nakhon, in which Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University collaborated with the Sakon Nakhon City Municipality, Sakon Nakhon Chamber of Commerce, and the Young Entrepreneur Chamber of Commerce. The objective of this project is to formulate master plans, guidelines, action plans, and various measures for the preservation and development of the Old Town district. It intends to serve as a framework for the conservation and development of all sectors within the area. The scope of work includes:

1. Conducting studies, research, collection, analysis, and presentation of documentary evidence, both primary and secondary, as well as field data across various fields. Additionally, consulting with agencies related to the study area on various issues.
2. Analysing and evaluating the characteristics and value of the study area, including unique identity and potential, along with identifying problems and limitations of the area.
3. Studying, reviewing, exploring, analysing, and evaluating cultural and natural heritage sites to create a cultural heritage map of the old city.
4. Developing a master plan and preservation and development plan for the old city, which includes:
 - 4.1 Establishing the vision, objectives, and goals for the preservation and development of the Old Town area. This encompasses physical, social, economic, cultural, traditional aspects, and the participation of all sectors.
 - 4.2 Proposing policies, guidelines, and measures to promote incentives, regulations, local ordinances, and rules that concern the conservation and development of the Old Town area. These should be clear, reasonable, and consistent with the area's characteristics.
 - 4.3 Proposing plans, projects, and activities in the form of a master plan, with detailed implementation strategies.
 - 4.4 Presenting plans, projects, and activities with specific details on core issues, including underlying principles, objectives, operational guidelines, project area plans or visual representations as appropriate, timelines, budgets, funding sources, responsible individuals, groups, or organizations, and anticipated outcomes.
5. Organising activities to enhance knowledge, publicising, and promoting the participation of all relevant sectors (Old Town Sakon Nakhon, 2018).

In 2022, the Thai Public Broadcasting Service (Thai PBS) conducted a small public survey in the Old Town district. This involved presentations of the old town development directions from three groups: Sakon Nakhon City Municipality, Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University, and the CEA. Sakon Nakhon City Municipality focused on the smart city concept, Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University proposed the historic old town direction, while the CEA suggested the development of the creative district ('Hug Phaeng to Build the City of Sakon', 2022).

Approximately 50 individuals participated in the survey and voted for the direction they wanted to see for the old town. Before listening to the presentations, the survey results showed 17.44% of the respondents favoured the smart city concept, 16.28% preferred the

historic old town direction, and 66.28% voted for the creative district development. After the presentations from each group, the preference for the creative district development significantly increased to 86.64%, and only 7.89% supporting the smart city concept and 5.26% still preferring the historic old town direction ('Hug Phaeng to Build the City of Sakon', 2022).

Economic

The economic context of Thailand and the provinces in the Northeastern region also impacts the CEA's approach to the development of the creative Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon. Increasing economic value is typically considered a significant Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the development of creativity-related discourses and policies in Thailand. Moreover, there is greater emphasis on the Northeastern region due to its comparatively high poverty rate compared to that of the rest of the country (National Statistical Office, 2023). Consequently, the CEA's creative district development places considerable importance on achieving economic advantages as a key goal.

According to Yongvikul (2023), the KPIs for her department are 1) achieving an economic value of THB 900 Million from all events and festivals, and 2) implementing at least one plan to support the creative district for each province under the TCDN. Based on this and the assumptions presented in the logic model, the CEA's strategy is to organise event-based activities such as Bangkok Design Week or Sakon Junction in Sakon Nakhon.

These events serve as 'experiments' conducted by the CEA to test and assess the area's potential and to showcase it to all stakeholders. Yongvikul (2023) further explains that this helps everyone "to visualise the most important thing and to create a dialogue with the government agency. So, event-based activity is like the easier tool to communicate with them, and finally we just create some other content for them."

The CEA Khon Kaen branch also emphasises fostering the growth of its local creative economy (Informant 3, 2023). One of the metrics used to measure this growth is the increasing number of hours that people spend in the Old Town district, as it correlates with the economic development of the region. For example, social and economic activities in the Old Town normally used to finish around 5:00 P.M. However, after the Sakon Junction event, the atmosphere shifted, and the usage of the area extended to around 7:00 P.M.

Another important economic context in Thailand that impacts the CEA's approach to creative district development is tourism. As a developing country, Thailand has relied heavily on tourism in the past decades. Hence, it is almost inevitable that the country's creative district development will be tied to the goal of promoting tourism.

Yongvikul (2023) confirms that every government agency asks the CEA to do tourism activities, but this is not the main objective of the creative district development. "The first purpose is to attract the creators from outside or maintain the creators inside that area to stay in that district because creator is the key element to create the event" such as Sakon Junction.

Social

The CEA recognises the importance of the creative people in the Old Town district. However, its creative development should also favour its residents. During its preliminary field research, Cloudfloor interacted with many locals, but there is a lack of substantial follow-through in terms of gathering feedback from them especially now that there are developments in place (Informant 2, 2023).

The CEA describes this as an indirect engagement with the local community. For instance, Sinpibul (2023) mentions that they invite those who do not fully understand about the creative district development to enjoy the event. However, they are not surprised that the residents are not familiar about the existence of the CEA as a public organisation because they engage with other partners such as Cloudfloor and other local entities that will work with the creators or artists and invite the residents to join the event (Informant 1, 2023).

Nevertheless, whether the engagement with the local community is direct or indirect is relatively immaterial. It is the type and quality of engagement and the outcome of this engagement that matter more. The social context of Sakon Nakhon can be characterised by its strong collective local identity and their pride as Isan people despite it being a multi-ethnic community. Engagement with them should be built on this social capital.

Overall, the contexts of Thailand and the Northeastern region both contribute and hinder the creative district development process of the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon. There is a strong network of creators in Sakon Nakhon and its surrounding provinces. This group of people knows their cultural and creative assets and knows how to utilise them. Once there is a key driver (e.g., artist or creator) from the target area, it is relatively easier to develop the creative district. Moreover, there are many government organisations who have worked to support the cultural assets in the area. Even though indigo, the main cultural asset of Sakon Nakhon, has not been developed and utilised to its fullest, Indigo has always been involved in the policy dialogue of many government agencies (i.e. Sakon Nakhon Provincial Office, Tourism Authority of Thailand, and Ministry of Commerce).

Despite the robust assets of Sakon Nakhon, the national context of Thailand significantly impacts the development process of the creative Old Town district. As evident from the preceding discussion, the position of the CEA as a promotional or supporting agency constrains their ability to endorse the establishment of the creative district fully in terms of both budget and policy support. The CEA still relies on NESDC and the Budget Bureau for the approval of the annual budget and needs to persuade NESDC to incorporate the creative district into the country's regional plan.

Moreover, it is important to note that the term of municipality in Thailand lasts for four years, which results in limited continuity of the creative district project unless it is mandated in the national strategy. As a tourism-driven country, tourism has become a tangible economic KPI for numerous government agencies (Informant 3, 2023). Consequently, tourism often emerges as the primary focus in discussions related to creative district

developments, whereas the CEA actually aims to foster the growth of the area itself for the benefit of the creators and the local population.

4.2. Implementation

Given the contexts of how the CEA operates, it is technically acting as the bridge or the middleperson between the national and local government and the local community that is being developed as a creative district. At the heart of its key processes is effective coordination and liaison with all stakeholders. This involves dealing with top level government agencies to push for policy initiatives that will directly benefit local creative placemaking development and engaging with the grassroots communities to ensure that their voices are heard.

Within the CEA, the Policy and Strategic Planning Department and the Creative City Development Department work together in setting out the overall five-year development plan and key performance indicators. The Creative City Development Department then works with each city that is going to be developed as a creative district by developing a project or an event that will launch the local area as a creative district. After the first run of the event, the Business and Innovation Development Department then further develops the capabilities of the local community through various capacity building programmes. Meanwhile, the Communication and Marketing Department disseminates and promotes the event or project to the public.

The first phase of the creative district development was completed between 2020 and 2022. This was primarily the planning, development, and ‘testing’ stage (to see how it will be received) for the creative districts being developed. The objective was to build a network of districts and raise awareness amongst local organisations and the general public.

The second phase is happening between 2023 and 2027. It now aims to identify the district’s key people and organisations that will lead the district’s development and lobby for the creative economy and creative city policy initiatives to be integrated into the municipality’s strategic development plan. This specifically targets on getting a resource or budget allocation for the district, so that the programme or event can be continued and sustained. The idea here is for the CEA to remove itself from the picture gradually—that is CEA’s support and assistance is minimised until the district can stand on its own. For 2023, the CEA is developing a Creative City module to train the key players and stakeholders in the TCDN, generate knowledge exchange, and share best practices and experiences.

The CEA’s main output for its creative placemaking strategy is the Sakon Junction event, which was held on 9-12 December 2021. The CEA started planning in 2019 and commissioned Cloudfloor, a Bangkok-based global think tank and architectural firm, to conduct field research in Sakon Nakhon in 2020 (Yongvikul, 2023).

Partnerships with creative organisations

The main strength of the CEA's process in developing Sakon Nakhon as a creative district is its ability to identify key partners and work with them. Together with Cloudfloor, the CEA has strategically and effectively identified the key creative people and organisations in Sakon Nakhon to position the Old Town as a creative district. These include Gypsy Janpengpen (Gypsy Coffee Drip Café), Mann Craft, Local Art Space, Baan Sangiam-Manee, and the YEC amongst many others. Key to all these connections is the YEC, which is represented by Tammawit Limlert Charoenvanich, whose strong network and business connections have brought almost everyone together in one big event. His passion and local patriotism have also helped inspire local community members to take part in the creative district development process.

Even before these partnerships however, there have been many individual and community-led initiatives that encourage creative development amongst the residents. These are only fuelled by the spirit of volunteerism with no external funding or support. For instance, Airatda Mahachai, founder of Local Art Space, has somewhat functioned like a representative of the people working in the Arts in Sakon Nakhon. Mahachai (2023) shares that it's relatively easy to gather the local community to work on a creative endeavour. The real challenge is making them understand the big goal or the purpose behind these initiatives. She recalls having to visit a certain community ten times to talk to the leader and the members, gain their trust, and make them see the big picture of the activity. "It's really difficult to just ask them for the permission. You need to be with them and talk with them for many times until they realize that this is going to impact them in a positive way." One thing that Mahachai has learned from throughout this process is that community involvement takes time.

In the past, there were also very limited art or exhibition spaces to showcase one's creative works (Artist X, 2023). Most of the time, it was only through the university spaces or in the big department store in the city. With the creative district development of the Old Town, more spaces and platforms are gradually being provided to the community. These include allowing art to be painted on certain walls as a form of public or street art amongst others (Mahachai, 2023).

The creation of more creative spaces is one of the direct outcomes of the effective implementation of the CEA's creative placemaking strategy. Residents have noticed that the district and the city has become livelier in the last two years. One resident comments that it was only friends or family that visit Sakon Nakhon but now sees local and foreign tourists gradually increasing (Resident 2, 2023).

This positive impact has made the local community realise the potential of Old Town as a creative district. At first, it was difficult to explain and make them understand the creative district concept. They ignored the idea before but after the success of Sakon Junction, people are now gradually understanding what it means. However, the awareness level still needs to be increased.

Engagement with the ‘non-creative’ local community members

The low engagement with the ‘non-creative’ local community members is the main weakness of the CEA’s creative district development process. It is but natural to engage with the creative people because the Old Town district development is meant to be a creative one. This is of course necessary and given because creativity must be at the heart of the whole development process to achieve the ‘creative district’ output.

In doing so however, it has somehow unintentionally created a creative and non-creative divide in the community. It appears that the focus has only been the concerns of the ‘creative’ people, but how about the ‘non-creative’ people? The ‘ordinary’ folks? What is a creative district for them? How do they see it or define it? While this is not very pronounced at the moment, the residents that we have spoken to had expressed that they were unaware of such developments and felt somewhat excluded from the process.

The engagement has also mostly been with the younger generation, which is sensible and part of the strategy because the idea is for them to see the potential of Old Town, Sakon Nakhon, so that they do not leave and look for better opportunities outside of their hometown (Resident 2, 2023). Having three relatively big universities in Sakon Nakhon means there is a large population of students whose creative talents can be honed for the benefit of the province. However, there is little to no engagement with the older generation who just attend the events most of the time (Petehkam, 2023). Their insights and experiences do not form a large part of the creative district development process.

The maximal engagement with the creatives and the minimal engagement with the other sectors of the community have created an imbalance in terms of understanding the concept and achieving a common goal. The collective spirit is not whole just yet, as people produce different meanings of what a creative district is, and here lies the confusion and mismatch with the overall goal of the creative district development.

In Mahachai’s perspective, there is no right or wrong way of interpreting what a creative district is, as this concept is relative and can mean differently to many people. However, it is not only about the creative district concept. The production of art itself that is specific for the creative district can also have different interpretations. This problem becomes evident when there are different teams working on a certain project (for the creative district) and each team interprets it differently. For example, they were working on a sculpture for Sakon Junction. Some interpreted the sculpture as something that looks like a part of a cremation ceremony and thought it inappropriate to be displayed in the event, while others thought it was unique and appropriate for Sakon Junction (2023).

The problem of understanding the creative district concept does not only occur at the community level but also at the municipality level. As discussed in the previous section, the political context of Thailand is a major barrier to the attainment of the overall creative district development of Old Town. For instance, the fact that the municipal

government does not have a solid grasp of what a creative district slows down the whole development process.

There are disagreements between the local government and creative groups in Old Town (Informant 2, 2023). This is seen in how they interpret the use of a public space such as the walls of an abandoned and semi-demolished old prison (See Figure 7). Many artists know that the old prison will be completely destroyed soon, so they think that they might as well use the huge walls as art canvases and transform it into an art space (See Figure 8). Even though the wall paintings has been generally well received by the public, the municipality was unhappy about this act and later posted a sign that prohibits any form of marking to be done on the walls (See Figure 9). The English translation reads: “No person shall scratch, write, spray paint, or cause to appear in any manner whatsoever any text, picture, or mark on the wall unless permission has been obtained from the municipality of Sakon Nakhon, which is the only entity allowed to use state properties.” The municipality treats any action that has not been granted permission as a form of vandalism. For them, the prison walls are not meant to be used for recreation or any type of creative activity.

On the other hand, some key informants think that this has been the case only because the artist groups did not follow the process of securing permission from the municipality. For long-time resident Sopsan Petehkam (2023), this is a communication and coordination issue between the Sakon Junction group and the local government. Furthermore, most of the artists belong to the younger generation who want to do things quickly and creatively without limitations. They do not want to go through the bureaucratic process that might impose certain restrictions to what they can do. There have been attempts to discuss and negotiate with the local government to discontinue the ban on painting on the prison walls, but these are unsuccessful to date.

Another resident expresses that the idea of creative district is definitely a good thing. However, he feels that this is being ‘monopolised’ by only certain groups who tend to be already more known in the creative community and thus identified as key creative people (Resident 1, 2023). This doesn’t mean however that they are not the ‘right’ people to be tapped, but because the process was through a referral connection system, there could be other undiscovered artists who remain untapped because s/he is not part of a network.



Figure 7. The walls of an abandoned and semi-demolished old prison in Sakon Nakhon



Figure 8. Paintings on the old prison walls in Sakon Nakhon



Figure 9. The sign that prohibits any form of marking on the old prison walls in Sakon Nakhon.

Lastly, there is a lack of (local) story in the creative district development process. For example, Atcha Somphong and Tat Wattanamethee, proprietors of the traditional Thai wooden guesthouse Baan Sangiam-Manee (See Figure 10), do not have complete information about the story and history of the house or the area (2023). They think that most people in the community generally do not think about collecting their own stories or histories, which could have significant added value to their assets—cultural or creative or otherwise. Similarly, having a collection of these unique age-old hi/stories about the Old Town district highlights the local colour and adds vibrance to the whole creative district development.

There is also a lack of information about preservation of old houses, and most people do not have the financial resources to even renovate their properties. This is an area of support that the government can look at especially at the policy level such as provision of funding or other incentives for those living in centuries-old houses that are also considered cultural assets of the community.



Figure 10. Atcha Somphong and Tat Wattanamethee, proprietors of the traditional Thai wooden guesthouse Baan Sangiam-Manee

As a whole, the creative district development process of the Old Town district in Sakon Nakhon has been implemented properly in accordance with the CEA's strategic framework and objectives. In fact, given the CEA's limitations in terms of mandate and budget, it has done more than what it could. As a project that's only been running for three years, the CEA has been very effective on forging key connections with the creative sector of the community, which is the main element for the creative district development.

The minimal engagement with the non-creative community members could have been overlooked. However, this is not a result of negligence but of scarcity of resources that hinder them to conduct a larger scale engagement exercise. In that sense, the process is not necessarily exclusionary, but it could have been more inclusionary had there been more engagement at the grassroots level. The creative and the non-creative divide that was created was unintentional and can be mitigated in several ways. We have included some of these in the recommendations section.

5. Conclusion

The creative district development process of Old Town, Sakon Nakhon, led by the CEA, has demonstrated a certain degree of success. Based on the contextual analysis, the Thailand's political landscape has had a very strong influence on the CEA's approach to implementing the discourse on creative districts. As a supporting agency, the CEA lacks the authority and mandate to enact legislation that will aid the implementation of creative district policies, which makes it immensely challenging for them to secure or advocate for funding for related projects. Moreover, no local government entity in the Sakon Nakhon responded to the invitation from the CEA to establish a creative district. Consequently, the limited funding from the CEA and the absence of financial and administrative backing from the local government have created barriers towards the establishment of a creative district in Old Town, Sakon Nakhon.

To overcome this obstacle, the CEA has turned to the creative community. The cultural and creative context of the Old Town, Sakon Nakhon enables the CEA in their creative district implementation process. It is evident that the strategy of engaging with the creative community has significantly facilitated the CEA's endeavours in setting up the creative district within the area. The establishment and consolidation of this network has streamlined the CEA's process of disseminating and promoting the creative district discourse. The creator groups and the YEC have worked together towards their objective of establishing the creative district.

The CEA's event-based approach to creative district development, such as the Sakon Junction held in the Old Town district, demonstrates the potentials of the creative and cultural assets of Sakon Nakhon. However, urban development is a complex matter due to the presence of numerous stakeholders who inhabit and benefit from the area. The pronounced emphasis on the creative demographic has unintentionally resulted in the inadvertent neglect of non-creative counterparts, as reiterated throughout the interviews. Furthermore, the absence of a clear understanding of the creative district discourse stands out as a primary challenge, impeding the full engagement of both the local government and non-creative individuals in realising the creative district concept in Old Town, Sakon Nakhon.

We therefore conclude that there is no failure in theory or implementation in the CEA's creative district development process of the Old Town in Sakon Nakhon. While there are no glaring deficiencies either in the theoretical underpinnings or in the practical execution, the prevailing political and economic barriers within the Thai context impede the CEA's process and complicate the complete and effective implementation of the project. As a result, there remains potential for enhancement in the implementation process. To this end, we have provided a comprehensive list of eight specific suggestions, indicating practical ways to progress along the intended path.

6. Recommendations

Based on the key findings and our interaction with all research participants, we put forward the following recommendations on how the creative district development process for the Old Town District in Sakon Nakhon can be further improved.

a. Increase engagement with the local community further, especially with the ‘non-creative’ people and older generation or long-time residents in the area.

The current engagement level does not fully capture and represent the majority of the community members. If one of the goals of creative district development is to gather and present more stories and histories about the area and its people and utilise their local wisdom, there must be higher engagement with long-time residents or older people who will have more stories and insights to share about the Old Town district. They are particularly important to include because they have witnessed the growth and changes in the Old Town. Their views can later be fused with the younger generation’s idea of creative district and eventually form a more interesting approach to telling the story of a creative Old Town district. These include the ‘non-creative’ people who can also be creative in their own way and contribute to the creative district development process.

For instance, long-time resident Petehkam (2023) suggests that having a zoning system in the area could be useful, so that it can be clearly distinguished as ‘Old Town’ or ‘New Town’ and people can see and learn about the district’s own story and history—how it has developed and evolved over time—especially for the younger generation. There are also many hidden gems in the Old Town district that remain hidden because only the dominant or more popular places and their stories tend to be heard and promoted. Petehkam points out that there are many temples in Sakon Nakhon, but people visiting from other places only know the main temple (Phra That Choeng Chum Worawihan Temple) and only go here. However, there are several beautiful temples that are also worth visiting but not promoted as much. For example, there is a stone buddha image in Wat Saphan Kham, and the Phra Hai Soke (“out of the sorrow when you go make a bow there”) at Wat Si Chomphu.

Resident 1 also indicates that local community members must be involved right from the beginning of the initiative—from conception and not just in the end when the event has already been finalised and they are invited only as attendees or participants. It is probable that several community members don’t attend these events because they don’t think that they are actively involved in the process and feel excluded.

b. Make the engagement process more inclusive, egalitarian, and accessible to everyone.

Some residents have observed that the creative groups appear to be cliquish and belong to a privileged class. They belong to a certain status or grouping who has access to certain networks. Hence, some feel that if one has no connection then s/he would not be tapped as a potential creative person.

For example, resident 1 remarks, “I don’t feel connected to them, and I don’t feel like I’m part of the development. They plan on their own as a group and only explain to everyone in the end. That is why we don’t immediately understand because we did not take part in the process. I think that the locals should be a very big part of that” (2023).

This lack of belongingness underscores how some of the community members that we have interacted with feels. Some of them are concerned that the context and culture of Old Town might totally change when “new things” are added and that it might not really reflect the Old Town’s ‘real’ identity (Resident 1, Resident 2, 2023).

c. Make access to public spaces, facilities, and services for the local community more accessible, democratic, and less bureaucratic.

This is perhaps outside of the remit of the CEA. However, this is part of the bigger picture of the creative district development, in liaison with the local municipality. For example, Somphong and Wattanamethee share their experience in organising the Sakon Hed festival for Sakon Nakhon. The initial idea is to hold this within the Old Town district because it showcases the assets of the district, and it is meant to promote the area. They have followed the procedures and guidelines in using the public space such as the Chalodem Phrakiat Park, but they were not granted the permission. Hence, they have had to change plans and hold the event in Farm Hug, which is outside of the Old Town district.

d. Launch a more active publicity and awareness campaign for the creative district development.

Most of the residents we have interacted with say that it’s their first time to hear about the ‘creative district’ concept, including the CEA as a public organisation. For example, some of them only get to know about the CEA because it had to do with their studies or work and had to use some of its facilities and resources. Otherwise, it would be pretty unknown to them.

The publicity and awareness campaign should target the younger generation, so that they see the potential and the value of the district and the province and are encouraged to stay in the area instead of looking for opportunities elsewhere. In doing so, they are able to develop local capabilities and attract more tourists to visit, which translates to more business and income for the community (Somphong and Wattanamethee, 2023).

e. Creative district development initiatives should ideally be locally led, and government supported.

The creative district concept can be first introduced and explained to the local community, but the development should be a joint initiative driven by the community members themselves and only guided by the local government. This means that the process can begin top-down and then develop bottom-up.

At present, this is already being done, but the bottom-up approach can further be improved, and the local government support should be more evident. One resident has articulated it very well. “The government can support, but they shouldn’t be the main driving force. It is supposed to come from the artists, the local community, and the private sector” (Resident 1, 2023).

When community members speak of lack of government support, they mean that there is no engagement with them, and their voices are not heard. The local government carries out its own plans and tends to disregard the ‘real’ concerns of the community. They just do it their own way and do not consult the people whom they are serving. Compounding this problem is the fact that the municipality doesn’t understand the creative district concept, and thus there is no monetary support for any community-led initiatives.

Somphong and Wattanamethee (2023) are still hopeful that this will change one day for the benefit of the local community. As of now, they are seeing a big gap of understanding between the creative people and organisations and the local administrators. The approach tends to be more directive instead of consultative and supportive.

f. Make the elements of creative district development more authentic and truly local.

One resident reveals that many of the products being sold in the Old Town district, including those on Pha Kram Road (Indigo Walking Street), are not all genuinely made in Sakon Nakhon nor produced by Old Town residents (Resident 1, 2023). Even some of the sellers come from other places, and they just go there to sell their products. It has transformed to just become a purely business endeavour due to the generally commercial nature of the street markets in Thailand. The prices are also marked up for tourists and are not even affordable for the residents.

While the creative district development process involves growing local businesses to drive the creative economy forward, it should still focus on authentic local culture by highlighting the cultural and creative value and not just driven by the economic value.

g. Make community participation in the creative district development voluntary and not mandatory.

Local community members should be asked about their willingness to participate in any event or initiative. They should be given the opportunity to accept or refuse participation. It shouldn’t be forced or imposed on them. Participation should be sustainable and allow the community members to share what they can and when they can.

One resident has noted that in one of the events in the Old Town district, there was one street where all residents were asked (to the point of being required) to somewhat redesign their house and to open it to the public for showcase during the event. Some of

these residents felt bad because their privacy has somewhat been compromised without having the chance to decline participation (Resident 1, 2023).

Another resident then cites one village in Mukdahan as an example, where he has witnessed how everyone helps each other to decorate the houses because they understood the concept and the overall goal of the initiative, and they were willing to participate out of their own accord.

h. Ask the local community members of their creative district development wish list.

One of the best ways of gathering and engaging community members in a consultative and supportive manner is by organising a townhall meeting and asking them what they ‘really’ need and want to see developed in their district that is not just for the purposes of aesthetics, tourism, or economy.

For instance, one resident expresses concern that the city might be “changed” or developed only to cater to outsiders or tourists and that there’s no real development for the locals (Rawirot, 2023).

Meanwhile, Somphong and Wattanamethee (2023) hope to see an information centre. “It’s like you come up here, then you see the map of Sakon Nakhon, the Old Town district, and you learn some information about how they produce the different Sakon Nakhon products, the different temples they can visit—not just Wat Phra That Choeng Chum Worawihan.

They also wish to see their guesthouse Baan Sangiam-Manee being used as a role model for other traditional houses in the Old Town district to follow suit. “We also dream that other people in this area begin to understand the value of the assets that they have and to realise their potential to help them revalue their assets” (ibid).

Nonetheless, the big dream for them is really to see how all the stakeholders can come together—the local government, the business sector, the residents—to plan and discuss possible policies and solutions to solve the ongoing problems of the area and generate more creative activities, develop more talents, improve the local creative economy. “That way, we can finally make the city grow” (ibid).

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix 1: (Named) Research Participants

Local community members

Name	Description/ Affiliation
Sopsan Phetkham	Long-time resident (older generation)
Chutmongkon Rawirot	Long-time resident (younger generation)
Prach Niyomkar	Mann Craft Shop
Airatda Mahachai	Local Art Space
Atcha Somphong Tat Wattanamethee	Baan Sangiam-Manee
Tammawit Limlert Charoenvanich	Young Entrepreneur Chamber of Commerce

Creative Economy Agency

Name	Designation
Montinee Yongvikul	Director of Creative City Development
Inthaphan Buakeow	CEA Deputy Director and Acting Director of Creative Industry Development
Jaroenpong Suppatheerathada	Director of Policy and Strategic Planning
Pantitra Sinpibul	Director, Thailand Creative and Design Centre, Bangkok

8.2. Appendix 2: Interview and Focus Group Protocol/Guide

Interview ID number		Participant's name				Mode (Circle accordingly)	In-person Online Hybrid
Designation				Affiliation			
Agreement/consent given? (Y/N)				Named/Anonymous?			
Interview date			Start time		End time		Zone
Location				City		Country	

Pre-interview

1. Researchers introduce themselves.
2. Researchers explain the study/research project (overview, objectives, coverage of the interview, length of the interview).
3. Researchers inform the participant that there is a Thai-English interpreter who will assist both investigators and the participants throughout the process.
4. Researchers explain the confidentiality of the interview to the participant and that they have the option to be named or anonymous.
5. Researchers further explain about the participant's rights not to answer any question if they do not wish to and that s/he has the right to stop the interview at any time without jeopardy.
6. Secure agreement/consent from the participant to be interviewed.
7. Secure agreement/consent from the participant for the interview to be recorded.

Interview proper

1. Start recording the interview. State interview ID (date, venue, time, other details).
2. Start asking the questions.

Post-interview

1. Researchers thank the participant and explain what will happen after the interview.
2. End the recording.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussion are designed to be flexible. This allows the investigators, who will be conducting the interviews and facilitating the focus group, to follow up unexpected lines of enquiry relating to the key questions about the creative district development process of Sakon Nakhon.

The following issues and themes will be covered in the **interviews**:

1. Participant's role in the creative district development process
2. Problems they encountered
3. Their interaction with the national or local government or (fellow) residents/ community members
4. Benefits of the creative district development of Sakon Nakhon
5. Areas of improvement

The following issues and themes will be covered in the **focus group discussion**:

1. Concerns and issues about how their place in sustainable urbanization might look like
2. How local participation has contributed to the development process
3. Steps being taken together towards achieving net zero in relation to the creative placemaking process

Indicative Questions

Group 1: Department heads from the Creative Economy Agency (CEA)

- a. Could you tell us how long you have been with CEA?
- b. What is your main task as (job title)?
- c. How is your experience of running the department?
- d. Could you describe the development process for Sakon Nakhon?
- e. What do you think is the most important development element that CEA has provided Sakon Nakhon in relation to your role/functions?
- f. What is the next priority?
- g. What are the usual challenges you encounter (generally) in creative district development? How about in the context of Sakon Nakhon?
- h. How is CEA's engagement with the local community/ residents of Sakon Nakhon?
- i. How is the consultation process with the local community? How big or small is their participation in the development process? Why is this so?
- j. What role is given to the local community/ residents in the development process (under the assumption of a top-down approach)?
- k. What worked in the process?
- l. What did not work in the process?

Group 2: Residents, community members

- a. How long have you lived in Sakon Nakhon?
- b. How familiar are you with the creative district development of Sakon Nakhon?
- c. How would you define a creative district?
- d. Do you think Sakon Nakhon can be a creative district? Why do you think so?
- e. What do you think of the development? Of the process? How do you feel about it?
- f. Has there been a consultation with you/ the community? Have you participated in these discussions? How do you feel about the community engagement or participation? How involved were you (in the process)?
- g. Has there been a noticeable change since the development? What are these? What do you think of these changes?
- h. What do you think have worked?
- i. What do you think have not worked? What areas of development could have been improved?
- j. Is there something that you think should be prioritised in terms of developing Sakon Nakhon as a creative district?
- k. How is the level of support from the local government? National government?

Additional questions for/ if founder of a creative organisation

- l. When did you start this business/ endeavour?
- m. How is your experience of it?
- n. What challenges have you encountered?
- o. How were these addressed?
- p. What kind of support have you received from the local/ national government/ CEA?
- q. What do you think of CEA's initiative of creative district development?
- r. How is your engagement or participation in the creative district development of Sakon Nakhon?
- s. How else can the local/ national government/ CEA help or support you/ your organisation?