

## Box 26.1: Innovation on the cards for Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor

The Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) is Thailand's flagship special economic zone, covering three eastern provinces: Chachoengsao, Chonburi and Rayong. It was established in 2016 before becoming a legal entity in May 2018.

As of January 2021, the EEC hosts what is purportedly the world's eleventh-largest auto-exporting industry (EECOT, 2021).

It is also home to global suppliers of home appliances and hard disc drives, as well as a large petrochemical industry. It is envisaged as a logistics hub and gateway linking China, India and the ASEAN bloc.

A high-speed train route is presently under construction to link Bangkok's two airports with the EEC's own airport. In 2021 alone, THB 100 billion (ca US\$ 3.3 billion) has been allocated for its construction. The total cost of the EEC development is estimated at THB 1.7 trillion (ca US\$ 57 billion), with the private sector to cover 80% of the cost.

According to Dr Kanit Sangsubhan, Secretary-General of the EEC, the annual targets for private-sector contributions have been reached. For instance, half of the funding for the

high-speed rail has been allocated by the government and half by a consortium of international investors led by Thailand's CP Group (EECOT, 2021).

Dr Sangsubhan anticipates that half of the EEC's current geographical area of 13 000 km will be covered by a 5G network by February 2021 (EECOT, 2021).

### A corridor of innovation

Plans for the Eastern Economic Corridor of Innovation (EECI) were approved in May 2017 (BOI, 2017). Managed by the Ministry of Science and Technology, this innovation hub will be mandated to invest in application-oriented R&D; transfer technology to the ten sectors targeted by the *Thailand 4.0 strategy*; promote innovative and high-tech start-ups; and develop linkages between the actors of the national innovation system.

These goals are to be achieved through, *inter alia*, the establishment of public- and private-sector laboratories, testing and analysis centres, field laboratories and pilot and demonstration plants for new industrial technologies and processes.

Three categories of innovation have been prioritized for support from public research institutes and universities:

life sciences and biotechnology; automation, robotics and intelligent systems; and space technology and geo-informatics.

The EECI is scheduled to become fully operational in June 2021. Convinced that biorefineries have the potential to kickstart an era of Thai leadership in bio-industry, the director plans to establish model biorefineries to transform agricultural produce and other outputs into biofuel and bioplastic palettes for use in various bioproducts (The Nation, 2020).

Biopolis, an innovation centre for biotechnology, is set to open in the EECI in 2021. It will work alongside the planned science park, Food Innopolis, and Airpolis, another park specializing in automation, robotics and intelligent systems. These centres plan to use smart-farming technology to turn the EEC into a hub for tropical fruit production. There are also plans to produce upstream products such as food additives and supplements (FEA, 2020).

*Source:* compiled by Patarapong Intarakumnerd and Jake Lewis

UNESCO SCIENCE REPORT (2021)