

Thailand's EEC to be post-COVID Global Food Innovation Hub

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Thailand last year exported \$33 billion worth of produce ranging from rice to ready meals to tropical fruits. But with the United Nations predicting that global demand for food will rise by 60 percent within the next 10 years, and with COVID-19 disruption adding to food insecurity in many countries, the Thai government believes it can further leverage technology, innovation and logistics to raise the food sector to even greater heights.

As part of a strategy known as Thailand 4.0, the government has designated "food for the future" and "advanced agriculture and biotechnology" among the 12 target industries to be prioritized in the EEC to spearhead the transformation of the kingdom into a fully developed innovation economy.

The EEC, a 13,000 square kilometer zone south and east of Bangkok, is the focal point of Thailand 4.0. And opening in the heart of the EEC will be the Eastern Economic Corridor of Innovation, or EECi, where some of the EEC's most advanced research and development will take place.

Two key components of the EECi will be Biopolis, an innovation center for biotechnology, which will open in 2021, and Food Innopolis, a science park in which giant multinational companies and universities research, develop and innovate alongside "agropreneur" startups and small and medium sized enterprises. They will be complemented by Aripolis, specializing in automation, robotics and intelligent systems.

"The EEC's agricultural promotion plan encourages the use of technology, and smart farming to increase the area's full potential as a hub of tropical fruit production," said Dr Luxmon Attapich, Deputy Secretary-General of the Eastern Economic Corridor Office. "Beyond final products, with the help of biotechnology, we also target up-stream production and raw materials for innovation in the health and wellbeing related industries, such as functional food, food additives, and food supplement."

Food Innopolis, which is part of the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA) already operates campuses in Bangkok and major provincial cities. But by expanding into the EEC, where the government and private sector is investing some \$45 billion on infrastructure and business development, food companies will be able to upscale their activities, said Dr Luxmon.

In addition to being at the center of innovation, the EECi offers food companies the EEC's unmatched connectivity, boasting three international airports -- all soon to be linked by high-speed rail – and three sea ports. An imminent upgrade to 5G telecommunications will enable food producers to take smart farming techniques to a new level with big data supplied by drones and satellites Dr Luxmon said.