

Transforming Urban Landscapes in Thailand: The Policy Evolution from the Eastern Seaboard to the Eastern Economic Corridor – A Chronological Review

The transformation of Thailand's economic structure through the Eastern Seaboard policy has been a landmark shift from an agricultural to a semi-industrial base. This policy heralded a significant enhancement in employment rates and GDP growth, as documented by JICA in 2001, and set a precedent for economic development strategies within the country. In response to the success of this initiative, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a military junta, sought to revitalize and extend these economic reforms by introducing the Eastern Economic Corridors (EEC) in 2017. The EEC project, focusing initially on three Eastern provinces, aims at a comprehensive transformation encompassing physical and social development to elevate Thailand's global competitiveness. The Eastern Economic Corridor Office of Thailand (EECO) leads this ambitious project with a tri-fold mission: ensuring sustainable area-based development, enhancing comprehensive infrastructure and connectivity, and fostering the adoption of advanced technology and innovation.

This initiative aligns with the global movement towards integrating environmental concerns and modern planning concepts into economic development strategies, as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) underscored in 2020. The evolution of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) reflects an increasing need to harmonize development goals with sustainability imperatives, particularly those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The EEC's strategy, which incorporates smart city and aerotropolis concepts alongside provisions for enhancing the skill sets of employees and residents, marks a significant pivot towards sustainable development. However, this progressive approach also introduces challenges, particularly for local communities that may need help to adapt to the rapid changes inherent in such ambitious development projects. Despite the EEC's innovative strategies to overcome the limitations of the Eastern Seaboard policy, there remains a critical need to evaluate the effectiveness of these transitions in addressing and potentially exacerbating social and environmental issues. This study identifies and explores these gaps, focusing on the impact of the EEC's implementation on local populations and environmental sustainability.

To achieve a comprehensive analysis, this study employs a chronological analysis method. This approach allows for a detailed examination of the policy's evolution, socio-economic impacts, and the causal relationships between policy implementation and its outcomes. Through this lens, the study aims to trace the progression of Thailand's economic policies from the Eastern Seaboard to the EEC, highlighting the successes, challenges, and unintended consequences of these shifts.

This research contributes to the discourse on sustainable economic development within SEZs, offering a nuanced understanding of the EEC's approach to integrating sustainable concepts into its development strategy. By highlighting the existing and emerging gaps in the EEC's policy framework, the study provides valuable insights into the complexities of executing large-scale economic transitions in alignment with global sustainability goals. Furthermore, it proposes critical considerations for future policy formulations, aiming to bridge the social and environmental disparities identified through the research. This study thus serves as a pivotal reference for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners involved in the planning and implementing of economic development projects, both within Thailand and in similar contexts globally.