



Innovation Systems in Southeast Asia

Edited by Apiwat Ratanawaraha, Pun-Arj Chairatana and William W. Ellis

Chulalongkorn University Press: Bangkok, 2013. ISBN: 0-789740-330653

223 + XXII pages

Reviewed by John Walsh, Editor, *SIU Journal of Management*, School of Management, Shinawatra University, Thailand.

In the introduction to this collection of papers on the national innovation systems in six Southeast Asian states, written by Apiwat Ratanawaraha, it is observed that: "... the European innovation

system model is based on its own unique socio-economic, institutional and cultural environment. By adapting such a model in framing national innovation policies in Southeast Asia's vastly different political, institutional and cultural contexts, policy-makers may have discounted the significance of such factors as determinants of success (p.2).” This observation goes to the heart of the difficulties in comparing the countries meaningfully and the resulting unevenness in the book. Previously, in the foreword, one of the founders of the national innovation system concept, Professor Bengt Åke Lundvall, draws the distinction between two types of learning mode involved in the concept, STI (science, technology and innovation) and DUI (doing, using and interacting) (p.v). The governments of five of the six countries considered (Singapore is perhaps inevitably the exception) have both ignored part of the prescription to incorporate these two modes of learning by focusing on STI and undervaluing or ignoring DUI (it may be argued that the former is the preserve of academic elites in alliance with policy-makers) and, then, expanding the definition and content of the former until it becomes almost meaningless. As a result, the analytical approach suggested to the authors has become problematic. They are encouraged to consider first the key actors in the system and their roles, then interactions and linkages among those actors, third the institutional settings that govern systems, fourth the various impacts of systemic learning, structural shift, external shocks, trends and market sophistication and, finally, innovation system policy in each country concerned. As the authors follow these suggestions, they demonstrate the divergence the governments concerned have put into place and how far this might be from the original concept.

This may be demonstrated by a comparison between the case studies on Singapore and the Philippines. The former, by William W. Ellis

and Apiwat Ratanawaraha, describes the focused, planned and properly resourced approach taken by the Singaporean government that correctly identified the need for a culture of innovation and provided incentives for people to develop themselves into professionals able to contribute. More recently, the government has come to recognize the importance of popular culture and the arts as part of general innovation culture – Korea provides an inspiration here with its support of the *hallyu*. As the authors point out, government support extends to the configuration of space in public areas to increase the likelihood of the serendipitous encounter that sparks a sharing of ideas and the result is creativity. Of course, the control of space and the provision of resources and policy is dependent on scale issues that make such an approach possible in a city state but much less possible in a country of a larger size. This is evident in the case of the Philippines, with its sprawling archipelago and diversity of peoples and governance systems. Adding to the problem has been the government's approach, which has been to bundle all of its developmental aspirations together in an innovation package that includes vocational education, business incubation and sourcing foreign technology, as part of the Filipinnovation concept. Since the focus has become so diffuse, it is inevitable that some aspects will fail to perform as hoped, not least because many policies cannot be expected to bear fruit for a number of years. The result is disappointment and, to counter potential criticism, there is an incentive for the government to reinvent the scheme and relaunch it in a new form. This is made clear from the chapter by Aida L. Velasco and Raymond B. Habaradas, although they do their best to follow the analytical framework required. Of the other case studies, it is evident that Indonesia is closer to the Philippines model while Malaysia is closer to the Singapore approach. Meanwhile, the system in Vietnam relies mostly on aspiration rather than actual achievement to date.

Unfortunately, the chapter on Thailand lacks credibility because of a series of unsupported allegations concerning the Thai Rak Thai administration. However, apart from the Thailand case study, the other chapters are appropriately written and of a good academic standard.

Overall, this is an interesting and useful contribution to understanding the dynamics of innovation and economic development in Southeast Asia. It is good to see publications of this sort being produced in the region by local specialists and Chulalongkorn University Press is to be congratulated for publishing and distributing it for just 200 baht (around US\$7). I note that this volume represents the first part of an extended research project and I look forward to seeing future volumes.