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INSIGHTS

Who Should Govern AI?

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is shaping the trajectory of economies, governance, education, and human development across the globe. For developing countries like Cambodia, it is not just a technological tool—it is a transformative force that could determine whether the country remains in a low-value economic loop or leapfrogs into a competitive digital economy. As the implications of AI deepen, so does the urgency of the question: Who should govern AI?

Contrary to popular belief, the answer is not "engineers alone." While technical expertise is indispensable, it must be accompanied by ethical vision, interdisciplinary collaboration, and strategic foresight

AI: A Paradigm Shift Requiring New Governance Models

AI is not merely a continuation of digital progress—it represents a paradigm shift. Unlike traditional ICT tools that transmit or store data, AI systems learn, predict, and decide. This transformation demands new forms of oversight that account for societal values, human rights, cultural sensitivities, and long-term consequences (Chhem & Hul, 2023; Xu, Lee, & Goggin, 2024).

AI governance cannot be merely regulatory or technical—it must be strategic, inclusive, and adaptive. It must foster innovation while safeguarding justice, fairness, and equity. As the Cambodia AI Landscape highlights, this requires a human-centered, multi-sectoral, and coordinated governance system rooted in national priorities and regional cooperation (Chhem & Hul, 2023).

The Dangers of Technocratic Elitism

Technical experts have an essential role—but not an exclusive one. Engineers are trained to solve problems efficiently, but not necessarily to assess the moral and societal trade-offs of algorithmic decisions. Entrusting AI governance solely to technocrats risks creating blind spots where optimization surpasses ethics (Chhem, 2024).

History warns us: the atomic bomb was built by brilliant scientists, but its ethical use was never their domain. Today’s AI carries similar potential for irreversible harm if not subject to cross sectoral scrutiny and cultural reflection. Governance must not be dictated by what is technologically feasible alone, but by what is socially acceptable and ethically grounded.

Cambodia's Strategic Inflection Point

The seminal paper Unleashing the Potential of Artificial Intelligence for Cambodia (Chhem, Gilberg, & Chhem, 2019) laid a foundational vision for AI-driven development. It called for a Cambodia-based "brain trust" to drive AI innovation, human capital development, and policy integration. Cambodia cannot afford to remain a producer of low-value goods. It must leverage AI to upskill its labor force, enhance governance efficiency, and build inclusive prosperity.

This strategic vision has been reaffirmed in Cambodia's AI policy landscape. Key national documents underscore the need to align AI with national development goals and SDGs; invest in AI research and upskilling; ensure ethical use of data and algorithms; embed AI into education, agriculture, and healthcare; and engage internationally to shape global AI norms (Chhem & Hul, 2023).

Cybersecurity and Cyberdiplomacy: Expanding the Governance Horizon

As AI systems are increasingly embedded in digital infrastructures, cybersecurity and sovereignty emerge as key governance concerns. The digital future of Cambodia depends on a secure, resilient, and diplomatically agile cyberspace. This was outlined in the comprehensive anthology Cambodia in Cyberspace, which emphasized the socio-political and economic dimensions of digital integration (Chhem, Chea, & Ou, 2022).

Moreover, Cambodia's Emergent Cyberdiplomacy presents a forward-looking vision for Cambodia's engagement with regional and global norms on cybersecurity and digital trust. The report argues for a multistakeholder approach that balances national interest, international law, and ASEAN frameworks (Chhem, Tean, & Bong, 2023).

Education and Workforce: Building the ABC of AI Governance

Workforce development is the foundation of ethical and strategic AI adoption. The ABC framework—Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, and Cybersecurity—proposed by Chhem and colleagues provides a collaborative model for Industry 4.0 readiness. It stresses interdisciplinary education, private-public partnerships, and context-relevant curriculum design (Chhem, Chea, Khieng, & Hossain, 2021).

Governing AI: Principles for an Inclusive Framework

AI governance must be:

1. Interdisciplinary: Involving not just technologists, but ethicists, economists, educators, lawyers, and community leaders
2. Human-centered: Protecting rights, promoting justice, and ensuring technology serves people.
3. Adaptive and transparent: Capable of responding to rapid innovation with clarity and public trust
4. Globally connected but locally rooted: Engaging with global frameworks while ensuring cultural fit and national ownership
5. Built on education and ethics: Embedding AI literacy and values into school curricula, vocational training, and lifelong learning.

A Regional and Global Voice for Cambodia

Cambodia's engagement in ASEAN's AI framework is essential but must go beyond compliance. The ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics provides a valuable reference, emphasizing inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural respect. Yet its voluntary nature limits enforcement. Cambodia must advocate for a development-centered, co-regulated model that bridges the region's disparities in AI readiness (ASEAN, 2024, Fong, 2024; Keith, 2024)

Conclusion: Governing AI Is Governing the Future

To govern AI is to shape the future of education, work, social trust, and national identity. Governance that is overly technical or corporatized risks alienating the public and reinforcing inequalities. Conversely, governance that is inclusive, ethical, and strategic has the power to transform AI from a threat into a national asset. Engineers must be at the table—but never alone. It takes educators, philosophers, policymakers, youth, and civil society to ensure AI aligns with our shared human values. This is not only a policy imperative—it is a moral one (Chhem, 2024).

* *References available upon request*

* *Edited with ChatGPT for clarity; arguments and ideas are solely the author's.*

* *The opinions expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the AI Forum.*