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ASEAN AI Governance Roundtable #5: Vientiane, Lao PDR

AI Governance in the Lao PDR: Building Trust and Capacity in a Developing Context.

What lessons emerge for AI governance in low-resource contexts? What are the main institutional and infrastructural constraints facing countries like Laos? And how is Laos contextualising AI governance and its place within the national ecosystem?

*This is the **fifth** in a series of regional [roundtables](#) convened by AI Singapore for representatives from industry, government, and academia to discuss responsible AI within ASEAN. Such discussions are typically too narrow and too broad. Too narrow in that a few voices dominate the discussion—notably those in the United States and Europe, with China sometimes included. Too broad in that discussion is often limited to generalities and principles. This project aims to address both aspects of this problem, involving a wider set of stakeholders—in particular those from Southeast Asia—in more focused discussions of specific challenges in the application of Responsible AI to particular questions.*

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Executive Summary

This report synthesises discussions from the fifth ASEAN AI Governance Roundtable, held in Vientiane in October 2025, which examined how low-resource and developing contexts—specifically the Lao PDR—can approach AI governance in a responsible, realistic, and development-oriented manner. Convened by AI Singapore in partnership with the Lao Ministry of Technology and Communications and ARIST, the roundtable brought together government, academic, and private-sector stakeholders to explore how Laos is contextualising AI governance, the constraints it faces, and the broader lessons this offers for developing countries.

The discussions underscored a central tension between ambition and capacity. Laos' draft National AI Strategy is notably ambitious yet self-aware, positioning AI as a long-term enabler of digital transformation and socio-economic development while explicitly acknowledging constraints in infrastructure, human capital, data availability, and institutional coordination. Rather than pursuing rapid deployment, the strategy prioritises governance readiness, ethical safeguards, and incremental capacity-building. This reflects a broader insight: in developing contexts, AI governance should function as a “seatbelt”—enabling safe acceleration—rather than as a brake on innovation.

Participants highlighted that Laos' challenges are widely shared across developing countries: limited compute and connectivity, skills shortages, fragmented governance structures, and heavy reliance on external technologies. At the same time, the Lao context reveals underappreciated leverage points, including extensive mobile coverage, a young and digitally fluent population, political stability, and abundant hydropower that could support clean-energy data infrastructure. These factors create opportunities for leapfrogging if combined with effective governance, focused sequencing, and strategic partnerships.

A recurring theme was the importance of regional and international alignment. ASEAN frameworks—particularly the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics—offer ready-made, adaptable foundations that can reduce policy burden, support interoperability, and strengthen collective bargaining power. Global instruments, such as UNESCO's AI Ethics Recommendations, further provide normative grounding and avenues for cooperation. Partnerships with regional and international organisations were identified as critical for capacity-building, including skills development, regulatory sandboxes, shared infrastructure, and the development of culturally and linguistically relevant AI systems.

The report outlines several non-exclusive pathways forward for Laos, including prioritising data and digital infrastructure, investing in AI literacy and human capital, building trust through early governance wins, and deepening regional and global partnerships. Across these options, the central lesson is the need to align broad strategic ambition with realistic sequencing, focusing resources on foundational enablers while maintaining an inclusive and forward-looking policy vision.

Overall, the Lao case illustrates that AI governance in developing contexts is not merely a technical or regulatory challenge but a developmental one. With sustained investment in governance capacity, human capital, and partnerships, Laos has the opportunity to build a trusted, contextually grounded AI ecosystem that supports inclusive growth while safeguarding social and cultural values.

Introduction: Laos & AI

Artificial intelligence is touted worldwide as the next big thing, said to revolutionise education, industry, and government. Yet, this is often framed from the context of largely developed countries, with existing infrastructure, access to digitalised data, and a largely skilled workforce. Developing countries are typically overlooked. [This is noteworthy not only because AI presents opportunities for leapfrogging, but, crucially, because developing countries must follow a different playbook.](#)

The AI Governance team organised a workshop in Vientiane, Laos, in October 2025 in partnership with the Ministry of Technology and Communications (MTC) and the Research Institute for Smart Technology (ARIST), discussing Laos' potential pathways, and how the country might adopt AI

responsibly and sustainably. The workshop brought together government officials, educators, and private-sector actors from within Laos—including the Vice Minister of Technology and Communication, Mr. Saysana Sitthiphone, who opened the session by emphasising the urgency of preparing Laos for AI adoption and the need for responsible, ethical deployment.

Therefore, the core questions guiding the discussion—and subsequently this report—were:

1. How is Laos approaching AI governance?
2. What constraints and challenges is Laos facing, and what opportunities can Laos leverage?
3. What lessons emerge for AI governance in developing contexts more broadly?

Throughout the discussion, participants explored the broad functions of AI governance, such as ethics versus law (what one ought to do versus what one must do), broader governance mechanisms—the implications of tough-to-nail-down concepts like transparency, responsibility, or explainability.

Globally, AI governance is advancing rapidly, but unevenly. Most countries—including within ASEAN—possess data-protection legislation, and some maintain cybersecurity laws, but very few have introduced dedicated AI governance regulations. [Laos revised its data protection framework](#) in 2023, and is drafting both cybersecurity and AI governance instruments, with the view of aligning early with regional norms.

This workshop repeatedly returned to a key analogy: AI governance as a seatbelt—not a brake slowing down innovation, but a tool that can enable safe acceleration. For developing contexts, where institutional and infrastructural gaps heighten risks, this framing underscores the need for governance *before* and *alongside* AI deployment.

Lao PDR's National AI Strategy

Though not yet formally adopted, [Laos has been developing a national AI strategy](#)—akin to many other countries—to operate as a roadmap for how this emerging technology should be managed and deployed. This draft strategy positions AI as a long-term enabler of digital transformation and socioeconomic development, whilst also explicitly acknowledging the country's current structural constraints. Framed as adaptive and iterative, intended to evolve alongside Laos' broader digital transformation agenda, it should not be considered a fixed blueprint.

At present, AI adoption in Laos remains at an early stage: ranked 125/172 in the [Oxford Insights Government AI Readiness Index](#). The draft strategy candidly acknowledges limited domestic AI capacity, weak digital infrastructure—predominantly outside of major urban centres such as Vientiane, Savannakhet, or Pakse—low availability of data, and a skills shortage. At the same time, the government identifies enabling conditions such as expanding ICT coverage, a young population, increasing industrialisation, and strategic geographic positioning within the Mekong region as foundations for future AI development.

The overarching vision is to make AI a driver for digital transformation that contributes to sustainable socio-economic development, grounded in responsible and ethical use. The strategy balances opportunity and risk management through five core ambitions:

- Preparing for AI adoption across priority sectors
- Mitigating ethics, social and security risks
- Developing AI-related economic opportunities
- Preserving Lao language and cultural identity within AI systems
- Strengthening Laos' role in regional and international AI governance

The strategy is organised around seven mutually reinforcing pillars:

1. **Legislation and Governance:** Development of AI-specific legal frameworks, coordination mechanisms, data protection rules, and ethical oversight structures aligned with international standards.
2. **Human Resource Development:** Broad-based AI literacy, STEAM education reform, workforce upskilling, and attraction of foreign expertise to address skills shortages.
3. **Digital and Data Infrastructure:** Expansion of high-speed connectivity, national data centres, AI operations centres, and public data accessibility.
4. **Research and Development:** Establishment of a National AI Research Centre, university labs, research funding mechanisms, and focus on culturally and economically relevant applications.
5. **AI Entrepreneurship:** Support for domestic AI firms through funding, incubation, market access, and preferential treatment for Lao-developed products.
6. **Sectoral AI Adoption:** Deployment of AI across nine priority domains, including government services, industry, agriculture, health, education, finance, transport, tourism, and environmental management.
7. **International Cooperation:** Deepening regional and global partnerships to access expertise, investment, and governance best practices, particularly within ASEAN frameworks.

Overall, the draft strategy reflects an ambitious, yet self-aware, primarily state-led approach to AI development, prioritising capacity-building, governance readiness, and ethical safeguards over rapid deployment. While ambitious relative to current capabilities, it aligns Laos with prevailing regional AI policy models and positions the country to incrementally participate in the ASEAN AI ecosystem, provided sustained investment and institutional coordination can be realised.

Ambition vs Capacity

Laos's national strategy is highly ambitious—but also honest and realistic. A key theme is that ambition needs to be balanced against capacity; many of the challenges stem from constraints and gaps in capacity. These include:

- **Infrastructural gaps:** Compute, connectivity, data centres.
- **Human capital gaps:** Teacher shortages, limited technical expertise, lack of Lao-language materials.
- **Governance gaps:** Limited coordination across ministries and agencies.

These challenges are not unique to Laos. Rather, they are central to AI development and deployment in most, if not all, development contexts. Many developing countries seek to harness AI for societal benefits—whether economic, governance-related, or social—yet face similar foundational deficits. The Lao case illustrates this global dynamic particularly clearly. Yet, there are also substantial opportunities presented in these contexts that should not be overlooked—and they often are—as the challenges associated with a development context are placed front and centre.

From Ambition to Action

Whilst the ambition–capacity gap is real, it is not insurmountable. It is worthwhile noting here that governance is crucial for this kind of development. Whilst governance—in the form of best practices, public policy initiatives and regulatory regimes—is often framed in opposition to fast-moving development and innovation, effective governance is more accurately a seatbelt than a

brake. Just as a seatbelt allows safer driving at higher speeds, so, too, does effective governance allow faster development, deployment and implementation safely and sustainably. In other words, governance must necessarily be a cross-cutting function for countries like Laos, as they implement emerging technologies, like artificial intelligence. Countries at similar stages, facing similar challenges, have succeeded by strengthening partnerships, sequencing reforms strategically, and leveraging existing advantages:

Regional Alignment

Laos is a member of ASEAN. This means that Laos is already part of the broader ASEAN discussions on AI ethics and governance. [The ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics](#) already provides ready-made frameworks for responsible AI development that Laos can adopt as well as adapt. Crucially, this also provides the benefit of aligning Laos regionally with other ASEAN partners, making further cooperation, co-development and sharing and implementation of best practices easier and more effectively. It also benefits all ASEAN member states to operate as a bloc, providing increased bargaining power.

In addition to regional standards, there are also global recommendations—such as [UNESCO's Recommendations on AI Ethics](#)—that also provide a solid ground for Laos to adopt in their own national and regional contexts, whilst also opening up potential for global cooperation and sharing of insights and knowledge.

All of this alignment—both regionally and with countries facing similar challenges and opportunities globally—provides important grounding for any developing country to deploy AI responsibly and sustainably.

Partnerships for Capacity Building

Central to the workshop's discussion was that of partnerships for capacity building. International partnerships, especially with institutions such as the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, emerging ASEAN AI network—like [ASEAN AI Safe](#)—or, indeed, institutions like AI Singapore, will play a crucial role in Laos' wider capacity building. Collaborations with such organisations can assist Laos in developing:

- Localised language models (e.g. Southeast Asia-focused models like [SEA-LION](#))
- Teacher training programmes and technical or vocational education and training programmes
- Regulatory sandboxes for low-risk experimentation
- and shared regional computing and data infrastructure

The benefits of working with these kinds of networks, to share skills, infrastructure, and insights allows not only for more sustainable deployment, but to leapfrog by not spending resources on challenges that have already been solved elsewhere.

Ambitious Breadth vs Focused Sequencing

One recurring touchpoint throughout the workshop was the tension between ambitious breadth and focused sequencing. In other words, is it better to attempt to do a lot of things at once, knowing that each goal will be easier to reach, but allowing these to be completed in tandem; or, is it better to carefully focus on a handful of key goals at once, completing these, before moving on to the next.

There is no singular answer to which approach is 'correct'. Ambitious breadth enables signalling, accelerates ecosystem momentum, and supports international investments. Meanwhile, a focused sequencing improves overall feasibility, mitigates overload, and

ensures stable capacity for development. These are benefits that are difficult to meaningfully weigh against one another.

The room remained more or less equally split as to which approach would benefit Laos the most. The discussion proposed a golden mean might be the best approach: a hybrid strategy, aiming at progressing widely at the level of policy vision, whilst concentrating resources on a small number of foundational enablers—mentioned specifically in the discussion was data infrastructure, skills pipelines, and governance capacity.

Unique Leverage Points

In developing contexts, it is easy to focus on challenges only: a lack of key resources or other foundations. Yet despite challenges, countries like Laos exhibit several strategic advantages. These include:

- [Extensive mobile coverage](#) (approx. 96% across the country), enabling digital public service delivery even before broadband expansions are instituted;
- [A young population](#) (median age at 25.8 years), meaning there is a large population segment that can be upskilled and put into work in new sectors—and many of which are effectively digital natives;
- Political stability, allowing long-term strategic planning and execution;
- and abundant hydropower, positioning Laos as a potential regional host for clean-energy data centres, as well as side-stepping one of the largest challenges for large-scale AI deployment (energy demand).

These conditions offer Laos the chance of leapfrogging certain stages of digital development—if combined with effective strategic planning, deliberate governance design, and targeted capability building.

Laos' path forward will depend on its ability to align ambition with realistic sequencing, deepen regional partnerships, and leverage its unique geographic and demographic advantages. With careful governance and sustained investment in human capital, Laos can build a contextually grounded, resilient, and trusted AI ecosystem.

Options, Considerations & Next Steps

There is no one path forward for countries facing a situation like Laos. Among the options for moving forward are one or more of the following:

Option 1: Prioritise data and digital infrastructure as national foundations

This option calls for an acceleration of digitalisation of public-sector records, specifically to create a strong foundation for a Lao language data set. Alongside developing data-governance standards aligned with ASEAN, UNESCO, or other such partnership-organisations, Laos could explore regional cloud or compute-sharing arrangements to reduce infrastructural costs. As a result, Laos would create a strong digital infrastructure as a stable foundation for their emergent AI ecosystem to grow from.

Option 2: Invest in human capital and AI literacy at multiple levels

Laos could prioritise the establishment of AI-literacy programmes for civil servants and other government employees. Furthermore, strengthening teacher training and expanding STEM and TVET education programmes would create a strong basis of human

capital to continue to build from. Additional support could also be leveraged to support Lao-language AI resources—such as data sets and foundation models—to reduce dependency on foreign models. This would set Laos up from a human capital perspective to grow into their ambitious strategy.

Option 3: Build trust through early governance wins

AI governance often adheres to the 80/20 rule. Thus, Laos could focus on comparably straightforward governance wins as their initial steps. This includes updating data-protection frameworks for AI-specific use cases, enabling clear rules for further development. Alongside this, they could pilot regulatory sandboxes in low-risk domains (e.g. administrative automation) to make engagement and deployment of new models and solutions clear and comparably straightforward for developers. Finally, promoting transparency and accountability norms within public-sector AI adoption would ensure that public trust is maintained, setting Laos up for high levels of public engagement and adoption.

Option 4: Strengthening international and regional partnerships

Rather than primarily focusing inwards, Laos could choose to formalise cooperation with external key organisations, like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, or—indeed—AI Singapore. Through such partnerships, Laos could co-develop benchmarks, talent pipelines, and shared standards, both shaping the AI ecosystem surrounding them, whilst also gaining key skills and training for their own young population. By participating actively in regional dialogues on AI—such as AI sovereignty or cultural preservation—the country could emerge as a key partner, and benefit from strong regional networks of cooperation.

These are just some options that Lao PDR may wish to consider. They are not mutually exclusive, and so some hybrid arrangement may be most desirable, in which early successes in specific areas build confidence and credibility in others.

Conclusion

Laos stands at a formative moment in shaping its AI trajectory. The discussions captured in this report depict a country neither rushing into AI adoption nor retreating from its potential, but instead attempting to chart a measured, development-oriented path. The draft National AI Strategy reflects a notable degree of institutional self-awareness: ambition is clearly articulated, yet balanced by an honest assessment of infrastructural, human-capital, and governance constraints. This alignment between aspiration and realism emerged as a core strength of the Lao approach.

The Vientiane roundtable underscored that AI governance in low-resource contexts is not merely a technical or regulatory challenge, but a developmental one. Governance must function as a foundational enabler rather than a downstream intervention. Framed as a “seatbelt” rather than a brake, effective governance allows countries to move faster and more confidently by reducing systemic risk and uncertainty while building public trust.

At the same time, the Lao case highlights that constraints coexist with underappreciated leverage points. A young population, extensive mobile connectivity, political stability, and abundant clean energy create real opportunities for leapfrogging if combined with focused sequencing and targeted investment. Regional and international alignment—particularly through ASEAN frameworks and global normative instruments—offers Laos practical pathways to reduce

policy burden, enhance interoperability, and strengthen capacity through partnerships rather than technological self-sufficiency.

More broadly, the lessons from Laos extend well beyond its borders. Many developing countries face similar tensions between ambition and capacity, speed and safety, autonomy and dependence. The discussions in Vientiane suggest that progress in such contexts depends less on identifying a single optimal model than on maintaining strategic coherence: aligning vision with resources, sequencing reforms deliberately, and allowing governance capacity to evolve alongside technical capability.

If Laos can sustain this approach—investing in institutions, human capital, and regional cooperation—it is well positioned to move from aspiration to implementation. With thoughtful governance, AI can become a catalyst for inclusive and culturally grounded development rather than an uneven, externally driven force. In that sense, Laos has a genuine opportunity not merely to adopt AI, but to make it meaningfully its own.

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