

BRIEFING PAPER

TRUST AND TALENT

GRASSROOTS SKILLS AND SHARED RULES FOR A SAFE DIGITAL FUTURE

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Theme Alignment: Synergy of ASEAN-China Cooperation on AI Governance and Bridging the Digital Divide

Relevant Policy Frameworks: ASEAN DEFA, ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030, Cambodia Roadmap for Digital Skills Development (2024-2035), Cambodia National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2025-2030) Draft, UNESCO Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM).

1. Introduction: The Dual Pillars of Regional Connectivity

As the digital landscape across Southeast Asia evolves at an unprecedented pace, the expansion of initiatives such as the Digital Silk Road and the broader ASEAN-China collaborative frameworks have primarily focused on the deployment of physical infrastructure. The rapid construction of 5G networks, subsea telecommunications cables, and high-capacity data centers are critical first steps. Furthermore, the successful progression of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) negotiations has provided the region with a highly inspiring economic horizon: a projected regional digital economy valued at two trillion US dollars by the year 2030.

However, as observed from the perspective of a developing digital economy like Cambodia, technological infrastructure alone cannot guarantee economic integration, digital security, or public trust. A digital ecosystem is ultimately only as resilient as the population that interacts with it. According to the internal survey data presented within the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030, a staggering 78% of stakeholders explicitly identified the "digital skills gap" as the primary barrier to cross-border digital trade and regional technological integration. Advanced hardware cannot deliver on its transformative promises without widespread local adoption. Therefore, to secure this projected two trillion dollar future, the region must invest equally in the human element of cyberspace, focusing on the twin pillars of digital Trust and grassroots Talent.

2. Redefining Cybersecurity: Engineering the "Human Firewall"

Traditional approaches to cybersecurity heavily emphasize software-based defenses, automated threat detection, and infrastructural resilience. While these elements are indispensable, they often overlook the most vulnerable access point in any regional

network: the human user. In an era increasingly defined by artificial intelligence, complex social engineering, digital fraud, and the rapid dissemination of disinformation, cognitive security becomes just as critical as software security.

Cambodia posits that the concept of a "Human Firewall" must become a central component of ASEAN-China strategic planning. A Human Firewall refers to a digitally literate public capable of critically evaluating online information, safely interacting with AI-driven tools, and practicing secure data habits. Without this baseline of grassroots cognitive security, the broader digital corridors connecting our regional economies remain fundamentally vulnerable to exploitation, threatening to undermine public confidence in digital trade and cross-border services. Bridging the digital divide is not merely an issue of economic equity; it is a foundational requirement for regional cybersecurity.

3. Cambodia's Grassroots Momentum: The 2024-2035 Policy Execution

To operationalize this vision and address the capacity gap from the ground up, the Royal Government of Cambodia has taken decisive, state-led action. Guided by the overarching Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035), the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPTC) is currently navigating the early execution stages of the comprehensive Roadmap for Digital Skills Development in Cambodia (2024-2035).

Crucially, Cambodia recognizes that waiting until students reach higher education to introduce digital security concepts is insufficient. Under this long-term roadmap, policy execution is shifting toward early intervention. Cambodia is actively exploring the integration of basic digital literacy, foundational computational thinking, and early AI awareness directly into primary education curriculums. By training educators and introducing young students to these concepts early in their cognitive development, the objective is to organically embed digital resilience into the next generation's worldview. This proactive, grassroots momentum provides a valuable real-world testing environment to observe how state-mandated early education can effectively cultivate the aforementioned Human Firewall.

4. Harmonizing Regional Trust: Local Ethics in Global Governance

Grassroots talent, however capable, cannot thrive in an unregulated or fragmented ecosystem. It requires a harmonized, secure, and highly trusted regional governance environment. To achieve this, Cambodia closely observes and highly values the collaborative standards emerging from regional partnerships, particularly the leadership demonstrated in the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, alongside the cooperative digital safety frameworks proposed by the Cyberspace Administration of China. These high-level agreements provide essential baselines for cross-border data exchange and systemic interoperability.

However, translating high-level regional policy into trusted local practice remains a complex challenge for all member states. As Cambodia drafts its own National Artificial

Intelligence Strategy (2025-2030), significantly supported by insights derived from our recent UNESCO AI Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM) evaluations, a primary focus has been the cultural contextualization of these international standards.

Initial observations indicate that public acceptance of complex AI regulations scales much faster when those guidelines resonate with familiar cultural values. For Cambodia, this means actively exploring how to anchor regional AI compliance within the framework of traditional local ethics - specifically drawing upon the Theravada Buddhist principles of non-harm and mutual, collective benefit. By ensuring that international regulations are translated through a lens of cultural familiarity, smaller member states can accelerate public trust in AI technologies. This localized approach to governance ensures that when local developers build and deploy new systems, those systems are legally interoperable across ASEAN and China, while remaining ethically trusted by the local populations they serve.

5. Strategic Observations for ASEAN-China Alignment

Drawing from our ongoing grassroots implementation, policy drafting, and research at CICP, Cambodia offers three strategic observations for the consideration of the NACT working group:

- **Prioritizing Early Education as Regional Defense:** Early public education must be elevated beyond a strictly academic concern and integrated into regional cybersecurity strategies. Developing foundational computational thinking at the primary school level is the most effective long-term strategy for engineering a resilient public Human Firewall capable of navigating the complexities of an AI-driven digital economy.
- **Cultural Localization of AI Governance:** To accelerate public trust and compliance, regional AI governance frameworks should encourage cultural localization. High-level standards (such as the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance) achieve their greatest impact when member states are supported in translating those technical regulations into guidelines that reflect their unique local ethical traditions.
- **Upskilling for Active Contribution:** By deliberately upskilling local software developers to meet shared ASEAN-China regional standards, smaller member states can fundamentally alter their role in the digital economy. Through targeted capacity building, developing nations can successfully transition from being passive consumers of imported technology into active, secure, and valuable contributors to the interconnected digital ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

As ASEAN and China continue to develop highly integrated digital corridors, we must remember that while digital infrastructure connects our economies, digital literacy connects our people. Cambodia approaches the complex, evolving challenge of AI and digital governance with a deep willingness to learn, to adapt, and to collaborate closely

with all regional partners. By prioritizing grassroots AI literacy and drafting official strategies that align local cultural ethics with regional regulations, we can collectively build an open, trusted, and deeply secure ASEAN-China digital future.

Resources / Policy Frameworks

- ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA).
- ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2030.
- Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (2021-2035).
- Cambodia Roadmap for Digital Skills Development (2024-2035).
- Cambodia National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2025-2030) Draft.
- UNESCO Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM) on Artificial Intelligence.