THE NEXT GREAT DIVERGENCE
WHY AI MAY WIDEN INEQUALITY BETWEEN COUNTRIES

Exploring the Potential of AI to Usher in a New Governance Paradigm in Asia and the Pacific

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AI can enable anticipatory governance that is based on more collaborative leadership with greater civic engagement. It should also be more efficient, but efficiency alone is not an adequate metric; governance transitions must also be equitable and just. If political and societal trade-offs are not managed effectively, AI-driven efficiency could come at the cost of essential public values such as privacy, transparency and accountability.

This chapter explores the potential of AI for improving bureaucratic workflows, allowing governments to be more responsive and to build foresight capacities for complex policy environments. Governments could work with a wide range of partners to draw in diverse expertise and knowledge systems, while enabling citizen participation and deliberative policy making.

Achieving this new paradigm will not be easy. Some countries will be hampered by weak digital infrastructure, unrepresentative datasets, and the lack of enabling policy frameworks or national capacities for deploying AI safely. Many institutions are now expected to leverage technologies where institutional expertise is still developing.

Whether AI can usher in a new and more forward-looking form of governance is ultimately not a function of technology but of the political and social context in which AI tools are introduced. This chapter explores the potential for a new type of politics that shifts the balance of power, and advances more equitable political, social, and economic relations.

Public sector bodies across several Asia-Pacific countries have already experimented with advanced statistics and machine learning tools. In Thailand, for example, to improve the efficacy and responsiveness of urban services Bangkok has instituted Traffy Fondue, a citizen-facing, issue reporting platform. In China, Pingshan, a district in Shenzhen, illustrates the use of AI for administrative efficiency, assigning citizen complaints and queries to the appropriate agencies and frontline workers via an AI-based internal query management system; and Singapore has invested heavily in digital twin infrastructure for future planning.

Nevertheless, while digital administrative services are increasingly established, advanced machine learning is a relatively new technology in the region. Consequently, there is currently emerging information on the outcome of such specific algorithmic applications, with evolving data and analysis on their effects on governance systems or on human development as a whole.

Even more nascent are Generative AI (GenAI) models. Many interventions are limited to specific ministerial departments or are deployed through pilot studies.[1] Asia and the Pacific offers few documented examples with evidence over time: most are from high-income countries such as Singapore and the Republic of Korea, or well-resourced provincial administrations in China – making it difficult to build a region-wide narrative. This chapter is therefore necessarily partial and speculative – using examples to suggest how AI could support or transform governance.

Future 'imaginaries'

Government, technology companies and international organizations in the region can have socio-technical 'imaginaries' for AI – visions of what is good, desirable, and worth attaining.'[2] Importantly, these imaginaries are performative; they mobilize actors, direct resources and legitimate policy measures. In some countries, they are well developed, with formal political support and AI technologies embedded within governmental frameworks; in others, they are still emerging. Whatever the vision, there will not be a single Asia-Pacific model, rather a series of solutions that align with each political, social, and cultural context.

As an indication of what is possible, this section organizes current AI-based interventions according to 'good governance' dimensions – globally recognized values and principles such as participation, anticipation, agility, efficiency, transparency, and accountability (Table 1).[3]

For foresight

Today's global order faces a series of protracted problems – rapid technological advances, climate change, war, civil unrest, geopolitical tensions, and shifting societal needs. Governments need to gauge and pre-empt current and future trajectories. As expressed by the UNDP Asia-Pacific Human Development Report 2024, this can be achieved by "systematically and actively monitoring sources of information for early signs of emerging trends, disruptions, opportunities, and changes that may have significant future implications."[4]

In this way, governments can move beyond reactive policymaking and adopt anticipatory and resilient postures centered on systems thinking, strategic foresight, and cross-sector collaboration.[5] Developing such anticipatory muscle requires a significant shift in policymaking mindset – towards one that values futures thinking, with the ability, both technical and intellectual, to detect and monitor, and inform decision-making based on early signals and forecasts and maps of various scenarios.

Table 1 – Potential of AI in driving governance reforms

Pillars of good governance	Potential roles of AI	Specific tools/methods
Anticipation	Forecaster	Predictive analytics; risk scoring models; time-series forecasting
	Simulator	Generative AI; predictive analytics; machine learning
Agility and efficiency	Monitor for bureaucratic workflows	Rule-based decision trees; natural language processing
	Archivist	Case-based reasoning; semantic search
Participation	Citizen information desk	Large language models
	Architect of digital public squares	Large language models; sentiment analysis
	Sense-maker of situated knowledge	Multi-modal ai integrating text, spatial, and image data
Transparency and accountability	Public financial management tool	Natural language processing

In this regard, AI can act as a crucial enabler, making sense of vast and disparate datasets. Tools such as predictive analytics, and nowcasting and forecasting models, can identify emerging risks and disruptions, along with opportunities for public value creation in the near and far futures.

As a nowcaster and forecaster

AI-based forecasting models can help in decision-making in highly uncertain scenarios – by tracking real-world events and complex data trends to anticipate the likelihood of instability or social unrest or conflict.[6] By making sense of large volumes of historical and current data, AI-based predictive analytics can enable "decentralized prediction at scale"[7] for crisis preparedness. Such models can also be valuable at lower levels of administration where local governments may lack the institutional capacity or resources for such planning, provided that outputs are treated as probabilistic and subject to meaningful human judgment to mitigate potential biases.

Climate models, for example, can forecast which micro-regions will experience drought,[8] and disease surveillance algorithms can track real-time outbreaks. The Asian Development Bank, for example, has employed AI and satellite imagery in the Philippines and Thailand to track poverty patterns at highly granular geographic scales – to detect early signs of economic distress or deepening pockets of inequality before they appear in traditional surveys or national statistics.[9]

At the global level, UNCTAD uses AI models to analyze data on shipping and customs to offer near real-time projections of trade volumes, helping governments adjust their fiscal and trade policies with minimal lag.[10]

As a simulator

A valuable tool for planning any physical environments cities, transport networks, ecosystems is a 'digital twin' – a virtual replica that can integrate real-time data, predictive models, and simulation tools. Digital twins offer data-rich, dynamic mirrors of complex systems and can be used to simulate potential futures, test policy scenarios, and proactively manage interdependencies. Digital twin architectures are increasingly being combined with machine learning, natural language processing, or decision-support algorithms to transform static models into adaptive tools for foresight and future-readiness.

For instance, Singapore's Virtual Twin integrates spatial and sensor data, allowing planners to simulate sea-level rise, test disaster response strategies, and model infrastructure impacts.[11] In China, the city of Haidian's "brain"[12] analyzes data from over 14,000 CCTV cameras and 20,000 sensors to oversee functions such as traffic, public safety, and environmental health, and uses LLMs to generate visions of urban futures.[13]

Digital twins can also enable participatory governance. Citizens and communities who engage with simulation models can better appreciate the complexity of the issues, understand the value of good data, and recognize the range of influences on policies and decisions.[14] This can help them visualize the impact of long-term visions and planning decisions, provide feedback, and contribute to the co-creation of alternative futures.

However, it should be emphasized that the implementation of forecasting and simulation tools is neither politically nor ethically neutral. These technologies raise urgent questions about surveillance, data governance, accountability, the interpretation of information, and the capacity and willingness of users to act on insights revealed. To serve the public good, the data must be truly representative and used transparently, and the models should be designed to expand the civic and democratic space within which governments imagine and navigate the future.

For agility

AI can harness vast amounts of data about citizens' feedback. Based on this, governments can customize public services,[17] leverage advanced computational techniques to improve the management of public agencies",[18] and streamline bureaucratic processes and operations.

These ideas resonate with the "public project management paradigm",[17] which envisages moving away from linear and rigid workflows towards dynamic approaches that are more amenable to swifter shifts in strategy.[18] Often referred to as 'agile governance', this privileges adaptive structures over hierarchies and silos, emphasizing the virtues of flexibility and responsiveness. UNDP and other development agencies in Asia and the Pacific are increasingly endorsing agile governance as a framework for tackling rapidly evolving policy challenges.[19]

Nevertheless, many countries have been slow to adapt. Their digitization efforts may display veneers of modernity and efficiency but fail to address the underlying constraints on transparency, accountability, and public integrity—often retaining a culture of secrecy and top-down control.

With the use of AI on the other hand, interventions can be more sophisticated and intentional. Unlike generic digitization or datafication, AI tools can be more purpose-driven and target specific bottlenecks in public sector workflows – guided by a theory of change that uncovers and addresses the root causes of inefficiencies. Design and deployment can also be more participatory. Used in this way, AI can not only speed up bureaucratic processes but also reconfigure or reengineer them to make them more comprehensible to citizens.

As a monitor for bureaucratic workflows

AI can be used to develop real-time monitoring tools for bureaucratic workflows, responding to citizen queries or grievances, overseeing project implementation pipelines, or managing service delivery timelines. AI can help bureaucrats and beneficiaries by tracking progress, assigning responsibility to officials or departments, collating status updates, and flagging urgent, exceptional, or priority cases.

Governments in India, Japan, China and Malaysia, for example, have been building online unified digital public service portals and citizen interfaces to enable advanced workflow management. AI can add sense-making layers to these, synchronizing data platforms so as to break down departmental silos.[20]

In China, for example, in Pingshan (Shenzhen) the local government has implemented an AI-based "unified management in one network platform" which collates queries and complaints from citizens on transport and environmental protection, for example, and from the private sector on issues such as taxes and licenses.[21] To prevent "passing the buck" between government departments, the platform directs requests to appropriate agencies and frontline workers, setting deadlines for resolution. It also tracks progress by the designated official, recording each action while updating citizens. If multiple citizens continue to report or raise the same issue, it flags this as a priority and sends the relevant agencies reminders to improve their solutions, and alerts higher-level officials to monitor progress. As well as using AI as a taskmaster, the Pingshan Government also uses it to analyze video data and detect problems related to city traffic and waste disposal.

As an archivist

An often-overlooked component of agile governance is institutional memory. Much historical information is lost through a high churn of civil servants, poor documentation practices, and inadequate coordination across and within departments. When confronting recurring policy dilemmas, new officials may struggle to access relevant precedents while even experienced staff may be unable to retrieve relevant lessons from the past.

Bureaucrats, legislators, and executives can use AI as a digital archivist or knowledge manager to build on accumulated institutional learning – including past experiences and experiments. AI agents can organize, analyze, and retrieve information that often remains unstructured and scattered across departmental reports, circulars, notices, training manuals, and internal policy memos. With natural language processing and information retrieval algorithms, public servants can more effectively preserve, structure, and reuse valuable institutional knowledge.

Such tools can build continuity and consistency during bureaucratic transitions, reduce duplication, and provide better decision-making support; for example, through case-based reasoning (CBR) systems, which analyze comparable prior cases or problems.[22] City planners can, for example, use CBR to quickly retrieve case histories and flag past policy failures or successful strategies as a basis for future urban planning.

Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff can employ CBR systems or sectorally trained LLMs for legislative research. Judicial officers or legal clerks can speed up judiciary workflows by performing AI-assisted precedent analysis.[23] Some jurisdictions, for example, uses LLMs to analyze past cases, and help judicial officers write judgements and orders more efficiently.[24]

In India, another example of AI as an archivist is through the Kunji (Hindi for "key") chatbot. Developed by a social-impact organization, Kunji responds to text and voice commands in multiple languages to help local officials retrieve relevant policy documents. It can also regularly upload new information, sustaining the archive as a living repository of policy frameworks and regulations.[25]

Also in India, the Parliament is aiming to use AI to revolutionize parliamentary documentation, by making parliamentary documents, debates and notes available in multiple Indian languages.[26] AI systems – especially those that combine traditional information retrieval methods with relatively newer forms of LLM-based conversational agents – can strengthen and develop the evidentiary, analytical and predictive reflexes of public officials.

For participation

The new public management approach has been criticized for merely offering states ways to increase efficiency by emulating private corporations. But, while boosting efficiency, AI systems should also be able to help governments in their much broader mandates. Unlike privately-owned entities the states must be accountable to the public, always serve the public interest, safeguard and uphold a wide array of citizen rights, respond to public needs, and focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized even when doing so may not always seem efficient.

As a citizen information desk

AI interfaces can help bridge state-citizen gaps. Government programs often have complex eligibility rules and opaque application processes. Citizens also struggle to get accurate information from officials. As a result, they are forced to make multiple trips to government offices or service centers, incurring high search costs in the process.

AI-driven chatbots offer useful alternatives, particularly for people living in places where it is difficult to access government officials or reach public service centers. Governments have already been using chatbots that enable citizens to get information on public services and report grievances.[27] Such interfaces allow citizens to submit queries in their local language and through their preferred medium – whether text or voice. The AI model then leverages these with advanced natural language processing and the latest GenAI techniques to access diverse data sources, retrieve relevant information, and respond in the appropriate language.

In India, for example, Jugalbandi, is an LLM-based chatbot designed collaboratively by Microsoft, OpenNyAI, and AI for Bharat, a government-backed initiative. Jugalbandi collects citizens' queries in their local languages, retrieves the necessary information from government databases which are primarily in English, and responds in the users' language.[28] Jugalbandi aims to bridge the chasm between the state and the citizen and also make public information more consistent while allowing interactions to be personalized to the needs of citizens. For example, if a user informs Jugalbandi of their current educational qualifications and asks, 'What kind of government scholarships are available for me?', it replies in clear and simple terms with a list of applicable central and state government scholarship opportunities, along with their eligibility criteria and the documentation they require.

This can be of tremendous value to governments at district or city levels. In Thailand, for example, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) in 2024 launched an AI-enabled citizen platform called Traffy Fondue through which citizens can report local issues – such as broken streetlights or trash accumulation. Within two years, BMA had received almost 600,000 complaints, mostly related to roads.[29]

As an architect of digital public squares

A critical component of effective governance is enabling and encouraging civic input. Many governments use digital portals, public assemblies, and feedback forms but find it difficult arrive at a consensus, especially when staff need to sift through large volumes of input along with related documents and notes.[30]

AI can enable and manage mass online deliberations, such as hybrid citizen assemblies, consultations, virtual town assemblies, and mini-publics – as has happened in France,[31] and Spain[32] where randomly or self-selected citizens have shared their perspectives on policy issues as part of democratic decision-making.[33] [34]

Similarly, civic technology initiatives have established vehicles for opinion-mapping and consensus-building amongst citizens and government officials .[35] An open-source survey research tool – Pol.is – uses advanced statistics and machine learning to gather, analyze and digest large amounts of text, and visually maps disagreements amongst groups. Project facilitators use this in conjunction with Typeform, a data-gathering tool for stakeholder dialogues that uses rolling questionnaire supplemented by direct personal contact. For this purpose, staffers receive special training, to gain the title of "participation officer."

In 2015, a digital consultation on the ride-sharing company Uber asked: "What are your feelings about occasionally using personal vehicles to transport passengers and charging for this?" Opinions coalesced into two overall groups: pro-Uber and anti-Uber, with the latter twice as large. Pol.is was used to cluster and visually map the gaps between participants' opinions. Each group was then invited to refine their remarks to appeal more to their opponents – resulting in seven comments that received almost universal approval. The insights were presented to stakeholders, including government officials, Uber representatives, taxi association representatives and leading scholars. All data is available on a public platform for individuals to run their own independent analyses.[36]

As a sense-maker of situated knowledge

As well as using formally curated data, AI systems can also be trained to interpret and synthesize hyper-local knowledge, which is particularly valuable in Asia-Pacific countries that have very diverse populations whose community knowledge and perspectives often remain undocumented and marginalized.

A notable pilot initiative is in Indonesia. As part of its Social Innovation Platform, the Ministry of Villages and Development has introduced an AI-based 'digital listening tool' Disadvantaged Regions (Kemendesa PDT). Developed in collaboration with UNDP and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, this is designed to allow local communities, to participate through voice, text, and images to share their opinions for village-level planning.[37] The tool uses AI to distil key concerns and opportunities and can also create 'digital profiles' for different demographic groups to facilitate solutions that respond to specific concerns. The data from the digital listening tool is also expected to be utilized for future planning.[38]

Similarly in Malaysia, the Government is using geospatial AI to simulate flood risks and support climate-resilience planning through community-centered approaches. Unlike earlier analyses that relied solely on satellite data, this initiative also incorporates insights from local communities – for example, information about the social value of flood-prone land. This helps the AI model account for cultural, historical, aesthetic, and emotional attachments that are often missing from conventional planning datasets. Additionally, the model can help validate satellite data by factoring in site-specific variables and indicators that only local knowledge can provide.

The result is a spatially rich, socially grounded dataset that reflects the priorities of the communities most affected. Rather than treating citizens as passive data subjects, the system reimagines them as active informants and participants for climate-resilience planning.[39]

For transparency and accountability

Transparency and accountability are the building blocks of participatory and deliberative democracies, enabling citizens to monitor government actions and hold public institutions to account, and prevent corruption. Yet, in practice these processes can face challenges regarding opacity, and public bodies may be subject to entrenched ideological positions, intensive lobbying, and other political pressures. Meanwhile, efforts to understand political actions and government initiatives are often complicated by bureaucratic complexity.[40]

AI opens up the prospect of greater accountability with new tools for scrutinizing political actions and holding officials accountable – for supporting investigative journalism, for example, watchdog organizations, and human rights advocates. Similarly, AI tools can monitor political campaign financing, identify irregularities, and flag potential conflicts of interest.[41] AI can also empower citizens and civil society actors to hold public officials accountable by collecting and analyzing data that otherwise might remain scattered and unstructured. In Brazil, for example, AI-enabled bots have used data mining and analytics to identify anomalies in public procurement, in the utilization of public revenues, and in the functioning of the judiciary.[42]

Machine-learning models could also help identify corruption in public procurement contracts – though their value and real-world impact for this have yet to be explored.[43]

Unlike earlier e-government initiatives, which had finite goals and fixed timelines, today's digital transformations are – and, more importantly, have to be – continuous, adaptive processes with no clear endpoints, requiring constant recalibration of public services, tools, and institutional norms in line with citizen and state capacities and the external needs of the moment.[44]

The risks ahead

As governments across the Asia-Pacific region increasingly adopt digital tools, they will see promising opportunities but also serious risks. While AI may enhance state-citizen interactions and responsiveness, it also risks heightening exclusion, enabling surveillance, obscuring lines of accountability, and reinforcing specific visions of development.

Moreover, unless these technologies are embedded within stable legislative and executive frameworks, they will always remain vulnerable to shifts in leadership and funding cycles – jeopardizing their long-term impact and the return on investment.

The true challenge lies not just in adopting AI, but in sustaining its deployment, oversight, and integration into public institutions. Governments must proceed with caution. Despite the compelling narrative surrounding AI, evidence of its consequences in the public sector remains limited, and there are significant risks. These include:[45]

1. Mission-creep into mass surveillance

AI-driven systems can generate real-time insights but gathering sufficiently dense data can entail a form of 'panopticon' monitoring of the citizen body, their movements and behaviors.[46] In countries that have less technical, administrative or political capacity, or in contexts characterized by political instability or limited checks and balances, such monitoring can easily become a tool of surveillance and repression.

Even in more democratic countries, public service chatbots often process sensitive personal data, including political opinions, demographic information, and behavioral patterns. Such data extraction can become a routine part of administrative 'backend' infrastructure that is too mundane or opaque to attract public attention or concern.[47] Nevertheless there can be grave implications for citizens and their freedom of movement and action in public spaces. Under the guise of public safety or stability, audio-visual, spatial and motion data can be used in combination with predictive analytics, to pre-empt dissent, or track individual movements, or target civil society and marginalized groups.[48] The potential for misuse, such as sharing with law enforcement or combining datasets for profiling, is real and significant. This can create a chilling effect, where citizens start to self-censor or withdraw from participation in everyday civic life, fearful of over-surveillance and data misuse.[49]

These systems also systematically monitor the historical actions and decisions of government officials. Such oversight may constrain individual autonomy, diminish opportunities for decentralized governance, and foster a culture of fear and subordination. Additionally, this information can facilitate politically motivated appointments. For instance, within the judiciary, AI technologies could be used to strategically select judges whose views align with those of the ruling party.

Without adequate and transparent data governance protocols, AI systems envisioned to bolster response governance may intentionally or unintentionally creep into the territory of citizen surveillance.

2. Opaque algorithms

AI systems typically operate as black boxes using complex algorithms that are difficult to follow and making choices whose steps cannot be retraced.[50] This is a precarious foundation for policy making. For example, the "thinking" of the Haidian "city brain" happens in a digital cloud and a physical computing center, where it "[analyzes] the variegated pieces of information at its disposal, finding patterns and reaching a situational awareness". It is then "up to the city brain" to assess the gravity of a situation and determine the appropriate course of action.[51]

In some countries such responsibility is also offloaded for systems of welfare or policing that use predictive algorithms.[52] Such logic can accelerate action in the wrong direction, as has happened with AI-enhanced algorithmic welfare systems. In Australia, for example, Robodebt was an automated government scheme that incorrectly demanded welfare recipients pay back benefits and then issued debt notices, wrongfully collecting AUS$746 million from 381,000 individuals,[53] many of whom experienced severe mental health crises; some died by suicide.[54] In one integrated service platform in the region, for example in Telangana, India, reliance on automated eligibility systems during the pandemic reportedly led to unintended exclusions, which in some cases left vulnerable households without recourse.[55] Neither the state government which implements the Samagra Vedika technology, nor the private company that owns the rights, placed the source code or any verifiable evidence of its efficacy in the public domain.[56] In these circumstances it becomes easy to "pass the buck" back and forth when something goes awry.[57]

3. Epistemic bias

Epistemic bias is a bias around what or who is recordable and therefore knowable or worth knowing. In AI systems, this occurs when an activity such as research or modelling is influenced by pre-existing beliefs and perspectives. Anticipatory governance processes can, for example, privilege certain world views or priorities over others. Often, they support mostly technocratic and linear planning strategies, and privilege the social frames of more powerful actors and certain types or forms of knowledge.[58]

Officials building digital twins, for example, when faced with complex and messy social reality tend to favor those aspects that can be captured by discrete data or which reflect the officials' own perspectives and priorities. Other people might come up with different versions. For example, in a pilot in London three distinct social groups with different interpretations of their environments gave input that led to three different twins.[59] In complex processes, in order to achieve stable outcomes some interpretations are likely to win over others, thereby privileging certain priorities or perspectives. Digital twins are thus not mere representations but can also be 'steering techniques' for arriving at certain goals.[60] It is important therefore to interrogate their goals and logic and consider the potential for bias and exclusion.

Moreover, government staff making use of AI innovations might not be able to identify exclusionary bias or have the capacity to address it. The more complex the model, the more difficult this becomes.

A broader problem with such systems is that they assume that our futures are objectifiable and quantifiable – they therefore assess political and socioeconomic realities algorithmically, and view governance itself as a series of optimization problems.[61] This linear approach leaves little room for contestation, plurality, and complexity. There will always be questions around what future to prepare for and whose values and voices are included in the imagination of that future. It is vital therefore also to have procedural safeguards and to enable civil society collaborators and the larger citizen body to add necessary nuance and color to data-driven insights.[62]

4. Engineered inclusivity

Incorporating AI into flawed participatory processes risks exacerbating existing biases. Rather than enabling genuine deliberation, AI can codify a superficial "engineered inclusivity" that is used to manipulate public opinion. For instance, automated moderation or summary tools might systematically amplify mainstream viewpoints while downplaying dissenting or minority voices. This not only undermines the quality of the debate but also further marginalizes groups who are already underrepresented.These risks are particularly high in some countries of South and South-East Asia which have lower levels of digital literacy.[64]

Even efforts to widen participation to some of the larger excluded groups tends to involve unelected representatives who themselves are in relative positions of power and might not accurately represent the needs of the group, or might focus on issues that are not generalizable or pertinent to the larger citizen body.[65]

There can also be a technocratic bias if officials primarily seek participation on issues with a digital or online component such as ridesharing, AI development, revenge porn, and online alcohol sales, leaving out many other issues and communities.[66]

As with any exercise in participation there is the risk that it may be performative rather than transformative – mere "open washing". In many digital consultation initiatives, for example, one of the biggest shortcomings is that the public authorities are not required to pay heed to the outcomes.[67] Without political buy-in and legal mandates AI-enabled participation can become detached from the real levers of governance.

Another crucial concern is citizens' perceptions of AI and of the value of their input in decision-making.[68] If these are negative or skeptical this will increase mistrust not only in the process but in governance itself.

5. Automation bias

On the other hand, there can also be too much trust in automated systems. Research shows that people tend to defer to the judgment of algorithmic and automated systems a tendency that is accentuated with LLM-based conversational chatbots whose interfaces are designed to duplicate the experience of talking to an actual human. This is a cause for concern when AI becomes the sole basis upon which decisions are made. In emerging economies like China, Indonesia, and India – where trust in AI is relatively high – there can be excessive reliance on AI models.

Mesmerized by the productivity and efficiency gains, it is easy to forget the brittleness of this technology. LLMs may work properly most of the time, but most of the time is not good enough for systems on which people are heavily reliant. LLMs are prone to inaccuracy and hallucinations, so following their advice uncritically can have grave consequences. For example, MyCity in New York provided citizens with legal guidance that was not in line with the city's legal frameworks.[69]

Errors are particularly troubling when these systems are deployed in developing countries to fill information gaps between citizens and states. Individuals in these countries may not have access to alternative sources of information and may rely overly on these systems.

Compounding automation bias is "expert bias". Faced with complex issues, governments may put their trust in expert-driven predictive models that treat problems as "solvable given enough time, resources, and expert advice".[70] This tends to sideline the less quantifiable community-based insights and grassroots realities and to reinforce technocratic approaches – limiting the potential of AI-enhanced governance to support more holistic and imaginative approaches to policymaking.

Even when decision makers know that AI systems can produce erroneous results, they may still assume that their system is prescribing the best course of action. For a busy public official not well versed in the technology it takes courage to defy the AI recommendations, and venture on their own path, painfully conscious that, if the plan fails, they might later be questioned and shamed for not heeding the AI's guidance and presuming to know better.[72] Added to this is the danger that outsourcing AI to all processes for information gathering, synthesis, and decision support could reduce the number and capacity of essential government officials.

Widening inequality

The introduction of AI is likely to widen existing digital divides. Developing AI models demands advanced computational power along with high-quality data. Even deploying AI models requires extensive financial and human resources and adequately trained personnel.

Several Asia-Pacific countries are boosting their AI capacities in these directions. Indonesia, for instance, is investing in a local network of data centers.[73] India's IndiaAI program is geared towards boosting investment into domestic data and compute infrastructures.[74] Thailand's is aiming to scale up AI education and training.[75] Nevertheless, these investments are often unaffordable for governments in lower-income countries, or provinces.

A major concern is data quality. To perform effectively, AI systems need regularly updated and representative data that is sufficiently granular and contextually nuanced. Digital twins, for example, that require high-quality and interoperable data have so far only been developed and deployed for data-rich, highly digitized environments as in Singapore or China.

Elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific, data may be patchy, outdated, or riddled with errors. In Nepal, for example, creating reliable predictive models for the national public health system will be hindered by infrequent collection of data which is not disaggregated at the local level.[76] In some cases, critical data points may only be collected once a decade.

Poor-quality data used in AI models often reflects underinvestment in digital infrastructure as well as the limited technical capacity of local officials and frontline staff. These actors – and even senior bureaucrats – may lack the skills or tools to evaluate whether the data they rely on is biased. This challenge is further intensified by misalignments in values, priorities, and technical expertise between government institutions and the private firms that develop these models, making it harder to identify and correct harmful data practices.

There are also likely to be gaps between different levels or branches of government. Many AI tools such as early-warning systems or archival systems may require data pooling across sectoral ministries and across different tiers of government. In countries with fragmented federal structures or weak central-state cooperation, national-level AI initiatives may also fail to trickle down to regions that are geographically remote or economically marginalized – further entrenching existing inequities in digital and infrastructural capacity.

It is important to recognize that anticipatory governance demands significant state capacity. For many government departments – already stretched thin and under-resourced – it may be an unaffordable luxury, especially when immediate, day-to-day challenges dominate their focus.

In a similar vein, citizens and other non-state actors – especially from marginalized communities – may lack access to digital tools or have insufficient literacy to engage with AI-mediated processes. In many countries, some civil society groups are already leveraging advanced technologies while others are struggling to establish basic digital processes. And even if they are offered greater access to information, they may not have the skills or capabilities to take advantage of it.

Inequality from using AI in governance

Both predictive and generative AI systems are susceptible to discriminatory patterns and bias. Local communities and marginalized groups that are underrepresented or missing from training datasets risk being excluded or discriminated against. This challenge is especially pronounced in geographically vast and socio-culturally diverse countries where rural regions, informal settlements, or ethnically marginalized communities remain underrepresented in administrative records as well as in digital spaces – as in India, for example, Indonesia, Australia, the Philippines, Malaysia or Timor-Leste,

The tools discussed in this chapter offer promising solutions, but they also carry the risk of deepening existing digital and socioeconomic inequalities – which are often complex and interwoven. For example, an AI-powered system designed to monitor bureaucratic workflows might identify bottlenecks in public service delivery or grievance redressal processes. Yet, it may overlook the underlying causes of these delays, such as staff shortages, limited technical capacity, or the absence of legal authority to address certain issues. By failing to account for their lived realities, the system risks unfairly penalizing already under-resourced departments and personnel.

Similarly, AI-driven archival platforms that digitize and curate institutional memory may reinforce dominant narratives. These systems often prioritize formal documentation and the perspectives of powerful actors, while neglecting oral traditions, informal practices, and local knowledge – forms of understanding that have long existed only on the periphery of official records. Digital twins, for example, depend on granular, high-frequency data collection. If certain parts of the population are data-invisible, these simulations can perpetuate their invisibility, leading to biased policy decisions and unfair resource distribution.

Inequality in ability to mitigate AI harms

As well as having different capacities to implement AI systems, governments can also differ widely in their capacities to recognize and respond to potential harms. Some have mature policy and regulatory environments. The Republic of Korea, for example, has developed comprehensive legislation on AI investment, oversight, and enforcement, set to take effect in 2026.[77] China, too, has introduced formal regulations around GenAI.[78] In contrast, countries such as India and Bangladesh are still in the process of drafting national AI strategies and currently lack enforceable laws to prevent or address AI harms.

The lack of regulatory frameworks can have serious repercussions for both citizens and government officials. For citizens, regulatory gaps leave them with fewer means of challenging AI-related harms and seeking redress. This is compounded by the lack of AI literacy, making it difficult for citizens even to recognize the harms, let alone demand accountability. But the lack of regulations also exposes public officials: unclear liability structures can leave them vulnerable to disciplinary action, even when failures are the result of design flaws or systemic issues beyond their control.

There is also the concern that state institutions are being tasked with regulating technologies they scarcely understand.[79] The problem extends beyond technical capacity – it involves the ability to make informed decisions about where AI should be applied and what protections are necessary. This demands that government officials possess a nuanced understanding of the risks specific to their context, the limitations of the AI tools they deploy, and the ability to avoid using

AI indiscriminately as a blanket solution for all policy and governance issues. Some governments in higher income countries or districts have the resources to hire technical advisors and build in appropriate safeguards; other are less equipped to either to leverage AI or deal with any harms.

Policy recommendations

AI can extend state capacity and bend bureaucratic systems toward efficiency, but efficiency is not the same as public value. Where there are major gaps in infrastructure, data, or policy, the benefits of AI are likely to be distributed unevenly – amplifying existing inequalities rather than closing them. Moreover, the state is not a private firm; efficiency cannot be its guiding principle, especially if it undermines public values. Making government more efficient can also accelerate the harms: from top-down bureaucratic hierarchies that strip autonomy from officials, to opaque welfare systems that penalize the most vulnerable.

AI should not simply be automating existing processes, it should also be optimizing bureaucratic workflows and stimulating new forms of governance: deliberative rather than legalistic norms; distributed rather than centralized authority; citizen agency rather than engineered inclusivity.

Governments need therefore to think more broadly – guided by a theory of change that analyzes the root causes of the problems, outlines what is needed for system change, and then shows how AI can support this.

History reminds us how technology could be mobilized toward more democratic ends. Experiments in the early 1970s, for example, sought to redistribute economic decision-making—conveying simple economic information to workers in real time to support them in self-regulating their industries.[80] The experiment was short-lived, as Allende's government was brought down in 1973. While short-lived, such initiatives remain important examples of how to inject a new rationality into the design and production of technology.

More recently, political scientist Akshay Mangala has shown how bureaucracies constrained by rigid legalism could better respond to citizens' needs by orienting around deliberative norms.[81] With some political reconfiguration, AI could serve not just as a technical tool, but as a catalyst for new forms of governance. The following recommendations are grounded in practical examples drawn from initiatives and experiences across the Asia-Pacific region.

A. Build AI literacy

To use AI effectively and safely, those within government must understand how the technology works and what it can and cannot do – able to judge when machine learning is appropriate, or where other policies or tools may be more effective.

Government will also need the knowledge and capacity to query the claims of vendors who tend to oversell their technologies, obfuscating critical questions with technical jargon. Experience from various countries in Asia and the Pacific illustrates the risk of such capacity gaps: automated eligibility systems in the region, for example, reportedly led to unintended exclusions from welfare benefits without recourse, while similar programs globally have wrongfully demanded repayments from large numbers of citizens. In both cases, algorithmic harms were amplified by the lack of technical literacy and foresight in government.

When introducing systems, governments often have too much recourse to management consultants rather than focusing on building in-house skills.[82] Some outsourcing may be necessary, but this can also erode state capacity and reduce accountability; external consultants may feel more accountable to their technical communities rather than to the public at large.

AI literacy training should also be tailored to different roles and responsibilities. Officials in charge of procurement, for example, may need a higher level of technical knowledge, while those communicating with citizens will require the knowledge and skills to explain the technologies, and how citizens can voice grievances. Once AI is embedded within governance, this will also raise new questions for judicial oversight; judges will thus also need training to manage these new complexities.

It will be difficult to foresee all the potential harms and risks of AI systems, or to identify individual instances of damage; harms may only become apparent in the aggregate. To navigate this uncertainty, governments need to cultivate 'futures literacy' to be able to evaluate the near-to-medium-term implications of AI from both a systems perspective and from the vantage point of diverse social groups.

These efforts can be reinforced through regional collaboration. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the Pacific Islands Forum could stimulate peer-learning networks to pool scarce expertise for the benefit of lower-capacity states. Regional development institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) could build foresight hubs to ensure that AI use in governance is shaped by local priorities and region-specific development goals.

B. Institutionalize transparency and accountability

In many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the state is one of the largest procurers of digital technologies. This provides states with opportunities to steer innovation and shape markets and in particular to specify that technological design should uphold certain public values. Well-designed public procurement can also improve trust and confidence in the use of AI in public services.

Where AI is used as a tool of governance, its outputs should be explainable. Governments should thus insist on understandable or interpretable models. Concerns regarding whether this is technically possible or whether it might hinder innovation should not deter progress; it should be up to technology providers, to figure this out. In this way, governments can play a critical role in setting norms and standards.

Governments also need clear information on the provenance and selection of data, and on feature choices and algorithmic models. At all stages there are likely to be mistakes. Officials overseeing the introduction of AI systems should be able to interpret the results of tests, including error rates, and take measures to correct these, while addressing data gaps and mitigating other risks including those related to privacy and data security.

AI systems ought first to be tested in isolated 'sandboxes' before being introduced into public institutions. In Singapore, for example, the Infocomm Media Development Authority has a Generative AI Evaluation Sandbox, which provides a controlled space where developers, regulators, and independent testers jointly assess generative AI systems, creating common evaluation standards. Smaller or less digitally mature governments could instead be supported through shared regional sandboxes alongside mechanisms for regular peer learning between governments.[83] Learnings and outcomes from these initiatives must be well-documented and independently audited.

Alongside this, there will need to be robust systems for continuous monitoring and evaluation along with mechanisms for independent oversight that report on the impact of AI systems on social systems and individual rights. These evaluations should be available for public audit and scrutiny. In addition, governments, at all levels, will need to maintain online AI dashboards which assemble information on how AI is being used and performing, and the corrective measures taken in response to any known errors or reported grievances.

In China, for example, the Cyberspace Administration requires all GenAI tools to be registered in a publicly accessible algorithm registry. This system provides a high level of transparency and traceability by logging key metadata such as approval dates, developer identities, tool functions, and system scope. However, it must also be noted that although the registry is publicly accessible, the disclosed information is often at too broad or high a level to offer insights into how specific AI systems operate or were trained. Information on the sources of training data or on the measures for mitigating risk are not disclosed – highlighting a gap between formal compliance and substantive accountability to the public at large.[84]

C. Seed new financing models and cultures

Often, private 'AI for good' ventures build products or applications for public or social purposes without sustainable revenue models or clear pathways to monetization. After the pilot stage such initiatives can fail to gain momentum. For those that make it past the pilot, there are typically two options: either monetize the data that has been collected or sell out to Big Tech companies. The first option violates privacy norms, and the second only further entrenches the power of Big Tech.

Governments may be willing buyers of AI tools for governance, but civil society organizations may be unable to afford to make, deploy or maintain the tools for 'Civic Tech'. Market dynamics are thus likely to widen power imbalances.

Startups building AI interventions often rely on venture capital. This creates perverse incentives that can be unaligned with social good or the public interest.[85] Venture capital (VC) demands exponential growth and global market capture, while social initiatives may require gradual and cautious approaches, and may only cater to specific national or local needs.

VCs also operate within a 'fail fast' culture that encourages short-term thinking and shallow innovation. For a social or development initiative, failing fast can cause grave or irreversible social harm and endanger the lives or livelihoods of people who are already vulnerable and marginalized. Not all innovation is worthwhile, useful or socially beneficial.

Technology startups typically envisage that a successful product can eventually be extended without requiring significant changes.[86] This 'scalability' is an essential criterion for investors but is antithetical for equity-driven social change that needs to be adapted for specific contexts.

AI-for-governance initiatives will need alternative financing models. With high fixed and ongoing costs and low prospects for cost recovery, they are usually a poor fit for short donor cycles or VC incentives. Instead, regional development banks, such as ADB or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, or philanthropic funders, could create multi-year, outcome-linked funding windows.

Moreover, funding isolated projects is not sufficient. Investment is also needed to strengthen the broader knowledge economy and to build the capacity of civil society institutions– so they can contribute to interpreting, evaluating, and shaping how technology transforms governance functions.

Although many Asian economies boast thriving tech sectors and a growing number of unicorns, this alone is not enough to advance a meaningful 'tech for good' agenda. Globally, scholarship from leading universities and thinktanks has played a key role in shaping technology toward the public interest – by analyzing its impact, challenging dominant narratives, and expanding the vision of what kinds of technologies should be built. Asia and the Pacific need comparable investments in research and critical inquiry. Currently, there is a reliance on frameworks originating externally, which are often applied to their local contexts, even when the nature and histories, and the capacities of their states differ significantly.

D. Grow the AI commons

Current AI ecosystems are dominated by commercial entities whose narrow interests are shaping the technology's ethical and social trajectory. The 2025 AI for Good Global Summit exemplified this: of 82 featured speakers, nearly half were from industry, compared to only three from civil society. Consequently, the definition of "good" is being curated by dominant technology firms, which have a vested interest in promoting adoption while downplaying potential harms.[87] This influence is compounded by the industry's reliance on dominant technology firms' infrastructure, from cloud services to developer tools, giving a few companies inordinate control over the direction of innovation. This dynamic widens the accountability gap and elevates the prospects for social harm. Embedding these commercial systems into state infrastructure only serves to legitimize and entrench this power.

What is needed are public and decentralized alternatives to Big Tech. Many Asia-Pacific countries such as India, Indonesia, and Thailand are already moving this way, building their domestic cloud infrastructures, creating platforms for sharing public data, and incentivizing local startups.

However, such initiatives alone will not be enough, as the capital required is likely to be beyond the reach of many governments. Even if it were within reach, this may not be the best use of public capital. Instead, there should be alternative models of AI development that work with smaller, more curated datasets, and are optimized for task-specific ends, and that do not rely on access to Big Tech cloud infrastructure. Alongside, there should be “small AI” investments that support and maintain open-source tools for building AI, as well for ensuring trust and safety.

Several organizations in the Global South are developing infrastructure for a decentralized AI commons; these efforts need to be further supported and amplified.[88] This can be done by prioritizing such initiatives in government procurement contracts, but even more importantly, it will require dedicated and sustained funding. This would not only accelerate civic engagement in an instrumental sense, enabling more efficient governance, but also transform the logic of governance by distributing power to citizens and developing AI solutions to address problems identified from the bottom up.

E. Put people in charge

Better governance offers citizens more decision-making power. As the examples in this chapter highlight, AI could facilitate such collective deliberation and policy planning. Similarly, AI can support better service delivery and forward-looking policy making.

Nevertheless, these systems carry significant risks: algorithmic bias from flawed data, threats to personal privacy, and increased surveillance. To mitigate these, there should be clear regulations on data minimization and on purpose limitation, along with new institutional capacities. Technical solutions like "privacy by design" and the use synthetic of data to fill gaps are also being explored.

Beyond these measures, there could be “people's councils.” These bottom-up, confederated citizen assemblies would verify AI data sources and contribute new data to create more just and equitable systems. They would also serve as arbiters, deciding if, where, and how AI should be deployed. For example, Manchester, UK, has created a People’s Panel for AI to incorporate the perspectives of marginalized communities into AI service design.[89] While such councils raise valid questions about representation, these challenges should not prevent their creation.

END NOTES

1. (Francis, 2024)
2. (Kuchler and Stigson, 2024)
3. (UNESCAP, no date)https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?broken=eucHdi
4. (OECD, no date)
5. (Vervoort and Gupta, 2018)
6. (Murphy, Sharpe and Huang, 2024)

7. (Muggah, 2025)
8. (Lentze, 2025)
9. (Hofer, 2020)
10. (Hopp, 2021)
11. (Government of Singapore, 2017)
12. (Cugurullo and Xu, 2025)
13. (Cugurullo and Xu, 2025).
14. (Loblay, Freebairn and Occhipinti, 2023)
15. (Margetts and Dorobantu, 2019)
16. (Valle-Cruz et al., 2019)https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?broken=0t5F7U
17. (Li, Fan and Nie, 2025)
18. (Meyer, Weigelt and Kreft, 2016)
19. (Paddison and McCollin-Norris, 2023; Liu, Lee and Goh, 2024)
20. (Engin et al., 2025)
21. (Li, Fan and Nie, 2025)
22. (Anthony Jnr, 2021)https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?broken=b78exX
23. (Mahari, 2021)
24. (Liu and Li, 2024)https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?broken=0xjSDS
25. (Veddis Foundation, 2025)
26. (Dharmaraj, 2025a)
27. (Makasi et al., 2022)
28. (Thoughtworks, no date)
29. (Wancharoen, 2024)
30. (Berliner and Economics, 2024)
31. (Combaz et al., 2025)
32. (Barcelona City Council, no date)
33. (Tessler et al., 2024)
34. (Chirigati, 2024)
35. (Computational Democracy Project, no date)
36. (Fork the Government (3/3), 2016)
37. (Shimomura and Salem, 2023)
38. As of September 2023, the tool was yet to be deployed in a real-world setting and was due to be field-tested in three Indonesian provinces.
39. (Richards and Zahidi, 2024)
40. (Li, 2025)
41. (Aarvik, 2019)
42. (Odilla, 2023)
43. (Aldana, Falcón-Cortés and Larralde, 2022)
44. (Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, 2019)
45. (Mergel, Edelmann and Haug, 2019).

46. A panopticon is a circular prison in which single guard in a central tower can observe all the inmates, who cannot see the guard – a system of control where visibility is a form of power, and the inability to know if one is being watched leads to continuous, self-imposed discipline.
47. (Törnberg et al., 2025)
48. (Amnesty International, 2025a)
49. (ECNL, 2024)
50. (Kaufmann, Egbert and Leese, 2019)
51. (Cugurullo and Xu, 2025)
52. (Amnesty International, 2025b; Ciston et al., 2025)
53. (Chiraag Shah, 2023)
54. (Frances Mao, 2023)
55. (Tapasya, Sambhav and Joshi, 2024)
56. (Tapasya, Sambhav and Joshi, 2024)
57. (Tapasya, Sambhav and Joshi, 2024).
58. (Muiderman et al., 2023a)
59. (Nochta and Oti-Sarpong, 2024)
60. (Korenhof, Blok and Kloppenburg, 2021)
61. (Muiderman et al., 2023b; Törnberg et al., 2025)
62. (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015)
63. (Zidouemba, 2025)
64. (UNICEF, 2021)
65. (Muiderman et al., 2023a)
66. (Hortonarchive, 2018)
67. (Muiderman et al., 2023a)
68. (ECNL, 2024)
69. (Richard, 2024)
70. (OECD, 2020)
71. (Tapasya, Sambhav and Joshi, 2024)
72. (Tretter, Ott and Dabrock, 2025)
73. (Tan, 2025)
74. (Government of India, no date)
75. (Government of Thailand, 2023)
76. (WHO, 2021)
77. (Shivhare and Park, 2025)
78. (Xu, Lee and Goggin, 2024)
79. (Lokanathan, Siddiqui and Oprunenco, 2025)
80. (Morozov, 2024)
81. (Mangla, 2022)
82. (Mazzucato and Collington, 2023)
83. (Government of Singapore, 2023)
84. (Sheehan and Du, 2022)
85. (Bracy, 2025)

86. (Hanna and Park, 2020)
87. (Birhane, 2025)
88. (Varon and Costanza-Chock, 2024)
89. (Local Government Association, 2025)

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