

Foreword

The *Human Development Report 1999* by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) asserts that “global markets, global technology, global ideas, and global solidarity can enrich the lives of people everywhere. The challenge is to ensure that the benefits are shared equitably and that this increasing interdependence works for people—not just for profits.” The challenge then, as today, is to ensure that governance arrangements consistent with these ambitions are in place. Using a working definition of open development as “the strategic application of open production, open distribution, and/or open consumption of knowledge (often via the digital ecosystem) in the pursuit of advancing human development” (chapter 2), the contributors to this volume foreground the crucial importance of knowledge resources within any development process. Open knowledge resources are understood as those that are shared publicly at no cost for their production, distribution, and/or consumption.

Over more than a decade (since 2009), Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has sponsored research examining how openness fares in practice. In this volume, the contributors find that “open development” is a very helpful and flexible concept. It signals a wide variety of institutional arrangements and practices that can, in many instances, be consistent with enriching people’s lives and livelihoods. Openness is treated as a means toward that end for the Global South, not as a goal in itself. The contributors acknowledge that even when efforts are made to secure open access to data, information, and knowledge, or when projects aimed at enabling inclusive development are labeled as “open,” a complex array of power relationships can yield outcomes that may not always be consistent with the goal of inclusive development. This can be the case for initiatives as disparate as open government, open health data, open science, and open innovation in a commercial setting. As Hess and Ostrom (2007, 13) have observed, there are many ways of instantiating an open commons, and the “outcomes of the interactions of people and resources can be positive or negative or somewhere in between.”

Castells (1998, 359) observed that “there is an extraordinary gap between our technological overdevelopment and our social underdevelopment.” He went on to argue that prevailing interests, values, institutions, and systems of representation often limit collective creativity and generate destructive confrontation. Resistance to opening up data or information resources in a particular country, the presence of conflicting values, such as between openness and the right to privacy, and the use of digital technologies to secure openness in a way that excludes those who cannot access or use the technologies are just some of the factors that can lead to open development not being associated with positive outcomes.

The contributors to this volume are especially sensitive to the potentially asymmetrical power relations that can be reinforced when concepts like open development and their associated practices migrate from the Global North to the Global South, with the risk that they exacerbate existing inequalities and injustices. The contributors seek evidence of whether the sociotechnical and cultural environments are changing in ways that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of people in their local contexts. They offer refreshing insights into the practices that have provided grounds for optimism, as well as for concern, when open development initiatives have been introduced. They present evidence-based challenges to practices that operate through top-down authority and that privilege the private ownership and control of data and information.

The chapters offer a rich panorama of illustrations of the institutions and practices that have promoted bottom-up development. By focusing on practices in the Global South, it becomes clear that initiatives designated as “open,” such as some government services, are actually characterized by implementation strategies that exclude as a result of lack of consultation with local people. Open development projects can be exclusionary if they admit only informants and trainees as beneficiaries, with the risk that potential benefits accrue to the already advantaged. The empirical cases emphasize that the governance rules and practices that influence how open development initiatives are designed and implemented are what matter. They demonstrate convincingly that it is crucial to understand these in order to assess whether open development initiatives are addressing development challenges in an inclusive way.

The benefit of a flexible definition of open development is that it allows investigation of the provision of goods and services through nonmarket relations, but also through the commercial market. In addition to research on public-sector and voluntary open development applications, this volume builds a bridge between the literature on openness in the context of commons-based modes of organization for education, governance, or data and the substantial body of research on open innovation and open science. It does so in a way that is sensitive to the potential for various forms of exclusion

or repression and to the need to recall that means are needed to ensure that investment is attracted to encourage innovation, often leading to hybrid open and closed institutional arrangements (Mansell 2013).

Questions are raised throughout about the practice of open development, not just about claims to openness and inclusiveness. Whether in relation to gender and inclusion or to open initiatives such as Wikipedia or OpenStreetMap (OSM), it is acknowledged that ostensibly open development initiatives embrace biases associated with power asymmetries, and that the representation of interests is never neutral. The empirical accounts show that absolute “openness” is a chimera. Of greater importance are commitments to values consistent with enriching people’s lives and the realization that openness is always situated and conditioned upon the broader context that enables knowledge production, circulation, and application.

This volume offers a very timely tour of practices associated with governing open development at the global, country, and application levels. Its empirically grounded and critical contributions provide an array of perspectives rooted in a variety of disciplines. At the intersection of commons-based research, the role of digital technologies in development, and the challenges of institutionalizing trust and fairness in innovative commercial enterprise, the contributors recognize the persistent tension between those seeking to control data, information, and knowledge and those seeking an open knowledge environment—an environment that makes it more likely that prevailing hegemonies will be challenged effectively.

The outcomes of open development initiatives ultimately depend on choices on the part of stakeholders concerning which values and strategies toward knowledge resources should be favored. As Chambers (2017, xiv) puts it, “we will always need to go on learning how to know better, and through knowing better, doing better.” In the case of open development strategies and practices, this volume paves the way for future research agendas that are needed to ensure a scaling-up of forms of openness that will benefit the excluded and disadvantaged. This is one way of ensuring that investment in open development in the Global South succeeds in “doing good” rather than simply “looking good” (Enghel and Noske-Turner 2018).

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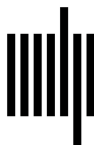
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