

Review



Making Open Development Inclusive: Lessons from IDRC Research. Edited by *Matthew L. Smith & Ruhiya Kristine Seward*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020. 512 pp. ISBN: 9780262539111.

What does “open development” mean, and how does “openness” work? How might open systems operate where there are pervasive inequalities? Can open development increase and promote equitable participation in the collection, production, and distribution of knowledge? These are some of the important questions addressed in Matthew L. Smith and Ruhiya Kristine Seward’s edited collection *Making Open Development Inclusive: Lessons from IDRC Research*.

Open development is often regarded for its potential to “support broader human development objectives” (p. 4), for instance, to amplify voices from the margin, foster inclusive research, and transform global ecologies of access to the outputs of research. The corollary is the movement toward developing open systems and institutions. However, this process seldom critically questions the viability for developing countries to adopt open development practices.

Recognizing this gap, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) investigated these questions for nearly ten years by examining how open development is operationalized in the global South. *Making Open Development Inclusive* synthesizes this research and offers a new perspective about open development by considering how “innovations in openness are contributing to and exacerbating existing inequalities” (p. 8).

Through a series of concise, informative, and innovative case studies, *Making Open Development Inclusive* successfully offers a nuanced analysis of open systems and their potential for inclusivity. The central thesis is that openness should not be conflated with inclusion or neutrality. Open systems, including education, health, data, science, and telecommunications, have the potential to be more inclusive, though inclusion can only occur “when institutional and hierarchical barriers to knowledge and participation are removed or lessened, as well as when diversity is enhanced” (p. 440). For open systems to be truly inclusive, they argue, the development process must include the values, perspectives, and knowledge frameworks of marginalized groups and incorporate these factors into the design, implementation, and outcomes of development projects from their inception.

This argument is carried throughout the book's 15 contributions, written by scholars and practitioners. The text is organized into three main sections—*Defining Open Development*, *Governing the Open Development Ecosystem*, and *Governing Open Development Applications*. The first section imparts the foundational knowledge in the topic area and defines open practices in inclusive development. The second section assesses the implications of governance in open systems from a variety of people-centric perspectives about gender, geography, ecology, development provision, and information and communications technology (ICT) access and use. This section examines pervasive inequalities in knowledge production practices, and considers how open development is affected by social differences and power relations. The final section interrogates the viability of governing open applications and infrastructures including open government data, open health data, educational resources, science, inclusive crowdsourcing, and open innovation. The claims, recommendations, and conclusions advanced in each contribution are supported with empirical evidence and case studies from the South.

The book does have limitations. First, the text's primary focus is on how open development might reinforce inequalities. As such, the contributors tend to overlook, albeit to varying degrees, the potential benefits of open development. For instance, ICTs and open source platforms have enabled innovative and important research, inquiry, and science that previously were unheard of, including citizen science, crowdsourcing, crowdseeding, microwork, and grassroots policymaking. Although not always optimally representative, the significance of these achievements should not be understated, especially when considering that such innovations have only emerged within the last two decades.

Second, the book does not engage with important research management issues. For instance, and despite the strong focus on information networks and data production, issues of data governance in the global South are left largely unaddressed. Data governance, or the ability for communities to manage and govern their own data individually or collectively, is particularly important in the context of historically marginalized populations especially in terms of agency and data sovereignty. Likewise, there is no discussion of whether and/or how the goals of data governance can coexist with the goals of open development and information management. This is an unfortunate oversight. Issues of surveillance and ICT adoption are also absent. In the current geopolitical climate, where the politics of surveillance of subgroups in cities persists in the global North, it is important that the potential implications of technological surveillance in the context of developing countries also be addressed by researchers. This is especially so, given the emphasis Smith and Seward place on critically examining existing power imbalances within the global South, lest open development serve to reinforce and/or escalate these inequalities.

In sum, *Making Open Development Inclusive: Lessons from IDRC Research* provides an important critique of open development, foregrounding important considerations that challenge equating open development with inclusion. In their attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the contributors are largely successful in providing readers with empirically informed investigations about the co-functioning of open development and digital network infrastructures, and in offering evidence-based recommendations aimed at advancing human rights and confronting ecologies of inequality. The book is structured and written in a manner that is accessible for scholars, practitioners, and civil society alike, including those who are not versed in open development. The breadth of its scope, which spans feminist theory, gender-based analysis, telecommunications, public policy, economics, and public health, makes this work a welcome addition to ongoing open development research that is likely to have cross-disciplinary and multisectoral appeal. This said, it is likely to be of particular interest to researchers, professionals, and academics in the fields of international development, political science, communication, critical data studies, social science, urban planning, and anthropology.

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