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Open Development: A Critique



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ABSTRACT

This essay presents a summary and critique of the book entitled *Open Development: Networked Innovations in International Development*. *Open Development* presents a compilation of chapters from a diverse set of researchers and frontline experts within the field of International Development. The volume was published in late 2013 by MIT Press in Cambridge Massachusetts and is a result of work initiated through the International Development Research Center. *Open Development* was chosen for this critique because it provides innovative strategies new to the field of international development. As such, it presents a crucial opportunity for members of the international development community to engage in critical learning and dialogue regarding the use of open access models which provide the field with a means to more effectively combat the multitude of negative trends and social issues facing today's global community. [AUTHOR ABSTRACT]

Keywords: *international development, open access technologies, book review*

Introduction and Summary

The concept of utilizing “open” models within international development presents an innovative trend that is procuring the attention of many development professionals. This exciting collective approach to the field often provides easier and more affordable access to resources such as technology and equipment, and supports the sharing of intellectual property. The increasing use of open models provides development organizations with a means to more effectively combat negative global circumstances such as poverty, poor health outcomes, low-quality education and violation of human rights.

A compilation of essays on the topic *Open Development: Networked Innovations in International Development* presents innovative open model case studies from the field of International Development. The 22 professionals who shared in the authorship of *Open Development* form a knowledgeable cast. These researchers, professors, and field experts come from a diverse list of countries including the UK, South Africa, India, Canada, Norway, and the US. The collective experience of the group covers topics such as information technology, public health, policy analysis, law, engineering, and of course international development. Together this large spectrum of knowledge and experience was able to contribute a balanced and thorough nature to the information presented in the book.

Open Development presents views and principles that are new to the field of international development. For members of the international development community, it is important to engage in critical dialogue regarding innovative strategies such as those presented in this book (some of which will be highlighted in this review). Such discourse will no doubt contribute to greater relevance and effectiveness within international development practice and initiatives.

Open Development came into existence as a result of a 2008 International Development Research Center conference in Ontario, Canada, where participants had been seeking to define how increasing levels of openness found in technology and information-sharing systems could best fit into the field and goals of international development. According to the editors, the term “Open Development” refers to “open models that can bring about development by allowing more people to more effectively execute [activities that allow for people to escape from poverty]” (p.32). The book presents a review of research from different parts of the globe on how open models of technologies are impacting development work. Each chapter of the volume individually explores and provides a constructive critique regarding the pros and cons of using open development models in a wide variety of domains within international development including research, health, and governmental collaboration.

Several of the chapters presented particularly interesting concepts. For example, chapter four discusses the facilitation of greater levels of transparency regarding commodity chains. The authors of this chapter point out how consumers often know very little about where their products and commodities were created (p.79). As such, developers working toward labor equality hope to use open information-sharing models on the World Wide Web to increase the level of consumer knowledge and activism. In a time when trans-national corporations are striving to preserve a lack of consumer knowledge in this area, information-sharing can be a

valuable tool for shedding light on the current state of life of the many individuals working at production plants in the Global South (p.79).

Alternately, chapter five presents two case studies on how open source biotechnology could provide a strong foundation for increased levels of global health. These two case studies discuss two collaborating non-profit organizations, one from Australia (p.115) and one from India (p.119), that are committed to researching the world's neglected diseases and then developing medications to combat those diseases. The authors of this chapter suggest that a combination of open models—including open access, open licensing, and open collaborative platforms—would be helpful when working with issues such as biotechnology (p.113).

In displaying the variety of information covered in *Open Development*, it is instrumental to note here chapter 10, which discusses the topic of openness with intellectual property (IP). In this chapter the authors highlight that, until recently, the protection of IP was considered of paramount importance to the effectiveness of international development (p. 249). Though this has been the case, it has led to such knowledge being homogenously applied in countries with greatly varying economies, cultures, and resources, and certainly bringing the potential for negative consequences. The authors argue that finding middle ground is the best way to move forward on this topic. “Access to knowledge,” as they call it, is a stance that neither holds tight to nor abolishes the protection of IP, but instead encourages collaboration to create approaches specifically fitted to the needs of the particular situation (p.250).

In the concluding chapter of the book, the authors liken open development to a freedom song, emphasizing that the practice provides freedom for human agents to connect, share, express, and thus provide accountability for their human intent (p. 344). The authors also assert that in an age where knowledge is so often used to gain power and control, the model of open development can provide an egalitarian space for the thinkers and doers of development to initiate positive change (p.344).

Critique

Success of Information Presented

Overall, *Open Development* sought to show readers how “openness” in information sharing and networked innovations can help to further work in the field of international development. The authors and editors were successful in this goal as they presented a great diversity of case studies to support their assertions and add an applicable nature to the principals presented in the book. The careful layout of the material, paring case studies with discussion, and analysis helped to clarify concepts and add practicality to the information being discussed.

Case studies drawn from the experience of field experts presented an applicable and solid foundation on which to facilitate discussion and posit ideas for change. Each separate chapter also featured an extensive bibliography of academic sources to support the topic being presented in that chapter. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the range of authors involved helped to provide a balance of prospective and accountability of information throughout the volume.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Open Development promises to be a useful academic contribution. The book has many characteristics such as author diversity and case study support that make it a well-balanced and inspiring read. It also acknowledges opposing views as well as potential weaknesses within the open development model. Though it may be difficult at first glance to see any weaknesses within the volume, one that could possibly draw people away from benefitting from all the book has to offer is its length. At almost 400 pages, this book is presents a substantial resource and the material contained within is of a nature that necessitates a methodical reading pace in order to digest the concepts being discussed. However, since each chapter presents on a different topic, the book can almost be viewed as a journal where one article can be read and digested at a time.

Comparison to Other Works

Open Development is in a class of its own within the literature speaking on the topic of international development. Since this volume stemmed from a conference where the “theory of openness” as relating to development work was coined, other literature of this nature has yet to be published. *Open Development* presents a high quality roadmap that others seeking to experiment with openness in their development setting would benefit from following. The authors encourage the use of the work as a source and jumping-off point for further research on the topic as well. Hopefully *Open Development* signifies the beginning of academic interest in this topic and there will soon be more literature to follow.

Lessons Learned

Open Development gave opportunity for several valuable lessons to be learned. In a practical sense, this book provided many ideas for potential tools that could be used in the readers’ future international development career. On a professional level, the book displayed the importance of transparency and collaboration that should be present in any healthy organizational setting. The examples shown in the book, and even the book itself, would not have been able to be achieved without the collective strength and accountability provided by healthy communication in professional relationships. In speaking about personal lessons learned, the book provided renewed inspiration to this reader regarding ethical practice in international development. As spoken about earlier, in a world where knowledge is so often used for power, an academic work seeking scholarship with the intent of collective creativity and growth is akin to a breath of fresh air. *Open Development* certainly is deserving of the commitment of your free time and will leave you refreshed and inspired to continue effecting change within our global village.

Reference

Reilly, K. M. A., Smith, M. L., (2013). *Open development: Networked innovations in international development*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
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