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Why the 'Do No Harm' principle can be key to open source sustainability and equality

By **Mark Samuels**   February 9, 2024
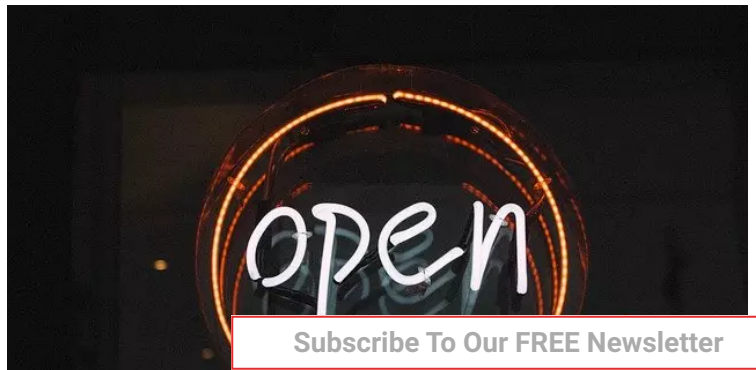
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SUMMARY: Open source software is having its most significant moment, but it's important that everyone benefits.

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The open source community must create a framework to ensure everyone involved in the development process is recognized and rewarded for their efforts.

That's the opinion of Malvika Sharan,

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work to be done around equality and sustainability in open-source technology.

Sharan cites evidence to suggest open source is now more important than ever, referring to research that suggests open source software is worth about $8.8 trillion globally, contributes to about 96% of codebases, and that some commercial software consists of up to 99% of freely available code.

Despite diverse achievements across the open source community, Sharan believes a range of key questions remain pertinent, particularly regarding access to knowledge and the circulation of benefits across society. Lots of the IT development work is being undertaken by unrecognised actors in the Global South and these inequalities must be addressed:

> **"**
> *How can the open source community further equity in an international context? Can we build a social and technical system where diverse stakeholders participate and are recognised in their participation for the benefit of that system?*

Creating a framework for change

As a means of dealing with these concerns, Sharan is undertaking research where she applies the 'Do No Harm' principle to promote open-source sustainability. She says the principle comes from the medical arena and the [Hippocratic Oath](#), where there is an obligation for physicians to swear to a range of ethical standards:

> **"**
> *Do No Harm means that if you're in a situation – and you don't know if there is a benefit, but you know there is a harm – you would rather do nothing. Do No Harm means taking a step back from an intervention to look at the broader context and mitigating potential negative effects on the social fabric, economy and environment.*

Sharan believes the Do No Harm principle can have a useful application in open source. As a context for this, she refers to a range of issues in open source development, such as uneven distribution of resources, threats of data misuse, misinformation and disinformation due to Artificial Intelligence (AI), and unfai

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being done in the Global South, but that data-labelling work is not being talked about as much when we talk about the use of AI.

She also refers to language and culture barriers, poor governance in community resources, and a complicated funding and investment landscape that can be tricky to navigate. In fact, there are so many concerns when it comes to equity that the list is open-ended:

> *There's also concentration of power, labour exploitation, economic uncertainty, and then I ran out of space. And there are many, many more issues. And that's because we don't know what those harms are. We know that there are certain harms, but we don't consider them regularly.*

Understanding complexity

According to Sharan, there are three main concepts that are part of the Do No Harm principle: intervention, such as providing aid; environment, where the aid is being supplied; and beneficiary, who is the individual, or individuals, who should benefit from aid:

> *Let's consider open source practices as the intervention, the environment can be considered as the scientific and local context of people who are involved in the production of open source, and the beneficiary is the global developer and user community.*

She suggests the main problem with this simple three-part concept is that there are many interventions affecting open source, including investment, governance, policies, licensing, advocacy, grants, grassroots communities, and evolving best practices. These interventions create complications:

> *So, it's not as simple as putting all open source into one box – open source itself is contextualized.*

licenses aren't yet legally-enforceable, they should be considered as a social agreement with ethical standards that people involved in the production of technology could adopt:

> **"** *Their effort has been focused on stopping bad actors from using their software, which has been a very strong conversation within the open source community. How can we stop someone from using my work when my work is open for all? That's the situation an ethical source license wants to avoid.*

Bringing benefits to all

Sharan posits that there are four key areas that need to be considered in a framework for equality and sustainability in open-source technology. First, stakeholder and beneficiary, which includes all the people in the community and their rights to science. Second, community functioning and relationships between actors, which are enabled by governance and decision-making process. Third, the local economy of the researcher in order to achieve scientific and economic equity. Finally, the environmental context where the open-source community conducts its work:

> **"** *These areas can be addressed through an implementation approach, such as best practice, recommendations, policies, manifestos, and collective declarations.*

She also refers to supporting infrastructures, such as investment and incentivising actors, and prioritizing behaviour that sponsors positive cultural change. Above all, all the actors that play a role in the production of open-source software must be considered:

> **"** *With Do No Harm, there are some questions we need to answer: who makes decisions, who gets to participate, who controls and protects the system, who enjoys and benefit from the outcome, and who is responsible for addressing challenges, like harm? At the end, the answer has to be, everyone.*

Open source is a complex socio-technical system, where

"

This Do No Harm principle allows us to assess who benefits and who's being left out, and how we can use apply this framework to improve our approaches for open-source community infrastructure, investment and policy.

Image credit - Pixabay

Disclosure - Sharan took part in State of Open Con 24 from OpenUK.

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greg_not_so:

Hi Jon,

in my mind, copilot is going to be the peak of AI, whichever enterprise manages to stay independent from all microsoft - will benefit in the long run.

cheers,
greg

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All acknowledged, except for MRP not being considered part of core ERP, although it may have fallen out of favor, or not even been part of post y2k era vendors concentrated in HRM/CRM. As US...
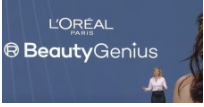
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