The chapters in this section explore the various roles of the major stakeholders that have shaped the development of the open data ecosystem, including civil society, government, the private sector, journalists, researchers, donors, and multilateral agencies.

Mapping the stakeholders

For the most part, the authors that have contributed to this section offer their perspective as members of their respective stakeholder groups. The selection of chapters draws on discussions at recent events, such as the International Open Data Conference and Open Government Partnership Summit, where civil society, governments, researchers, and donors, among others, have all hosted their own side events, reflecting on their particular agendas, roles, and shared interests. As Wilson notes, the dividing line between different stakeholders is not always clear (Chapter 24: Civil society). In some contexts, private sector and civil society organisations (CSOs) may be competing to provide the same services, and, as Van Schalkwyk explores, the landscape of research often involves overlapping networks of academics, CSOs, and donor-backed projects (Chapter 30: Researchers). Open data itself is a contributing factor in blurring the boundaries between different stakeholder groups, creating what Hammer refers to as “the need for new paradigmatic thinking about the relationships among governments, civil society, the private sector, and citizens” (Chapter 28: Multilateral organisations, p. 413). For example, when relevant data is open, roles formerly carried out by governments might shift to the private sector, or the work of journalists might be carried out by civil society startups. In looking at different stakeholder groups, it is necessary to pay attention as much to their inter-relationships as to their distinctive roles.

Institutionalisation, engagement, and sustainability

One thing is clear in the chapters that follow. The work of all stakeholder groups has evolved over time. Chapters on governments (Chapter 26) and on multilateral organisations (Chapter 28) highlight an increase in the consolidation of supply-side arrangements for open data provision, and as part of this maturation of organisational approaches to open data, new institutional and governance arrangements are evolving to move from innovation and experimentation to long-term sustainability. The authors of these two chapters identify the need for open data to be further integrated into existing funding streams and policy agendas and for the creation of collaborative spaces, where governments and multilaterals can work with other stakeholders to align data supply and tools for reuse with external demands. This points to a key tension that may be prevalent in the years ahead between a desire to maintain the generative, collaborative, and silo-busting spirit of open data work, while, at the same time, making it more business-as-usual and less reliant on political leaders whose tenure is always temporary.

Making sure that potential users have the capacity to work with open data surfaces is a critical challenge for a number of the stakeholders discussed in this section. Chapter 24 (Civil society)
describes international CSOs that have been able to hire data science specialists, adopting agile and user-centric development methodologies from the private sector. However, for most CSOs at the national level, as well as for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the private sector, particularly in the Global South, the skills, experience, and intermediary support required to leverage open data remains scarce.

Chapter 27 (Journalists and the media) describes significant challenges associated with creating the business cases necessary to sustain data journalism. Although journalists are essential partners in turning national and local government open data into resources for transparency and accountability, the business models behind conventional journalism are collapsing and data journalism has not yet adequately refined new approaches that can fill this gap with a measure of stability. There is a very real risk that, just at the point when governments may be on track to make open data supply more reliable, potential users from civil society, journalism, and the private sector will exhaust their resources, and open data will remain unused.

The critical duality of the role of donors is explored in Chapter 25 (Donors and investors). Donors have not only provided much needed financial support for open data research and initiatives all over the world, they also play an important convening role, shaping the field through their interventions. The last decade has seen a number of efforts at consolidation and coordination of open data investments, and this chapter suggests a number of sectors have reached a level of resilience with access to funding from a diverse set of donors, while other sectors remain highly dependent on a smaller pool of funders and are vulnerable to a loss of funding. In outlining the risks moving forward, the chapter points to shifting donor priorities and the threat this may present to future work needed to improve interoperability and data infrastructures, as well as that required to increase collaboration and community linkages across the open data ecosystem.

Who’s who?

Although each stakeholder group may possess its own structures and logic, there are, ultimately, individual stakeholders active in leading and shaping open data practice. Chapter 30 (Researchers) explores the composition of the research community, identifying particular biases toward Northern-led research, male authors, and a lack of inter-regional collaboration. The author also notes that the composition of the stakeholder group has a substantial impact on the areas of research explored and types of outcomes it produces. This is a theme that is also picked up in both the private sector (Chapter 29) and civil society (Chapter 24) chapters, where both geographical and gender biases are identified as issues to be addressed, and there is a common call to go beyond the “usual suspects” and to ensure greater inclusiveness of open data programmes and initiatives.

This points to another area of limited information with regard to open data activity. Although Chapter 25 (Donors and investors) offers us a view of those organisations with active open data projects, unlike the bibliometrics analysis carried out in Chapter 30 (Researchers), it is not easy to determine who makes up the network of individuals actually responsible for implementing these projects. Although a number of organisations have been involved, this may serve to obscure
that a relatively small number of individuals moving between organisations, both as funders and implementers, make up the true support base for open data work. Providing pathways for new actors to engage with open data, and to expand that experience over time, is an important aspect of increasing diversity and sustainability.

**Stakeholder horizons**

The context for open data work is changing for all stakeholders. Chapter 28 (Multilateral organisations) sums up current technologically driven change as a “fourth industrial revolution”, a source both of new opportunities but also new challenges, such as threats to privacy, structural job losses, and growing social dislocation. Chapter 27 (Journalists and the media) refers to the erosion of public trust and the centralisation of power in the hands of major internet platforms. Against this backdrop, governments, private sector firms, donors, CSOs, and researchers are all challenged to consider whether to maintain a full-time focus on open data or shift their limited resources to other potential tools for development, democratisation, or profit-making.

The authors in this section are largely in favour of maintaining a distinct emphasis on open data while also working to connect open data with other agendas. They recognise that the last decade has laid considerable groundwork, but that, in light of capacity gaps and unstable funding, it is only now that open data resources largely untapped to date might start to be put to greater use. The recommendations across these chapters are also remarkably well aligned: more investment in capacity building and data use; a focus on inclusion; continued work to align data supply and demand; support for mainstreaming open data into sectoral work, while retaining resources to work on core open data issues; and support for increasing engagement with data and open data in the Global South. Both the chapters on the private sector (Chapter 29) and civil society (Chapter 24) also place an emphasis on the need for more targeted and actionable project level metrics, as opposed to measurement that tries to estimate the state or value of the open data field in general.

The section as a whole puts forth grounds for both cautious optimism and concern. In light of reflective learning across a range of stakeholders, the required conditions to secure impacts from open data are closer than ever, but there are ongoing concerns that, in the majority of sectors, advances to date will be difficult to maintain if internal commitment and external investment are reduced in a more crowded and confusing data policy landscape.