

Concept note on Workshop on Public Software for Social Sector - Principles and Practice

Jaipur, February 25, 2010

Background

Software is a basic building block of this digital world and its nature has important implications for the public interest, hence basic software applications that are required by all to access and participate in the digital world can be seen as a 'public good'. FOSS being freely shareable and locally customizable has the features of such a public good. The basic philosophy of public institutions is to promote the public good and in keeping with such basic principles, the technology choice of these institutions needs to clearly favor FOSS over proprietary software. FOSS thus has a critical role in the public sector¹

However there are several obstacles to the adoption of FOSS in the public sector², including lack of awareness about FOSS, inhibitions about using FOSS and a FOSS ecology that can support training, implementation and support processes. There is a need for active support from various institutions to create the required FOSS ecology.

Objective

Knowledge Commons, Digital Empowerment Foundation, Digantar and IT for Change³ are planning a workshop on February 25 in Jaipur as a part of the FOSS ecology creation process. This has three components

1. Creating **awareness** about Public Software amongst people who have not heard of it or heard of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS).. This includes the social, political, economic and pedagogic imperatives of FOSS and the dangers from proprietary software to society. Most people in the social sector use proprietary software since they have not heard of public software and this workshop aims to bring about awareness on its advantages as well as addressing challenges, both real and mythical in its adoption.
2. Addressing the perceptions/issues amongst people who are aware of FOSS to help them **commit** in principle to FOSS over proprietary software. This would cover both the principles (why FOSS) as well as practical issues of adoption/migration (migration paths, options, case studies of migration, FAQs etc). This helps people/institutions to move from 'awareness' to 'commitment'. Given the compelling advantages of FOSS, invariably awareness leads to

1 Public Sector - Institutions working for public interest. Includes governments, academic institutions, civil society (NGO/CBO), community media institutions etc

2 Research by IT for Change

3 Will also seek support from NCERT, AIF and like minded organizations

commitment over time.

3. Helping people/institutions who are convinced about the imperative for public institutions to adopt FOSS, to **migrate** to FOSS. There would be technical support teams at the workshop, who would help migrate participants computers and notebooks to public software applications, wholly or partly.

The FOSS ecology creation spectrum



Methodology

The workshop would have two parallel tracks

1. Presentations and panel discussions on FOSS

People from academic institutions, civil society, private sector as well as government would participate in discussions relating to the importance of FOSS to society, specially to the public sector⁴. Issues relating to the creation of FOSS ecology and possible measures and ideas would be discussed. The workshop would focus on public education system and look at the specific pedagogical imperatives for FOSS in the public education system.

2. Technical Support team for adoption of FOSS by individuals and institutions

There would be a parallel session where a volunteer team would help individuals migrate to FOSS platforms on their computers/notebooks. Institutions who are keen to migrate to FOSS could register with this team and plan this process.

Participants

Given that the workshop seeks to address the awareness-commitment-adoption spectrum for FOSS ecology creation, the invitees would comprise of

1. Organizations/individuals already working with FOSS platforms and tools, including those in education domain.
2. Organizations/individuals keen to explore FOSS in their institutions.
3. Organizations/individuals who may not be much aware of FOSS and its criticality for the public sector. This would cover a large number of NGOs, academic institutions, government departments, schools

⁴ A recent workshop on “Software Principles for the Public Sector, with focus on Public Education” was organized by UNESCO, e-Governance Department, Government of Karnataka, Department of Public Instruction and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, Government of Karnataka, Karnataka Jnana Aayoga (Karnataka Knowledge Commission) and IT for Change (ITfC), see www.Public-Software.in