

Workshop on
'Public Software* for the Social Sector - Principles and Practice'

Jaipur, February 25, 2010

Concept Note

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'. public software being freely shareable and locally customizable has the features of such a public good. The basic philosophy of social sector institutions is to promote the public good and in keeping with such basic principles, the technology choice of these institutions needs to clearly favor public software over proprietary software. Public software thus has a critical role in the public sector¹

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

Social Sector Software Principles

There is a need to explore and understand the role and possibilities for the adoption and promotion of software conforming to social sector requirements and philosophies. Thus social sector computer projects require careful thinking on issues such as accountability to the public, costs of access that impact equity, providing universal services which requires independence of the provider (dependence on private sector can be a cause for failure of public provisioning), encouraging community participation etc. Apart from the obvious economic and security aspects, there are certain political and philosophical imperatives of the social sector that the software architecture needs to be in alignment with, including those of openness and collaboration / sharing. Such principles can be seen as '**Guiding principles for policy on software for the social sector**' and need to be discussed, debated and designed for guiding ICT Projects.

Education

The public education system has as its essential element, the sharing of information and the co-construction of knowledge amongst teachers and learners. Given that this process has a significant component of information and communication, it points to the significant role that new ICTs can play in education. In case of Public Education, apart from the overarching 'social sector' principles, the decisions regarding the design of computer programs in schools, also need to be made clearly from pedagogical principles, philosophies and accepted educational policies. These require

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

exploration on issues such as constructivistic approaches to learning, collaborative curricular design, focus on teacher professional development, using personal computers with internet connectivity to enable learners to connect to new information sources, communicate with peer networks and with guides and mentors, use software tools to create new knowledge artefacts whether audio-visuals, or images etc.; apart from ICTs such as radio, films etc. etc to form the bedrock for ICT policies and programs in schools. The traditional bottlenecks faced in the public education system (which is also largely true for social sector as a whole) to many of the issues discussed here are actually connected to the possibilities of new ICTs- digital media enable far easier sharing and transmission, electronic networks enable communication and community building far more easily, universal access to knowledge resources etc.

However, in many cases, whether in education or in other domains, software decisions have largely been seen as being 'technological' and the critical aspects of social sector (and additionally pedagogical in case of public education) have not been adequately considered in such decisions.

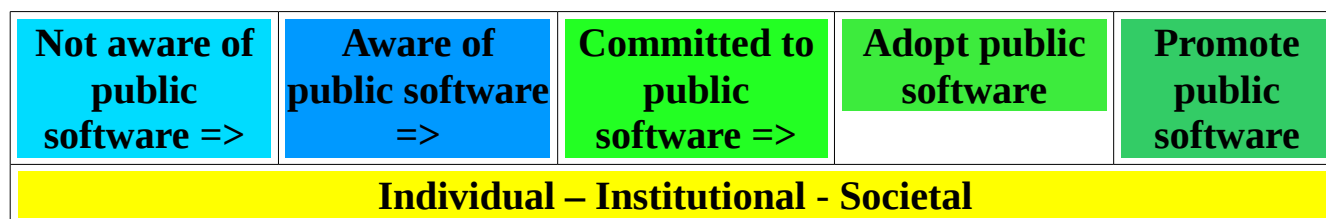
Objective

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

1. Creating **awareness** about public software amongst people who have not heard of it. This includes the social, political, economic and pedagogic imperatives of public software and the dangers from proprietary software to society.
2. Addressing the perceptions/issues amongst people who are aware of public software to help them **commit** to public software over proprietary software. This would cover both the philosophical aspects (Why public software) 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 public software, invariably awareness leads to commitment over time.
3. Helping people/institutions who are convinced about the imperative for public institutions to adopt public software, to **migrate** to public software

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

The public software ecology creation spectrum



Methodology

The workshop would have two parallel tracks

1. Presentations and panel discussions on public software

People from academic institutions, civil society, private sector as well as government would participate in discussions relating to the importance of public software to society, specially to the public sector⁴. Issues relating to the creation of public software 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 public software in the public education system.

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

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

Participants

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

1. Organizations/individuals already working with public software platforms and tools, including those in education domain.
2. Organizations/individuals keen to explore public software in their institutions.
3. Organizations/individuals who may not be much aware of public software 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