

Microsoft opens mouth, inserts foot

Microsoft, in the person of its GM: Nigeria, Gerald Ilukwe, has claimed that the cost of software is not an important issue in the developing world. **By Brian Bakker**

The incident was widely reported on the Internet, but most prominently by Ingrid Marson of ZDNet UK. She wrote: "In response to a question on the role of open source software in Africa, [Ilukwe] said that cost is not important, even though he admitted that the average annual salary in the West African country is only \$160."

Strange, especially if one considers the vociferous and continuous protestations of the Business Software Alliance (BSA). In its most recent analysis of software piracy around the world, the organisation listed five African countries among its top 10 piracy hotspots in the world – among them Nigeria with, according to the BSA, a piracy rate of 84 percent.

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Ilukwe seems oblivious of this fact. He continued: "It's easy to focus on cost and say how much is a product, but at the end of the day it's the total impact that's important. You can give people free software or computers, but they won't have the expertise to use it. Microsoft is not a helicopter dropping relief materials; we're there in the field."

His colleague, Neil Holloway, the president of Microsoft for EMEA, is reported to have added that training in IT skills is the most important issue in emerging markets. "It's not about the cost of the software, it's about how you take your expertise to people."

Not surprisingly, rumours are flying around the local Free/Libre/Open Source Software (FLOSS) community – the gist of which seem to concern whether or not these utterances are indicative of a new battle-plan from Microsoft in its struggle against FLOSS.

Unfortunately, Microsoft SA was unable to provide

an official response in time, so Brainstorm could neither confirm, nor refute these rumours.

SITTING IN AN IVORY TOWER

Denis Brandjes, MD of OpenLab International is scathing, asserting that Ilukwe sits in an ivory tower on Victoria Island, Lagos, and has lost touch with the reality of life experienced by the majority of Africans. He takes umbrage at the declaration that FLOSS is more complex to use than Microsoft products and describes it as "blatantly declaring one's ignorance and lack of insight into the competition".

Nhlanhla Mabaso, manager of the CSIR's open source centre, is equally scathing: "Such general comments are embarrassing to both the ICT industry and the continent as a whole. It is as if we've forgotten about our sordid colonial history," he says, referring readers to the work of two well-known FLOSS advocates, David Wheeler and Rishab Ghosh, for what he calls "scary stats".

Wheeler has an article on his site (www.dwheeler.com) called "*Why Open Source Software/Free Software (OSS/FS, FLOSS, or FOSS)? Look at the Numbers!*" The paper discusses why, in many cases, using FLOSS is a reasonable or even superior approach to using proprietary alternatives. It examines market share, reliability, performance, scalability, security and that old chestnut, TCO, along with a number of non-quantitative measures.

Ghosh, meanwhile, who is FLOSS programme leader as Maastricht University's Economic Research Institute on Innovation and Technology, is helping to dispel many of the myths around FLOSS – in particular that viable business models are not possible around it. The survey was conducted on behalf of the European Commission and delivered back in 2002

and is available from: flossproject.org

Andre Coetzee, creator of Impi Linux and CEO Cubit Accounting, provides additional local perspective: "Africa needs to develop its own technology instead of perpetually being digitally colonised by the USA and Europe." He agrees, to a degree, with Microsoft's Holloway: "The price or cost of software is not as relevant as the transferral of real skill to Africans."

Coetzee also believes that, with the correct skills development, Africa could be a net exporter of software, generating revenue from its own intellectual property. "We should be focused on free and open standards, free or low technology costs to lower barriers of entry to Africans and African companies, dual trade agreements and technology exchange agreements with other governments and many other 'real' needs that need be concerned whether Africa needs free software or not," he comments.

"We, as Africans, also have a responsibility to understand that it is not whether software costs nil rand or R10, but whether or not the money generated remains in Africa," adds Coetzee.

He makes another valid point: "Every human being wants free software (who would want to pay if they don't have to?). It is whether it is African technology and whether it is world class or could compete on the world market."

The BSA findings tend to support his first assertion. As to the second, time will tell whether Africa can rival the likes of India as a software development hub. The more immediate concern is an economic one: vast swathes of Africa can't afford first world software pricing, leaving us with one of two options: piracy or FLOSS. No one is advocating piracy. ■

