

July 2005

FLOSS synergies channelled at free knowledge workshop

The Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) workshop held in Pretoria in April provided an effective means of acknowledging players and identifying the need for collaboration.

The Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) workshop saw about 30 open source flag-bearers, some from as far as Europe, Asia, Australasia and other parts of Africa, converge at the State Information and Technology Agency (Sita) in Pretoria in April. Its aims were twofold – firstly to effectively plan and map out the synergies among various international FLOSS initiatives and events; and secondly, to seek ways to inform the planning around regional and local efforts, such as the Regional Task Force on open source software (OSS) and the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Open Source Centre. It was also an opportunity for networking with key players in the open source space in Africa.

The workshop – organised by the CSIR Open Source Centre (part of the African Advanced Institute for Information and Communications Technology) and supported by the Shuttleworth Foundation, DST, OSISA, and HP, among others – kicked off with various presentations on the first day. Perspectives from India, New Zealand, Finland, Malaysia, Germany and Kenya covered topics such as education, South-South collaboration, the status of FLOSS in Africa, challenges, new initiatives and available resources.

Workshop delegates reiterated the sentiments of Wayne Mackintosh, responsible for leading the e-learning strategy for the University of Auckland. "Although the concept of OSS is relatively new, it is envisaged that this initiative will help reduce the digital divide, considering the reduced software costs. The language barrier will be overcome, due to the adaptability of the open source code, enabling programme software to be written in a user's mother tongue," he stated.

John Antwi Nkumah of the Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in Ghana echoed Mackintosh's sentiments and added: "Models need to be established through which small businesses, tertiary institutions and government institutions can benefit." Dr M Sasikumar of CDAC in India Open Source was positive

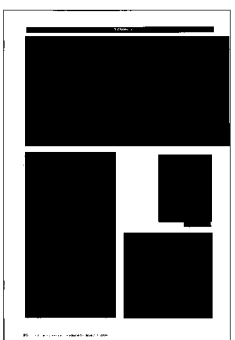


Wayne Mackintosh

about the prospects for OSS: "It needs to have a slice of the market share, it needs to set standards and dictate terms – in a nutshell, Open Source Software needs to be irresistible to users!"

After the presentations, the workshop split into two tracks, dealing with regional and international collaboration, while the other focused on free knowledge. The establishment of a FLOSS Task Force in South Africa, as requested by the State President, was regarded as a first step towards formulating a FLOSS policy. The participants discussed the establishment of Regional Centre in South Africa (UNDP) and envisioned replicating this model thirty times over throughout the region within the next three years. Such centres would be responsible for accelerating the successful adoption of FLOSS in Africa.

Successful implementation of FLOSS in SA depends on the extent to which there is a policy-driven well-managed environment, clearly regulated by Government and stakeholder expectations. The Task Force will take on the job of transforming the national OSS strategy document into policy. In this way, an



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Derek Keats



Edward Holcroft, Bob Jolliffe, Vusi Magagula, Hilton Theunissen



Joe Mazibuko, Sita



Members from the Finnish delegation



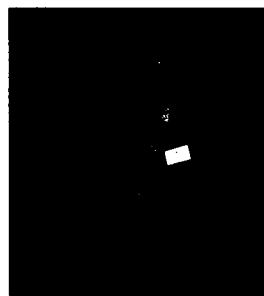
Delegated from Ghana



Rishab Ghosh



Bill Kagai



Solly Masinga, Edward Holcroft



Jill Matshana



Chris Morris

enabling environment will be created towards achieving the OSS dream for the country and beyond its borders.

Discussions on free knowledge communities focused on literacy levels in Africa and ways in which to explore e-learning platforms to address this challenge. One of the proposals pertained to the integration of Wikimedia projects with existing e-learning initiatives to make learning more accessible to wider communities throughout the region. Projects undertaken to address this issue need to merge content creation, community building and technical development.

Kim Tucker of the CSIR Open Source Centre, and workshop convenor, commented: "The workshop was an ideal opportunity to define a way forward for the Free Knowledge Communities (FKC) concept with input from a diverse selection of participants with a wide range of perspectives and experience. Proposals will be

developed with collaborators through the use of existing networks so as to grow and consolidate the process in a bid to work toward the FKC vision: knowledge for all, education for all - empowering individuals and communities to empower themselves with knowledge."

Delegates pronounced the workshop a success since it provided an effective means of acknowledging players and identifying the need for collaboration. It also established a foundation for further networking, both regionally and internationally, on which to expand current initiatives and devise new plans for the future of open source in Africa.

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