

Free and Open Source Software: *A Blind Alley for Developing Countries?*

There is considerable interest in the "e-development" community about FOSS: free and open source software. It is argued to be cheaper and more customisable than proprietary software; it is argued to be a potential kick-starter for the local IT industry; it merits a mention in the WSIS Plan of Action. So what is its likely trajectory?

We can turn first to historical evidence because we have been here before. In the 1980s, "shareware" – FOSS' forerunner – was a temporary source of excitement for exactly the same reasons; even attracting the attention of the World Bank. Yet the developmental equation for shareware was "Impact = Zero".

What of the evidence today? A recent survey on our eGovernment for Development Information Exchange plus survey data from Africaⁱ suggest at most 5% of computer systems in developing countries have any open source software running on them, and that is almost entirely represented by Linux. Even in Cuba, where the US embargo should make conditions highly propitious, proprietary software dominatesⁱⁱ.

Because of piracy and the limited size of initial purchase price within total cost of software ownership, there is no clear, general evidence of FOSS delivering cost savings. Because, by and large, FOSS means Linux, the benefits of customisation and IT industry kick-start are also nebulous.

The lack of strong evidence of FOSS benefits helps explain its lack of success vis-à-vis proprietary products. In particular, proprietary software may not be open source but it is certainly free for the great majority of developing country users, thanks to piracy. Other key factors uncovered include:

- *Lack of awareness of FOSS*: the African evidence suggests most IT managers simply don't know about it.
- *Poor international links*: to work effectively with open source code you need to be part of an active, global community of like-minded developers; links to such communities from developing countries are weak.

Donors have moved in with interventions to support FOSS, as recently seen in Tanzania with the development of Jambo Office. Yet such efforts are found to make little impact. To date, they have been amateurish; focusing on the techies who write the code, and failing to introduce a business focus that would draw in needed market research, marketing, distribution and support skills. As so often, too, donor FOSS projects have been short-term flares of interest rather than the required sustained efforts. They are no match for proprietary firms who are in for the long-haul, and who will use the carrot of low pricing and the stick of anti-piracy actions to achieve their aims.

Even the potential "backfire" of anti-piracy actions, leading organisations to abandon their pirated proprietary products and adopt FOSS instead, seems exaggerated. Microsoft and the Indonesian police recently launched a crackdown on cybercafesⁱⁱⁱ. As could be predicted, many owners changed over to FOSS. However, users then stopped coming to those cybercafes because of their unfamiliarity with the software. Soon after, the pirated products were back in place.

FOSS' trajectory, then, is intimately bound up to proprietary software, especially Microsoft products. At best, FOSS looks like a lever to extract concessions from Microsoft and similar vendors. In its present state, FOSS will remain a marginal activity that does not deliver on its development promise and that is no match for the enduring power and business acumen of major proprietary players.

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ⁱ Kamuzora, F. & Baruch, J. (2005) 'Contextualising the challenges of free and open source software adoption in African countries', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept

ⁱⁱ Mitra, A., Garcia, A. & Somoza, A. (2005) 'Imperatives of free and open source software in Cuban development', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept

ⁱⁱⁱ Robinson, A. (2005) 'Square pegs for round holes?', UK DSA conference, *Connecting People and Places*, Open University, 7-9 Sept