Open Source Software Strategies in Development Cooperation

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Abstract

With the still increasing globalisation and the integration of local markets into the global economy, information is more than ever a key factor for success. While computer based information systems are common practice in more developed countries they are still an exception in other parts of the world, particularly remote rural areas in developing countries.

Bridging this divide can not be reduced to the mere provision of internet access. Instead effective solutions like business information systems with localised content and specialised databases need to be developed.

Obviously these solutions do not only consist of information and content. A well suited IT infrastructure and strategy is the basis for such systems and necessary for a sustainable development.

Coming from a non IT background many actors of development cooperation focus on the content and information part. It seems as if not many efforts are spent on the underlying IT strategy and architecture.

On the other hand the UN, especially the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), specifically recommends the usage of Free/Libré and Open Source Software (FLOSS) for development. The E-commerce and Development Report 2003 for example discusses the advantages and reasons for the usage of Open Source Software. At the same time many civil services as well as companies in Europe and North America switch over to use FLOSS instead of proprietary solutions.

With this background we are analysing the awareness of different actors and agents in the development communities — including those in rural areas — about the importance of IT strategies in general and, more specifically, about Open Source Software strategies.

In "dry exercises" based on the available literature and by using techniques like SWOT and SINFONIE actors and agents are analysed and clustered. By means of case studies of different development projects the actors' attitude towards the underlying IT infrastructure are being investigated. Special attention is drawn to possible relationships between a country's IT policy and the actors' attitude towards IT strategy questions.

Keywords: Development countries, ICT strategies, information technology, open-source software, rural development

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