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NOTIFICATION

Joint UNCTAD/UNITAR event on Free and Open-source Software (FOSS) New York, 29 August 2006

Within the larger framework of a three-day UNITAR Web Seminar Symposium on ICT Policy Issues for Development, UNCTAD and UNITAR will hold an event on Free and Open-source Software (FOSS) on 29 August 2006 in New York, at United Nations Headquarters. The event will provide a forum for discussion on the policy and practical implications of FOSS, both globally and locally. It will also explore the potential for and depth of involvement of the United Nations regarding this issue.

Background

An increasing number of countries have recognized the important role of software – in addition to hardware, connectivity, content and human capacities – as the medium that enables people to use technology productively. Software is the inescapable interface between people and hardware – without software, computers are inoperable. Furthermore, software that cannot adapt to a diverse set of global users with a wide array of needs will have a limited impact on the adoption of information technology solutions.

FOSS is software whose source code – its set of instructions – has been made open to the public and freely available under a public license. It is not necessarily free, as in "gratis" or free-of-charge. It is "free" and "open" because it can be freely used, altered and adapted, and redistributed. FOSS has become an inseparable component of a global technological reality. For example, much of the Internet runs on free software, and many distinguished firms use open – source information technology for mission-critical tasks. Nevertheless, FOSS is often insufficiently understood from an economic, human capacity and intellectual property perspective – all issues with important development implications.

A greater awareness and better understanding of FOSS can help the United Nations and its member States to adjust positively their technology policies and practice. The notion that FOSS can have positive externalities makes it an important consideration in countries with strong development agendas. FOSS has triggered thinking on and consideration of issues relating to content provision and associated issues in education, science and creative endeavours. FOSS suggests that there may be a spectrum of approaches to developing and licensing creative work, research and development and knowledge distribution which fall in between the proprietary model and the public domain.

Objectives

The Web Seminar event on FOSS will bring together prominent information technology experts involved in FOSS issues, software industry representatives, academics, government representatives, and representatives from civil society organizations. The objectives of the event are as follows:

1. To provide delegates with an opportunity to discuss issues of relevance to item 49 of the provisional agenda for the sixty-first session of the General Assembly, on information and communication technologies for development;
2. To support discussions about FOSS usage within the scope of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Charter (A/59/563, Annex I) and as a result of system-wide inputs addressing this issue;
3. To exhibit a number of computers running exclusively on FOSS, giving delegates an opportunity to experience FOSS as users;
4. To increase the visibility and relevancy of the issue via a live webcast of the event to a global audience;
5. To raise awareness about UNCTAD partnership activities on information and communication technologies for development, in particular those related to developing free and open-source software technology communities and human capacities in developing countries.

Participation

The event will provide UN delegates and other nominated officials from UN member States with policy-focused learning opportunities in the area of ICT. The event may be particularly relevant to countries and delegations involved in formulating and implementing policies and activities that have emerged from the first and second phases of the World Summit on the Information Society.

More details, included on how to register for this event, can be obtained from the UNITAR website: www.unitar.org/en/webinars.html, or from:

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(signed)

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