

# Open standards + open source = equitable access

*Global Centre for ICT in Parliament*

Shaping the Information Society:

The Role of Parliaments and Legislators

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# Role of ICTs

- ICT increasingly essential for government and citizens' participation in public life
- Technical standards now part of the process of government
- Technical standards and software define citizens' access to government

# Equitable access

- Access for citizens with disabilities
- Access for citizens speaking different languages
- ...equitable access based on citizens needs
- But also: access for citizens *regardless of the software* they use

# Economics of standards

- Network effects can form entry barriers for new technologies
- Path dependence, QWERTY, intel 8086, linux/unix...
- Natural monopolies to maximise welfare from network effects
- Monopolies can capture the profits from network externalities, so consumers don't benefit

# Economics of standards

- Alternative approach: separate technology from producer
- *Interoperable standards* allow natural monopolies of technologies (standards) while providing for competition among *vendors*

# Economics of standards

- *If* no competitive advantage is held by some players just because they own rights over a standard,
  - *then* a natural monopoly of technology can coexist with full competition in the supply for the technology
- Only such a *different* economic effect deserves a different term: **open standard**

# Standards and access

- Open standards ensure that all citizens can have access to the information society, as *citizens* rather than as *consumers* of software from specific companies

# Open source software

- Originally known as Free Software; also Libre Software
- Software which comes with the *freedoms* to use, study, modify and share
- Essential for promoting access to knowledge: access is assured by the freedom to study the software (source code)

# Software for access to all

- Access for all to participate in the information society as *citizens* not as *consumers*
- Freedom to use promotes equitable access
- Freedom to study promotes transparency
- Freedom to modify and share promotes access for different communities, allowing the software to be adapted to needs

# Software for access to all

- Open source freedoms allow users to have control of software choices
- Empowerment of software users essential for sustainable, equitable access in the long run
- Governments use open source to “reduce dependence on ICT vendors” (EU FLOSSPOLS report, 2005), as well as costs and sustainability, enabling infrastructure
- The Internet runs on open source today

# Access or participation?

- “Access [to ICTs] is not enough, it is the ability to create and add value that is important” - Felipe Gonzalez
- Equitable *participation* in the information society matters, not just *access*!
- Freedom to study, modify and share software promotes capacity building

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# Participation = equity

- Open source software provides a fishing-rod, not just fish
- Participation and skills development increases equity
- “Learning knowledge and skills” is the #1 reason for people to participate in open source communities

# Participation = equity

- Developing countries and those with less access within countries need opportunities to participate actively, to contribute not just consume
- *Open source provides the fishing rods, not just the fish*
- EU funded FLOSSINCLUDE project studying ways to increase *development* not just *use* of software from Africa, Asia, Latin America

# More information

EC FLOSSPOLS report (including “An economic basis for Open Standards”):

<http://flosspols.org/deliverables.php>

EC report on “Economic impact of open source:”

[www.flossimpact.eu](http://www.flossimpact.eu)

EU FLOSSINCLUDE project

[www.flossinclude.eu](http://www.flossinclude.eu)

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