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**EUROPEAN COMMISSION
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EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES (EUROSTAT)**

**ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC
COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD)
STATISTICS DIRECTORATE**

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(Geneva, 17-19 May 2004)

Topic (iii): Open source and software consortia in statistics

OPEN SOURCE FOR STATISTICS – A STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN?

Invited Paper

Submitted by Statistics Norway¹

Summary

1. On their way to increasing interest in FLOSS (Free/Libre and Open Source Software), governments should lean towards case studies and analyses done to demonstrate the risk and benefits of open software in the public sector. Some technical and organizational matters will be discussed in the following, and hopefully add valuable aspects to an open-source strategy of any target organization. A concrete collaborative example formed by a number of statistical institutes, the SOS (Statistics Open Standards) Group will be described.
2. In any large IT environment, commercial software has coexisted with open-source software for years. The public sector is no exception. Emerging software monopolists combined with heavy investments in new technology in the 90s made governments look at open source for the perceived savings of these investments.
3. The belief of quick and inexpensive implementation is usually the main driving force of open-source appliances. Some see it as a shortcut to their technological independence and as a basis for their future IT capabilities. Further, commercial vendors supports open-source software as a business strategy providing for add-on business, as consulting services, and add-on products, which are tactically charged.
4. A recent survey in 2003 on behalf of the European Commission in European public administrations, found that 63 percent of the respondents said they already use open source in their software architecture. Web and file server features seem to be the most convenient areas of appliance.

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5. To avoid confusion, the paper will define some key elements within the fields of open-source software, and also define other areas of non-commercial use of available software, often regarded as substitutes or parts of open-source software.
6. The quest for cost savings, due to free up-front license fees and the availability of community-based support, tend to be the major force for open-source appliances. An indirect benefit of the consideration of open-source in public-sector procurement is that it can be used to boost a user's negotiation position.
7. IT management should bring the open-source discussion to a formal level. In lack of strategic guidelines, it's likely to believe that the developers introduce different open-source products tactically in a case-by-case manner to solve a specific requirement.
8. There is no doubt that successful open-source projects, as the Linux and Perl revolution, provide for a "share and reuse" best practice. When public-sector agencies stick together in large-scaled collaboration projects running by the same practice, optimized investments may be derived. Such software pooling is valuable and cost-effective provided that the IT management realizes that flexibility, traveling concerns, meetings and "give and take" mentality are provided for.
9. Experiences in recent years from the close cooperation between statistical institutes in the area of standardization and IT development have led to some conclusions on the achievements made, and on a future strategy.
10. **The SOS Group** is a cooperative network formed by the statistical institutes in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, The Netherlands, Switzerland, UK and Norway, based upon the above principles. The objectives and outline of the work will be described.
11. Any cooperation on development based upon open source seems to lead to a need for well-defined interfaces based upon common accepted standards. From a starting point of discussing how to share software components, SOS has turned to the need for investigation and adoption of common standards. In general, the statistical society still has a number of fields facing a lack of developed and/or adopted standards. This is still the main obstacle for achieving the economic and organizational goals by using open-source software.

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