

New Study Investigates Significance of FLOSS for Developing Countries

Fits the World

UN bodies like the UNESCO and UNDP have been focussing on free and Open Source software, with workshops and portals. Now researchers in Finland presented a detailed study on its significance for the developing countries. **BY C. MARTIN**

For some reason, South Asians have been at the helm of a number of critical studies on Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS). First it was Rishab Aiyer-Ghosh in the Netherlands who undertook the prestigious study on FLOSS for the European Union. Seema Arora at Stanford is part of the team looking at what makes programmers gift their critical code without hoping to earn millions from it. Now, it is Finland-based researcher of Pakistani origin, Niranjan Rajani, who has headed a study for Helsinki's Ministry for Foreign Affairs on the significance of FLOSS for the developing countries. Version 1.0 of the 152-page report was released in end-May and is available at <http://www.itfirms.co.za/research.html>; http://www.maailma.kaapeli.fi/FLOSS_for_dev.html will carry updated versions.

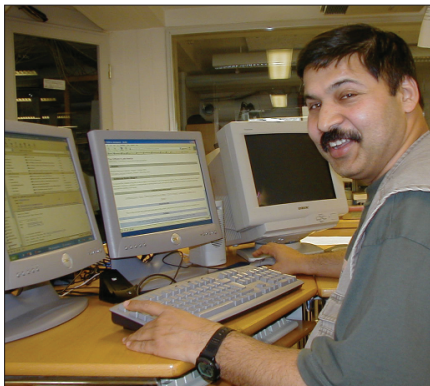


Figure 1: Lead researcher of the FLOSS study, Helsinki-based Niranjan Rajani

FLOSS's impact is looked at in detail for Africa, Asia and Latin America. There at least, three factors play an important role: the costs of software, the anti-piracy campaign and security concerns. Also Rajani argues that the ideas of FLOSS are spreading to other fields, as seen in terms of "open law", "open source biology", MIT's opencourseware, e-books put online through volunteers under Project Gutenberg, free dictionaries, or the open music movement.

"Even a quick look at the use of computers in the education sector, NGOs, alternative media, and civil society is enough to convince us of the potential of FLOSS," the report states. As "students, teachers, journalists, and democracy activists have been using computers, email, web publishing, desktop publishing and the Internet to get their message across," FLOSS is also helping in the process of democratization, puts forward education and research (see interview). Likewise it can help stimulate the indige-

nous software industry and create local jobs. Rajani suggests that FLOSS could also act as a bridge across conflict zones, though this has yet to be systematically worked on. FLOSS may help developing countries enhance independence (including that of the technological kind), and meet international obligations like TRIPS by reducing illegally-copied software.

Obstacles to the wider use of FLOSS include financial (more pressing problems worldwide), to technical (a dearth of trained IT professionals in many developing countries), and political or social issues (a resistant-to-change bureaucracy, corruption, the brain drain, lack of political freedom, and unhelpful legal frameworks).

The report calls on the Finnish government to "use, promote and support FLOSS in multiple ways". It suggests to sensitise civil society groups in partner countries about its potential and to encourage locally-trained "grassroot hackers" to join the worldwide FLOSS movements. ■

Yes, it's relevant! – interview with Niranjan Rajani

Linux Magazine: Despite their lack of money, Third World countries own one big resource: people who are eager to learn. How can FLOSS help to use this talent pool?

Niranjan Rajani: In terms of computer education, nothing else provides that much value to learners as FLOSS does. You're free to tinker with the code. Not only that, you can get in touch with those who wrote it and ask why this or that was done. You have a well established community of coders around the world, which doesn't discriminate against you in any way, and lets you in, if you are willing to get into the system. I don't know of any resistance to anyone in the world, when one tries to enter the community of FLOSS coders. It offers low entry barriers. That's how it should be described. It reduces the barriers for anyone wanting to enter this field by making everything open. So much so, that many people fail to appreciate that fact. Besides, there's the element of cost. Most of the studies show that, in terms of cost, free and Open Source software is unmatched.

LM: Any interesting, surprising or unexpected findings from your report?

NR: One surprise was the relatively low FLOSS-related activity in the Arab world, and that Arabic, a language spoken in so many countries still does not have that much support in terms of FLOSS. Then, one came across some of the intricacies of the GPL versus other Open Source licences. In the beginning, the conception I had was that the commercial world would be intrinsically against the GPL. But that turned out to be wrong. Because the companies which may want to contribute code to a FLOSS project would also want to make sure that their competitors could not steal that very code. With GPL'd code, it's guaranteed that this would not happen (because it's not allowed to integrate and redistribute it in a non-GPL'd or closed source product). If some other license is chosen, the code could be stolen, and probably that's happening. So companies are reluctant to contribute to a, say BSD-style code. Individuals might react differently... I'm talking about companies.