



Philippines Gov't to debate mandating open source

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Congress is set to conduct hearings on the proposed Free Open Source Software (FOSS) Act of 2006, which mandates the use of open-source software in government. If enacted, the law is likewise expected to benefit small companies.

In an interview with Computerworld Philippines, Congressman Teodoro Casiño, author of FOSS Act 2006 (or House Bill no. 5769), said the use of FOSS and open standards would benefit both the government and private sector, particularly small-to-medium enterprises (SME).

"SMEs will have more access to ICT and they need all the competitive advantages they can get with IT," Casiño said in a forum Monday attended by delegates across the Southeast Asian region.

The lawmaker described his proposed bill on FOSS as "timely" as there are now several initiatives promoting its usage by many sectors of civil society.

FOSS Act 2006, which was first filed in Congress last September, mandates the use of FOSS in government and educational institutions.

The bill requires learning organizations to issue FOSS certifications and basically bans schools for exclusive purchases of proprietary software, and then provides non-fiscal incentives to companies engaged and using FOSS.

The bill also requires the Commission on ICT (CICT) to enforce the law and facilitate migration of agencies and institutions from proprietary software to FOSS.

Casiño said the bill does not target to benefit SMEs alone, rather it is a broad policy framework for FOSS. The bill's first hearing in Congress is scheduled on Wednesday.

Potential benefits

Casiño, along with other FOSS advocates in the forum, entitled "1st FOSS@Work International Conference-Workshop for SMEs in the IT industry", identified several benefits to be gained and the positive changes that could happen if FOSS usage is propagated.

Through FOSS, advocates believe this would lead to usage of legal and affordable software that are stable, user-friendly and low-cost. Benefits also include reduction in software piracy, and emergence of local software companies.

Balthas Seibold, senior project manager of InWEnt Capacity Building International of Germany, justified the user-friendliness of FOSS, saying it can be accustomed to local languages for SMEs in the ASEAN region.

"We have to look at the language issue. Many of the standard products are not customized to local languages and so very often poorer population groups have no access to such software solutions," Seibold said.

InWEnt is teaming up with FOSS advocates in the Philippines to help improve training and awareness programs in order to have a growing base of users among SMEs in the region.

Shahid Akthar of UNDP-International Open Source Network, meanwhile, believes FOSS training among smaller companies should be significant since more than 90 percent of companies worldwide can be categorized as SMEs.

Aside from empowering SMEs, Casiño believes FOSS would help develop the local software industry since the FOSS' business model focuses on providing services.

"Filipinos are known in the world for providing good services, very productive, dedicated, and creative," said Casino, noting that a number of local software companies are doing very well on FOSS but most of their clients are abroad.

Freedom of choice

CICT commissioner Emmanuel Lallana said the commission is for 'freedom of choice' when it comes to software use but believes FOSS levels the playing field for smaller software developers.

CICT is promoting FOSS use by distributing a "FOSS CD Kit" to government agencies that includes basic open-source applications accompanied with user manuals to help ease migration from proprietary solutions.

The proposed FOSS bill does not mention any budget allocation. Congressman Casiño said the government can save about P20 million (US\$403,000) every year if it uses FOSS instead of proprietary software.

Commissioner Lallana said there is no actual measure on how much the government spends every year on software due to the absence of a centralized purchasing system.

Moreover, he said "a lot of government agencies use unlicensed software." Despite this reality, however, he said the commission is not pursuing anti-piracy cases against these agencies.

Rather, the FOSS CD kits remind agencies to take intellectual property or IP laws seriously, he said.