The OSS promise

by Sim Kyazze

For Africa the attraction of open source software (OSS), is obvious. But for once, Internet intellectuals are not simply sounding off to annoy the rich north.

For the uninitiated, OSS is a baby of the non-profit organisation, Open Source Initiative, and works on the principle that programmers are able to read, use, redistribute and modify the source code for a piece of software.

From the name, OSS lives up to its moniker that it's free, it has an "easy-step" way of uploading, it includes the source code, and has no licensing or distribution restrictions, unlike Microsoft Windows or Oracle IT solutions, for example.

Open source software has some big-name enthusiasts, including Thabo Ndlela, who heads broadcast information technology at SABC; Dan Gillmor, a technology columnist with the San Jose Mercury News, the prestigious US newspaper; and Douglas Arellanes, head of research and development at the Media Development Loan Fund in Prague.
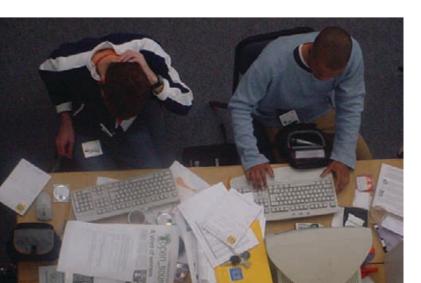
Gillmor is especially intrigued by the idea of writing locally and distributing globally. To do this, he proposed that stories be unique, be community-oriented, and they must also bear in mind the Internet's new rules and strategies (for example taking advantage of weblogging and creating links between Internet sites).

"Major events are essential to cover, but the lives of everyday people are stories we must be telling as well," Gillmor said. "The Internet is the medium." And what he probably wanted to add was that OSS was the software to help this along.

Ndlela has said that OSS is analogical with the democratisation of Africa and mentioned at least one school, Uganda Martyrs' University, that has completely embraced OSS.

Gillmor is convinced about the potential to help education in Africa and wrote in a recent column: "In Africa, in Asia, in much of the world — especially in the developing nations — open source is looking like the best way to usher in the information age. Around the globe, educators, companies and governments are getting tired of paying the Microsoft tax – which tends to rise inexorably – and sending the money to America."

Added Ndlela: "It does, however, depend on which business you are in. OSS might be more appropriate for education institutions as opposed to big corporate firms."

It is the big business tactics of the Microsofts of this world that have spurred all this recent interest in OSS, but the obvious need to be in on the Information Society has been a powerful incentive for Africans as well. Indeed, Ndlela views Africa's perpetual indebtedness as a real threat to its people's ability to dig themselves out of this hole, let alone be able to use open source software.

"OSS could be the answer to Africa's indebtedness by providing alternate computing to expensive proprietary licence fees," Ndlela said in an interview.

Ndlela thinks there are real advantages to OSS:
♦ It's less costly and quick to implement.
♦ It's more secure than proprietary software.
♦ It's more stable than proprietary software.
♦ It's more likely to conform to standards.
♦ It has immediacy of use and modification.
♦ It has a rich set of programmes and features.
♦ It has very few restrictions on its use (for example one cannot use it to set up a pornography site on the World Wide Web).
♦ It's a shortcut to technological independence.
♦ It bridges the digital divide by improving access to technology.

The real problem for Africa will be the commitment to OSS from governments. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) has some very strong and useful language on enhancing human capital to take advantage of the Information Society. It remains to be seen, however, whether the inspiration can be translated into real strategy and efforts to make use of open source software.

"Governments seem to be taking charge of this… even the SA government is advocating OSS, hoping for technical liberty and financial relief," Ndlela said. "The OSS community is taking charge in conjunction with OSS firms such as Red Hat."

But while this is true in South Africa, the same cannot be said of many other African countries.

"Who should take charge?" Ndlela asked. "I don't know… the public that seek alternative computing."

It seems that is as much as can be expected from the experts on how the continent can link up via OSS.

"OSS is not proposed as a uniform platform but an alternative from proprietary software," said Ndlela. "The essence of OSS would not suit uniformity since its research and development depends on the innovation of multi users. Open standards are however mandatory for OSS to succeed. It is open standards that the OSS community should adhere to as opposed to a common strategy."

But can the big players in Africa (especially in South Africa and Egypt) embrace OSS and its potential to have bugs? Said Ndlela: "The big corporate firms use OSS in certain aspects of their business but I do not see it becoming the mainstream business computing platform."

Ndlela concedes that OSS is appropriate for some applications, "but I do not see it becoming the mainstream platform".

Open source software does not have to become the mainstream platform in Africa. It just has to be a building block for a continent that is short on money and anxious to get ahead in the World Information Society.

The "Open Source" (in spirit if not technology) newsroom at Highway Africa 2003.

Rudy Nadler-Nir and MTN representative Thandi Mokoena with their camera-included, video-recording-enabled, MMS- and GPRS-activated cellphones.