

# **Common Understanding: Open Dialogue on Open Standards**

Summary of the Policy Dialogue on Open Standards  
at the  
Regional Conference on Open Standards: the Key to an Open ICT Ecosystem  
2-4 May 2006 Bangkok, Thailand

## **Chairs:**

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The purpose of the dialogue was to explore policy issues affecting open standards and openly discuss and share practices, to come to some common understanding and possible future collaboration.

There were 54 participants representing 13 countries - from government, the private sector, academia, and civil society.

The following summaries are clustered by the topics covered during the dialogue, highlighting the salient points and suggestions for moving forward.

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### **1 Open Standards attributes**

1.1 A good deal of time was devoted to discussing the attributes of open standards for software interoperability. A standard is a set of technical specification as opposed to software, which deals with implementation. It was proposed that truly open standards must have the following attributes:

- Openly developed
- Openly maintained
- Openly modified
- Openly accessible
- Openly implemented

1.2 It was pointed out that the level of openness needs to be defined, especially for individual governments that include the terms 'open standards' in policies. Since

there is much ambiguity associated with the term 'open', consumers (including government) must be very specific in stating their expectations.

1.3 It was recognized that there exists a spectrum for the definition of openness:

A. Open + Royalty Free	B. Open + RAND2 + Royalty Free	C. Open + RAND + Royalty
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1.4 At one end, open standards are defined as being patent and royalty free standards; and at the other end, open standards are defined with patent and royalty implications, and in the middle are those standards where the associated patents are licensed royalty free.

1.5 All government representatives, some private sector representatives, and members from education institutions agreed that open standards must be royalty free (A and B). Some private sector representatives were of the opinion that Reasonable and Non-Discriminatory (RAND) with royalty implications must also be included in the definition of open standards (A and B and C).

1.6 One private sector representative suggested that RAND usually includes defensive suspension<sup>3</sup>, which protects the rights of intellectual property holders. RAND-based standards have been used to implement some successful software products that comply with open standards.

1.7 It was suggested that the spectrum could follow a 'creative commons' model for labelling the 'gradient' of open standards; however, it was also stated that labels may not provide the clarity that governments require for their policies and frameworks. Furthermore, national governments must arrive at a definition of open standards based on their needs and local context.

1.8 It was agreed that two models of development, market-based consensus and centralized development, co-exist and that there was no clear preference for either. It was noted that no matter what the model or accreditation is, the timing of standardization is critical – we must examine the maturity of the standard.

## 2 Procurement policies

2.1 Most government and some private sector representatives agreed to a 'pragmatic' approach with a preference for open standards – where they i) exist, and ii) are most appropriate.

2.2 Some private sector representatives were of the opinion that there should be no preference for open standards, that governments should maintain a position of choice, instead of mandating technology of specific standards. However, other participants pointed out that governments make technological choices on a daily basis through purchasing decisions.

2.3 Government representatives from India, Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Thailand stated that the choice of standards should be based on the following criteria:

- Risk management/exit strategies/vendor independence
- Cost

- Interoperability
- Competition
- Stability
- Implementation support (also by local vendors)
- Data Longevity
- Performance
- Platform neutrality

2.4 There was generally consensus among government representatives that open standards meet these criteria.

2.5 Furthermore, it was pointed out that governments play an important role in ensuring free competition in the market place through policy intervention – open standards help maximize competition and strategic industry development. Certain government representatives stated that government policies on open standards can improve negotiating positions with vendors.

2.6 It was suggested that governments mandate interoperability instead of open standards – looking at the ends as opposed to the means. Governments should be flexible and maintain a policy of technology choice by choosing from all of the options or ways to achieve interoperability for a given problem. Certain private sector representatives stated that interoperability can also be achieved by proprietary standards; however, other private sector representatives pointed out that compatibility should not be confused with true interoperability.

2.7 It was agreed that there is a need to de-link free/open source software policies and open standards policies to ensure clear decisions regarding purchases.

### **3 ICT innovation and development**

3.1 It was recognized that innovation comes from all sectors, academia, government and the private sector. Open standards maximize competition, they allow companies to have self-directed innovation and not be locked into opaque technology pathway. This is particularly important for local Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).

3.2 In the area of research and development, some government representatives stated that adopting existing open standards saves resources and allows them to concentrate on innovation and build on what has already been developed.

3.3 It was stated that some of the problems (Avian flu, Tsunami, etc.) facing the world today cannot be solved by individual corporations or nation states, and that publishing data using open formats will create global collaboration that could rapidly address these challenges.

3.4 It was agreed that the Internet is the best example of an innovation based on open standards, which itself has become a global platform for further innovation based on open standards.

### **4 Free/Open Source Software**

4.1 It was pointed out that FOSS and open standards share a symbiotic relationship and there is an overlap between the attributes of FOSS and open standards. Some

participants were of the view that the ability for FOSS to implement a standard is a measure of the openness of the standard. Certain participants suggested that the ability to implement a standard by FOSS was a basic requirement for a standard to be considered open.

4.2 There was general consensus that government policies on FOSS be de-linked from policies on open standards. However, some participants pointed out that open standards policies help to level the playing field in the domain of software; and it was generally agreed that many open source implementations of open standards enhance the wide adoption of open standards.

4.3 It was stated that in developing countries both FOSS and open standards are means to providing universal access to ICT.

## **5 Strategic planning and architecture frameworks based on open standard**

5.1 There was consensus that governments need a high-level interoperability framework. Such frameworks should:

- be forward looking and examine scenarios and use cases;
- consider the industry-wide perspective and impacts on industry;
- guide government in delivering government-to-government and government-to-citizens (e-government) services and functionalities;
- include performance and service level agreements;
- involve stakeholders and include guidelines for vendors;
- include risk management and exit strategies;
- consider data longevity/archiving; and
- be vendor and platform neutral.

5.2 It was agreed that there is no single interoperability framework that can suit all countries, and that a framework is formulated from the needs and requirements of individual countries.

## **6 Proposals and ideas for the way forward**

6.1 Form a 'group' modelled after the Berkman Roadmap for Open ICT Ecosystems exercise to explore the scope and specific areas of interest in open standards in the Asia-Pacific context. Research possibilities include:

- analysis of existing government interoperability frameworks and best practices, examining inter alia impacts on competition in the market place; and
- indicators and benchmarks for measuring ICT ecosystem openness and interoperability.

6.2 The development of national interoperability framework for interested governments in the region. Foster regional cooperation (e.g. ASEAN) towards developing regional interoperability frameworks.

6.3 Undertake capacity building activities on open standards targeting CIOs (government), developers, and the general public – provided that the scope of open standards is well defined.

6.4 Undertake a regional capacity building exercise for select countries involving a 'road show' of experts on open standards.

6.5 Hold a region-wide competition to promote the development of open standards and to recognize the interoperability of government projects based on open standards.

6.6 Organize open standards events for government and industry to exchange information - giving government the opportunity to express its requirements and for industry to match its products and systems to those requirements.

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### **Footnotes**

1. It was suggested that access to specifications and documentation be free of charge. arrowup

2. Reasonable and Non-Discriminatory licensing – used when patents are included in an open standard. arrowup

3. Defensive suspension - the license can be suspended if any user of the standard sues the licensor for patent infringement. arrowup