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Guidelines for Sustainable Open Source Communities in the Public Sector

OSOR Webinar Background Document

June 4, 2020

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1. Context

Purpose of this document

This document provides background information on the **Guidelines for Sustainable Open Source Communities in the Public Sector** (from here on: Sustainability Guidelines) that are currently being produced by the European Commission's Open Source Observatory (OSOR).

Our work on the Sustainability Guidelines will be presented during **OSOR's webinar** on the same topic on **4 June 2020**. We aim to gather participants' feedback on the guidelines and leverage the community's insights to assess how we can develop the guidelines further.

This document provides an overview of OSOR's Sustainability Guidelines so you can better understand their **structure** and **content**. We believe that this background document will help us to have a more fruitful and engaging discussion at the webinar.

The story behind the Guidelines

Public administrations can greatly benefit from adopting open source software. By using it to develop and implement IT solutions, public administrations can facilitate internal processes and the delivery of digital public services. The adoption of open source software across public administrations has historically been a slow and not always sustainable journey. There are examples of public administrations at national or local levels adopting open source software, only to switch back to a proprietary solution several years later, be it due to compatibility issues or changes at the management levels of administration.

Having recognised the different experiences of public administrations in adopting and maintaining open source software, OSOR has realised that there is a need for dedicated Sustainability Guidelines specifically targeting the public sector. Whilst many open source software community guidelines exist in the world of open source software, the purpose of our Sustainability Guidelines is to debunk the myth that working with open source software in the public sector is challenging, costly, and requires domain-specific knowledge. The Guidelines aim to demonstrate that there are different ways to launch a public-sector-focused open source software project, and to guide the readers through this process.

Our Sustainability Guidelines are useful to any civil servants, project managers, IT developers, and open source software enthusiasts looking to start a public-sector-focused open source software project or simply curious about what such an endeavour might entail.

We took a three-step approach to compile the Sustainability Guidelines:

- Literature review on the factors influencing the sustainability of open source software communities
- Survey targeting representatives of open source software communities in the public sector to uncover further factors affecting sustainability
- Development of five case studies focusing on sustainable public sector projects

2. Introduction to the Sustainability Guidelines

Structure overview

The Sustainability Guidelines have been designed with a user-centric approach, focusing on what the launch of a public-sector-oriented open source software project might entail. For this reason, the guidelines follow a **Q&A structure**, seeking to answer the most important questions associated with sustainability of open source software in the public sector. This Background Document presents an overview of the key chapters of the Sustainability Guidelines as well as detailing the key questions addressed in each chapter[1]. The answers to those questions will be provided in the published version of the Sustainability Guidelines.

There are **two general approaches** that one can take to launch an open source software project in the public sector. One can either **join an existing open source software community** or **create such a community from scratch**. Nevertheless, it is crucial for public administrations to address some key questions internally before deciding on how to best launch a public sector open source software project. That's why the Sustainability Guidelines contain the following chapters:

1. **Setting the foundation for sustainable open source projects** – detailing the sort of questions that should be addressed within public administrations before launching an open source software project and outlining the two main approaches one can take to achieve this purpose.
2. **Joining an existing open source software community** – describing a sustainable way to join an existing open source software community to reuse and contribute to its software if a community meeting a public administration's needs already exist.
3. **Building your own open source software community** – providing a detailed breakdown of the steps that should be taken and questions that need to be answered to build a sustainable open source software public sector community.

Each chapter details the **key steps** that those looking to establish public-sector-focused open source projects should take and answers the **main questions** to be addressed corresponding to each step.

Chapter 1: Setting the foundation for sustainable open source projects

This chapter aims to guide those looking to launch a public-sector-focused OSS project through the steps that should be taken at the inception stage. More specifically, the chapter outlines the foundations that should be established prior to any open source software engagement. By detailing the key elements that should be assessed by public administrations before launching an open source software project, the chapter concludes that public administration can either join an existing open source software community or build their own.

Chapter 1 covers the following steps with their associated questions:

Assessing your needs and capabilities

- What kind of software am I looking for?
- What IT capabilities does my public administration possess?
- Does an open source software solution that meets our needs already exist in the market?

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[1] Due to the length of the document, the content of the answers will not be detailed but can be discussed during the webinar.

- Could other public administrations become my project partners?

Formalising your OSS project – making it 'official'

- Which key actors within my public administration do I need to onboard to kick-start my project?
- How do I formalise my project within my public administration?

Securing project funding

- What elements should I consider when defining the budget for my open source software project?
- How do I secure funding for my project?
- Are there any additional resources that might be needed to implement my project?

Chapter 2: Joining an existing open source software community

Chapter 2 focuses on the steps that should be taken by public administrations to establish sustainable collaboration with already existing open source software communities. More specifically, we highlight the importance of understanding the community that the public administration will be joining. This is to see whether they can rely on it to host and maintain the software or if the public administration should expect to hire some IT developers. The chapter also emphasises the significance of giving back to the community and facilitating sustainable collaboration by contributing to code, promoting the community to other public administrations, or contributing financially.

The chapter outlines the following steps with associated questions:

Understand the community behind your software

- How is this community organised?
- What is the maturity of the community I am joining?
- How can I make the most out of the open source software community behind my software?

Facilitate sustainable collaboration

- How can I adapt my procurement rules and processes to facilitate sustainable collaboration?
- How to best implement the open source software in my public administration?
- What are my strengths that I can offer to the community?

Contribute to the open source software solution in the long run

- How can I promote the open source software solution to other public administrations to help grow the community?
- How can I contribute to the visibility of the open source software solution?

Chapter 3: Building your own open source software community

The key objective of Chapter 3 is to equip readers with the necessary knowledge to build their own public sector open source software community. We explore the need to strike a fine balance between working with

a public administration and ensuring horizontal and transparent operation of the community. The chapter also focuses on more practical elements such as organising the community through assigning key roles, producing community guidelines, and sustaining members' motivation.

The chapter details the following steps with associated questions:

Understand how the public sector works

- How to build a strong relationship between my open source software community and the public administration it is attached to?
- How can I ensure the community's growth within my public administration?
- Should my project be somewhat independent from the public administration?

Focus on the software

- How do I choose the right license for my open source software?
- Which programming language should I choose?
- How should my community approach release cycles?
- How do we ensure code quality whilst encouraging contributions from new developers?
- What should I do regarding software documentation?
- Does my software have to meet GDPR requirements?
- When should I make the source code available?

Organise your community

- How should the management of the community be set up?
- How should the community be organised (i.e. through publication of Guidelines, Code of Conduct, FAQ)?
- How inclusive can we afford to be at the start of the project without losing control of the direction?

Keep the community active

- How to best facilitate communication between community members?
- How to sustain the motivation of community members?

Grow your community

- Are there other public administrations that could be interested in joining the community?
- How do I attract new members?

We look forward to discussing the Sustainability Guidelines with you on 4 June!