

Ensuring Adoption of Progressive National Egovernance Standards Policy

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The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology(MCIT) last year released a Draft policy on Open Standards for eGovernance. This progressive policy mandates adoption of single and wholly public standards in various e-governance projects in India. However NASSCOM and MAIT have written to the government suggesting changes which will weaken the policy and advance narrow commercial interests over national interests.

IT for Change is part of a campaign launched by FOSSCOMM(a civil society alliance of organizations and individuals working to promote use of free and open source software (FOSS) in India) which seeks to ensure that the government does not dilute the policy by allowing multiple standards and proprietary standards.

NASSCOM and the Manufacturers' Association for Information Technology(MAIT -an industry body representing the hardware, training and R&D sections of Indian IT industry) have written to the government suggesting changes which will weaken the policy and advance narrow commercial interests over national interests. Specifically NASSCOM and MAIT have written to the government asking for the policy to allow multiple standards and to allow royalty encumbered standards.

The ministry states that the purpose of the formulation of the policy is to- ' ensure reliable long term accessibility to public documents and information'; and 'provide users larger spectrum of choice of solutions and flexibility by avoiding lockin to specific vendor or proprietary solutions for both hardware and software'. Allowing multiple standards and proprietary standards defeats the purpose of this policy. Both these concepts – 'multiple standards' and 'proprietary standards' are oxymorons. A standard is by definition 'single' - we do not have different shapes of electric plugs within the country. Also, standards need to be public and not proprietary - Just imagine: 25 years down the line you cannot open a spreadsheet file created today, because the software giant whose product was used to create the file has shut down, and the product is no more available! Also, people cannot be asked to pay to access government data which is what will be required is royalty based standards are used to store government data. This will be against the letter and spirit of many laws, including the RTI .

In order to ensure that the draft policy is not diluted and corrupted, and national interests not sacrificed, FOSSCOMM (a civil society alliance of organizations and individuals working to promote use of free and open source software (FOSS) in India) is writing to the Department of Information and Technology(DIT) requesting that the present draft policy not be diluted by including recommendations on multiple and royalty encumbered standards as asked for by NASSCOM and MAIT. It is also important to note that atleast three members of these industry associations have objected against the stand taken by them(NASSCOM and MAIT) - IBM, Sun Microsystems and Red Hat.

IT for Change has also written to the Secretary(IT), MCIT , requesting that the government not dilute the open standards policy by allowing for multiple standards and proprietary standards.