

Making the Knowledge Economy Work for Africa

TRIP TO SENEGAL

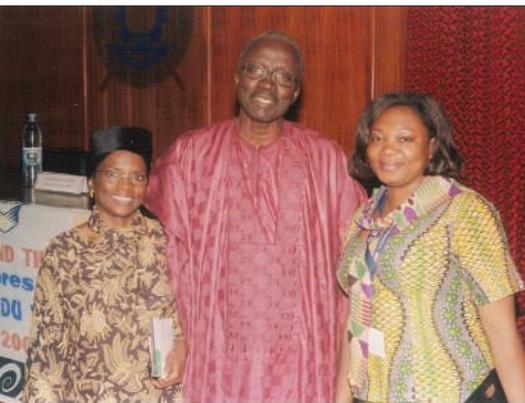


Figure 1: Members of FOSSFA and the Minister of Education (center).

Idlelo 3[1], hosted by the Free Software and Open Source Foundation for Africa (FOSSFA) was held on March 16-20 in Dakar, Senegal. The bilingual plenary and exhibition was hosted at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD II), and the workshops and hands-on training were held at Campus Numérique de la Francophonie. The conference brought together more than 400 representatives across Africa who are actively involved in practical implementation projects. The theme of the third conference builds on the original intent of the first two Idlelo conferences. Idlelo is a Xhosa (a southern Africa tribal language) word that means a common grazing ground. This common ground for all was the exchange between and among the small to medium business sector.

The uniqueness of Idlelo 3 was the presence of African IT associations, IT small and medium-sized enterprises, and IT training institutions, along with the cast of regulars from the public and civil sectors. The current Patron for FOSSFA is the South African Minister of Public Services and Administration, Ms. Geraldine Fraser-Moloketi, who could not make the proceedings. She provided a video feed espousing the virtues of FOSS to the delegates.

One of the major themes of Idlelo 3 was Human Capacity Development, which was sponsored by InWEnt, a German non-profit organization that has

The Free Software and Open Source Foundation for Africa recently hosted the third Idlelo conference, which focused on “Making the Knowledge Economy Work for Africa.” **BY GLENN MCKNIGHT**

taken a leadership role in FOSS business development in emerging nations of regions such as Africa and Southeast Asia. InWEnt has been commissioned by the German government through its Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to assist in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations through advanced training and capacity building. InWEnt and FOSSFA jointly organized two conference tracks that included “Human Capacities, Capabilities, and Competencies” and “Business Models and Community Development,” bringing together best practices across Africa of successful FOSS businesses. To learn more about InWEnt’s ict@innovation program, see www.it-inwent.org/.

The sessions spanned the three days and included 35 conceptual presentations and in-depth FOSS applications providing practical hands-on training. One of the many highlights of the conference was an extensive workshop held by the world-famous Jon “maddog” Hall, in which he shared with passion his life’s experiences in implementing a FOSS business. One of his messages to the business entrepreneurs was to recommend a return to the idea as Software as Service. He stressed that FOSS is a business enabler, providing opportunities in the local language, one’s own culture, and meeting market demands through the creative process of cooperation as found in FOSS.

One of the final sessions was run by Zaheda Borat from Google, the former coordinator for the Summer of Code program, which is a US\$ 10 million summer scholarship program opened annually to 1,500 students. She challenged the audience to participate in the Summer of Code, which is greatly underrepresented by African countries.

Conversations with many of the participants demonstrated a number of common character traits that include young, dynamic, intelligent, and passionate individuals who demonstrate a firm commitment to building the human capacity of their citizens.

It is important to note that a significant number of the businesses were operated by women. A few profiles include companies such as Assist Solutions Technologiques run by Christina Roland from Abidjan, Ivory Coast; Linux Solutions by James Wire Lunghabo of Uganda; Alex Gakuru of Nairobi, Kenya; Priscilla Maliwichi of LinuxChix in Malawi; and Solomon Gizaw of Ethiopia, plus dozens of others that spanned Africa from Algeria in the north, South Africa in the south, Senegal in the west, and Egypt in the east.

FOSSFA[2] is the premier African FOSS organization and was founded under the auspices of the Bamako Bureau of the African Information Society Initiative within the mandate given by African Governments in 1995 to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). The vision of FOSSFA is to promote the use of FOSS and the FOSS model in African development, and the organization supports the integration of FOSS in national policies.

FOSSFA also coordinates, promotes, and adds value to African FOSS initiatives. FOSSFA is governed by a Council elected during Idlelo, from which the Executive is chosen. ■

INFO

[1] Idlelo Conference details and reports on Idlelo 1 and Idlelo 2: floss.meraka.org.za/ocs/index.php/idlelo3/idlelo3.

[2] FOSSFA Council Chair: Nnenna Nwakanma, nnenna@opensource.org