

SchoolNet Malawi in collaboration with Malawi Open Source Society (MOSS) held a workshop in Blantyre, Malawi, to introduce and advocate for the use of Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in government, non-governmental and commercial institutions, and to equip teachers in training institutions that have benefited from SchoolNet Malawi with skills on using and maintaining FOSS systems. The workshop also launched the phasing-in of FOSS in Schools in Malawi. All Schools' computer laboratories will phase out stand-alone computers for networked server-driven Linux Terminal Server environments. FOSS refers to software that guarantees users' freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software.

The four-day workshop, which was hosted at the Malawi Post Office Training Conference Centre in Blantyre, received presentations aiming at introducing FOSS and showcasing existing FOSS applications. Presenters came from SchoolNet Malawi, MOSS, OSISA, Computer-Aid International and the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB).

Sister Dambo from the Ministry of Education, representing the Minister of Education, appreciated the benefits that come with free and Open Source software, and assured participants that the Ministry of Education would assist efforts of the SchoolNet Malawi project. The MANEB gave an overview of the use of FOSS and plans to introduce ICT Examinations to Malawi School Certificate Examinations. Mr Kunitawa, who gave the presentation, announced that the curriculum will include FOSS.

As an example of the ability to customise FOSS to one's needs, Mr Mumba (MOSS) presented a project that aims at providing a Chichewa Spellchecker. The project, packages Chichewa language words into dictionaries for FOSS applications like OpenOffice. Chichewa is the national language in Malawi and is also widely spoken in other countries in Southern Africa including Swaziland, Mozambique and Zambia.

To remove fears that once they start using a FOSS environment, one may not be able to accomplish some of their tasks, Mr Monawe (MOSS) described alternative FOSS applications that can be used in Linux, the most popular free/ Open Source operating system. The types of applications include office suites, graphic manipulation, CD/ DVD burning, multimedia, and file compression applications

SchoolNet Malawi and Moss Launches Use of Foss in Malawi Schools

By Bessie Nyirenda

The Chairperson and Executive Director of SchoolNet Malawi, Bessie Nyirenda, explained to the participants how they can strategically plan for and manage the ICT facilities for their schools in a presentation titled "ICT Planning in Schools." She advised the participants on how to get the best out these facilities and what services they can get from SchoolNet Malawi. She also spared time to hear from the participants what challenges they are facing in their respective schools.

The rest of the workshop offered hands-on training on Linux Server/ Networking Training and OpenOffice. Participants received training on installing and administering Linux Servers. Part of the training also included OpenOffice Training for School Teachers, offering skills to comfortably create text, spreadsheets, graphics and presentations using OpenOffice. Participants also learned the use of OpenOffice applications, migrating from Microsoft Office applications and teaching OpenOffice applications.

The workshop was attended by 55 participants and representatives of 12 schools and teacher training institutions (TTI) across the country. This knowledge will further be imparted to thousands of students and teachers by the trained teachers in their respective schools. The workshop was made possible through financial assistance from Open Society for Southern Africa (OSISA). 