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“Open Source” and “Open Medicine” to take centre stage at UN Research Symposium

Can an Intellectual Property regime designed to protect private interests be reformed to “lock everyone in”? What results when government authorities promote free, open source software in their jurisdictions? Who (if anyone) should own or control access to the human genome sequence? What parallels can be drawn with the fundamental principles of 'openness' for science and society as a whole?

These and a host of other issues will be explored at a research symposium titled *Challenging Intellectual Property: Access to Knowledge Issues in Open Source and Medicine*ⁱ that takes place on Thursday 13 April 2006 at the UN Headquarters in New York. The event is organized by the United Nations University at the United Nations, New York, and United Nations University - Maastricht Economic and social Research and training centre on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) in the Netherlands.

The Symposium will analyse the role of Free/Open Source Software and other collaborative models of knowledge production in economic development. It will also assess the effectiveness of several alternative global financing mechanisms that have been proposed to boost health research and development, and broaden access to affordable drugs for the world’s poorest populations.

The speakers include:

- **Rishab Aiyer Ghosh**, Senior Researcher, UNU-MERIT;
- **Louis-Dominique Ouédraogo**, retiring Inspector, the UN Joint Inspection Unit;
- **Tim Hubbard**, Head of Human Genome Analysis, The Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, UK;
- **Renato da Silveira Martini**, Director-General, ITI (National Institute of IT, Brazil).

At a time of growing economic and social disparities within and across countries and regions - coupled with diminishing returns on R&D investments despite stronger intellectual property protection – a range of governments and non-governmental groups in technologically advanced and developing countries alike have called for a new global paradigm that supports creativity, innovation and equitable access to knowledge.

In an open letterⁱⁱ submitted to members of the World Health Organization Executive Board in January 2006, 280 eminent scientists from 50 countries noted: Although we have very varied scientific backgrounds, from basic research to specific clinical research, we are all deeply concerned with deficiencies in the way that biomedical research science is supported and translated into treatments that improve health outcomes around the world. In the research setting

we see many possibilities to develop drugs to treat neglected diseases, but a lack of sustainable support for the R&D process. In the clinical setting we see the problem of affordable drugs to a greater or lesser extent in health care systems in all countries."

A recent UNU-MERIT Policy Briefⁱⁱⁱ on the role of Open Source and Open Standards in economic development similarly notes that: "...Countries around the world, regardless of their wealth, are trying to bring citizens into the Information Society and provide electronic access to government services. Many of them are considering open source software as a cost-effective means of doing so. Many more see an inherent injustice in requiring citizens and businesses to buy software from specific vendors in order to communicate with the government, and are looking at *open standards* - which allow different products from different producers, whether open source or proprietary software, to work together."

Research results from several Open Source studies at UNU-MERIT^{iv} suggest that some countries and institutions have made strides in adopting policies to promote competition among technology providers, and enhance public access to knowledge. In just four years, Extremadura – one of the poorest regions of Spain - successfully invested in creating a free-software society. The model is now being replicated in other poor regions of Spain, as well as in Latin America. In Africa, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa has introduced an open learning model^v spearheaded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and coordinates an African University network that is developing a learning management platform to host these educational resources. At the other end of the spectrum is the recent experience of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts - one of the richest states in the USA – in introducing OpenDocument, an Open Standard for office applications, which provides important lessons for other regions and countries across the world.

The Symposium builds on last month's panel discussion on *eGovernance and Free Software: How They are Changing Developing Countries*^{vi}. The panel discussed the work of the UNU-International Institute on Software Technology (UNU-IIST) in building capacity in developing countries, and explored how software technology can enhance government services.

The new UNU-MERIT Access To Knowledge (A2K) Hub^{vii} will be launched during the event. The A2K Hub provides a central access point to UNU-MERIT's work on free/open source software, intellectual property, biotechnology and access to medicine. It publishes regular updates on the research in progress and links to available publications and outputs. It also frames UNU-MERIT's activities in a wider global context by reporting on events and projects in other UNU Centres and Programmes, and elsewhere.

Notes for Editors

1. Media representatives are cordially invited to attend the Symposium (details at <http://www.ony.unu.edu>). The speakers will also be available for advance interviews in New York on 12 and 13 April, and telephone interviews with international media can be arranged, upon request. Please use the contacts listed below to schedule a time.

For more information please contact:

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2. Relevant URLs

ⁱ Draft programme at: <http://www.merit.unu.edu/seminars/docs/NYAgenda.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Open letter from scientists in support of World Health Organization resolution proposed by Brazil and Kenya <http://www.whoscientistsletter.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Open Source and Open Standards: A New Frontier for Economic Development?” UNU Policy Brief Number 1, 2006. <http://www.unu.edu/publications/briefs/policy-briefs/2006/PB-1.pdf>

^{iv} FLOSSPOLs and related studies at UNU-MERIT: <http://www.flosspols.org/>

^v African Universities Initiative on Open Learning Resources: <http://www.tectonic.co.za/view.php?id=879>

^{vi} eGovernance and Free Software: How They are Changing Developing Countries: <http://www.ony.unu.edu/seminars/2006/opensource/index.shtml>

^{vii} UNU-MERIT Access to Technology Hub: <http://www.merit.unu.edu/a2k/>

About United Nations University (UNU)

Established by the U.N. General Assembly in 1973, [UNU](#) is an international community of scholars engaged in research, advanced training and the dissemination of knowledge related to pressing global problems. Activities focus mainly on peace and conflict resolution, sustainable development and the use of science and technology to advance human welfare. The University operates a worldwide network of research and post-graduate training centres, with headquarters in Tokyo.

About UNU-MERIT

UNU-MERIT is the United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and social Research and training centre on Innovation and Technology. It integrates the former UNU Institute for New Technologies (UNU-INTECH) and the Maastricht Economic Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (MERIT). UNU-MERIT provides insights into the social, political and economic contexts within which innovation and technological change is created, adapted, selected, diffused, and improved upon. The Institute’s research and training programmes address a broad range of relevant policy questions dealing with the national and international governance of innovation, intellectual property protection, and knowledge creation and diffusion. UNU-MERIT is located at, and works in close collaboration with Maastricht University in The Netherlands. For more information, please contact:

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