PRESS RELEASE

COCOF Threatens To Cut Software Choices
Software "preferences" will harm administration, citizens, and local & national ICT industries

Background: *On 11 February, the Budget Committee of the Commission Communauté Française (COCOF) of the Brussels Region voted in favour of a Socialist proposal compelling the administrations of the COCOF to use Open Source Software (OSS), except where no other viable solution exists. According to the proposal (reconfirmed today), the full migration to OSS should be implemented within three years. The draft will be put to vote at the 21 March COCOF Assembly.*

The following statement may be attributed to Hugo Lueders, European Director of the Initiative for Software Choice (ISC):

Brussels, 24 February 2003 – "The worldwide and European software industry, as represented by the ISC, opposes the draft decree currently before COCOF, which will both harm the software industry and severely limit the choice of software options available to COCOF, with little or no benefit to its administration or for the public at large.

"The ISC insists that the decree is unwise from a business and public policy point of view because it prevents COCOF from selecting software that best meets its needs. It is unnecessary to enact such a legislative mandate at a time when all types of software already co-exist in a competitive, dynamic marketplace.

"Introducing COCOF's software 'preference' policies will have a number of serious repercussions, including:

- Inflexibly locking-in one type of software system without regard to the merit of other competing options;
- Distorting market dynamics by protecting OSS developers from the beneficial effects of competition;
- Harming the Belgian commercial software industry, including companies that resell software, retailers, and Application Service Providers, by limiting their ability to prescribe the best solutions to both their government and private-sector clients;
- Disproportionately impacting small and medium sized software companies, which together make up some 80% of the software industry, and primarily sell proprietary software solutions;
- Undermining small, independent developers who depend on strong intellectual property rights to protect their R&D investment and compete with larger firms;
- Reducing access to state-maintained information by imposing software systems on citizens, the majority of whom do not use or possess such systems; and
- Creating barriers to software sales in Belgium to other EU software companies, most of which provide commercial and/or hybrid software solutions to the world's governments.

"The ISC believes that restrictive 'preference' policies can never serve the public well. All software options – be they OSS, hybrid or commercial – must remain available to government procurement officials. When this occurs, the needs of each unique ICT project can be met, driven by a flexible range of factors such as cost, reliability, functionality and availability, among others.

"To do otherwise risks placing COCOF and its constituents behind in the Information Age as the rest of the world looks to all software options to meet their constantly evolving ICT needs. It could also undermine the development of interoperating platforms for the exchange of information between public institutions at various levels, and with the public in general.

"The ISC urges COCOF to consider the approach adopted elsewhere in Europe by a number of other governments. For example, in the UK and Sweden competent authorities have already recognised the need to carefully contrast the total costs associated with OSS and proprietary software on a case-by-case basis in order to achieve the best value for money in their ICT investments.

"Accordingly, the ISC asks that COCOF maintain a merit-based selection criterion over one based on preferred development model. In doing so, COCOF, its citizens, its ICT industry, as well as the surrounding, integrated communities and industries will reap the greatest benefit because more – not fewer – software options will be available to meet the challenges of our ICT-dependent world."

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About the ISC

The Initiative for Software Choice (ISC) is a global coalition of large and small companies committed to advancing the concept that multiple competing software markets should be allowed to develop and flourish unimpeded by government preference or mandate. The ISC represents some 200 companies worldwide, of which over 50 are in Europe. For more information, please see us on the web at: www.softwarechoice.org.

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