

Case study:
**CommunesPlone an experience of software mutualization
by local governments**

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A. Abstract

CommunesPlone.org success results from a close collaboration between Belgian and French local governments, the Plone Open Source Community and Zea Partners an international network of SME.

The towns of Seneffe and Sambreville (Belgium) jointly started the project. In 2 years, it spread to 15 Belgian and French local governments. This fast growing project has the potential to spread to new countries and to reach 10% of Walloon local authorities before end 2007. The roots of its success may be found in early decisions:

- *to model processes on proven practices of a successful Open Source Community,*
- *to involve OS experts to coach the IT team of Sambreville,*
- *to be open to collaboration from other towns and experts,*
- *to maintain a close relationship with the local user group and SME.*

The project is a clear example of FLOSS enabling innovation within public organization and its benefits to the local economy. The project close relationship with the Plone OS Community and SME brings additional benefits as sharing best practices on collaborative work and speeding up international dissemination.

Keywords :

- *Plone : open source web Content Management System (CMS) built on Zope.*
- *Zope : open source web application server.*

B. The project CommunesPlone: why and how?¹

15 Belgian Communes and French Mairies (all local governments) participate in the CommunesPlone project. In doing so, they aim to gain independence from IT services providers by developing, essentially by themselves and in a cooperative manner, applications and websites for their own use as well as for their citizens'. CommunesPlone strategy mainly rests on two renowned multiplatform Open Source tools: Zope and Plone.

Apart from a greater independence from IT service providers, CommunesPlone expected benefits are: to enhance the applications' consistency with the users' needs; to promote collaborative websites (managed by communal services, associations and businesses); to promote both the independence and the proficiency of the Communes' internal IT staff; to use the most recent technologies while avoiding license fees; to ensure publication of sources with General Public License (GPL).

Until now, CommunesPlone has generated concrete and usable tools such as:

- a module to order administrative documents on the Internet,
- a business directory and Communal websites,
- a workflow to manage town deliberation.

Other tools being developed include a certification module (through the eID card) and a documentary management tool. CommunesPlone is supported by the Union of Walloon Cities and Municipalities UVCW, which takes actively part in the project.

C. The beginning: why an open source solution? Was there a clear-cut strategy for the execution of the idea?

The project leader had clear goals: to reduce supplier dependency and be open to collaboration. M. Lambillote, IT manager of the town of Sambreville, explains² his decision to move to Floss as "to solve problems related to suppliers dependency and that functional needs of the administration were not completely met by proprietary software". Even if he had short listed Plone for technical reasons, the final decision to move to Open Source was only taken after attending in November 2004, a Plone Belgium Community meeting. The contacts with the Plone Community gave him confidence that he could get advice from "Senior" FLOSS Public Users³ **and** local support from OS experts and SME.

¹ Based on IDABC Open source news, June 13-2006 : <http://ec.europa.eu/idabc/en/document/5617/469>

² www.sambreville.be, based on a presentation at a Plone Community event in Brussels - Nov 2006

³ Royal Museum for Central Africa, Royal Belgian Institute for Natural Sciences, University of Ghent, University of Namur, ...

D. International dissemination and strategy

CommunesPlone is raising interest in several groups:

-Local governments- the project provides a practical example of successful collaboration and benefits of mutualization.

-SME- are attracted by the project close relationship with the Plone Community and Zea Partners⁴ an international association regrouping Plone SME.

In response to international interest, CommunesPlone.org internationalization started mid 2006 (French, Dutch, English, Spanish). The strategy is to extend CommunesPlone membership within and outside the EU in order to match international funding criteria for eovernment projects.

As local governments do not have much cross border contacts, the role of Zea Partners and its member SME should be outlined for disseminating the project internationally. SME from several countries are directly involved in CommunesPlone (Belgium, France, Argentina) while a second group of SME is analyzing opportunities (Spain, UK, The Netherlands, South Africa). It is important to outline that SME from 10 countries already had a direct contact with CommunesPlone project leader.

E. How are legal aspects being addressed?

The code produced is covered by a GPL license. Investigations are underway to evaluate potential improvements:

- A lawyer working for the Union of Walloon Cities and Municipalities⁵ is investigating Belgian regulations and possible impact on the project.

- CommunesPlone is closely related to Plone itself. The Plone Foundation⁶ is protecting Plone IPR. An analysis is being done on the feasibility to extend Plone IPR protection to CommunesPlone.

F. Best practices – factors of success

1. A bottom-up strategy to move to open source

2. Be practical – start small- To maintain independence from suppliers while building up a project open to collaboration, CommunesPlone was modeled on the

⁴ ZeaPartners counts as members 25 innovative SME located in 14 countries and 4 continents. Zea headquarters are located nearby most CommunesPlone members.

⁵ UWCM provides central support to the 262 Communes (towns) of Wallonia, Belgium. www.uvcw.be/english

⁶ The IPR protection was designed by Eben Moglen, lawyer of the Free Software Foundation (FSF)

Plone Community organization and development practices⁷. BubbleNet, a local SME was involved and coached the town IT team on collaborative development practices. A second town Seneffe and the Union of Walloon Cities and Municipalities soon joined Sambreville, bringing in additional expertise and giving visibility to the project.

3. Be attractive to new players- Newcomers get direct benefits in joining the project: the ability to reuse software and to participate to CommunesPlone activities. The project facilitates human resources development (training, coaching and exchange of best practices) by pooling towns IT experts. The result is a motivating team spirit.

4. Values- Public Sector and OS communities share similar values on collaboration and work done in the public interest. These values are key in developing a trustworthy environment between actors from different working environment (public sector, SME, OS Community).

5. Clear focus on results- Based on FLOSS community practice, CommunesPlone members meet regularly. Activities are focused on programming, resolving practical issues, sharing knowledge and expertise.

6. Motivating environment - economy of scale- IT teams in local government are often small organizations with similar size to Floss SME. It facilitates collaboration between actors and the ability to exchange best practices from several backgrounds as local government, OS Community and SME. Results are a motivating working environment enabling innovation.

7. Limited investment and low financial risk- The initial budget of CommunesPlone (involving already 15 towns in 2 countries) was low compared to traditional IT projects. The seed funding totaled 40k euro dedicated to coaching/training on collaborative development. So far, financial resources result mostly from a better use of existing manpower (no additional budget) by pooling resources and focusing investment on a limited number of developments.

8. Economic benefit of involving SME- The involvement of SME has a positive impact on the CommunesPlone project. The development of a network of potential suppliers reduces the risk of dependency and speeds up regional and international dissemination.

G. Factors of risks

1. Taking in charge the FLOSS project management- The model of Floss development is new and often misunderstood. A risk would be to under evaluate the work required to sustain and manage a growing mutualization project. Some activities as coordination, information, training, ... should ideally be taken in charge by a central body. It is unclear who will take over this work and how it will be funded.

⁷ Open source project management: <http://www.zeapartners.org/about/methodology>

2. Resistance-opposition- The success of a bottom up project may raise opposition from traditional top down administrative structure. It is a risk although, as the project grows, obvious benefits are likely to help a change of mentality.

3. Diluting focus- CommunesPlone focus is to pool resources for developing applications. The project success is now attracting a new profile of towns interested in using software and requiring support for its installation. The coexistence of this new group will require addressing new issues.

4. Human resources and missing skills- A key factor of success was to model the project practices on the experience of an open source community. As the projects grows, new skills will be needed (example : for managing an open source project, coaching a community, ...) these skills are new for most CommunesPlone members as well as to the authorities supporting the project. It may be a challenge to address some upcoming issues. The involvement of OS Community experts may be necessary, but who should centralize this work and how to fund it is unclear.

H. Conclusion – Challenges

CommunesPlone is an example of the benefits open source and mutualization offers to the Public Sector. The project also supports the development of an innovative economic ecosystem including several actors as local governments, SME and an open source Community. In this particular case, the Floss community took in charge and “at no charge” part of the initial investment in term of free promotion, community events to build up confidence, coaching, transfer of knowledge... A future challenge is that clear rules and funding models should support Floss initiatives in the Public Sector **and also** benefit the underlying OS community.

Source :

Case study proposed by Xavier Heymans to "Public sector and Open source", a report commissioned by the European Commission www.publicsectoross.info