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Linux Professional Institute (LPI)

To the organizers and delegates of the WSIS conference:

The Linux Professional Institute (LPI) congratulates the participating national delegations of the World Summit on the Information Society, and the International Telecommunications Union and the United Nations under whose auspices it has been called, for accepting the challenge of defining a global information society.

Since its inception as a non-profit organization in 1998, LPI has actively served its worldwide community of professional IT practitioners, who have chosen to work with Free and Open Source Software (FOSS). In response to the needs of its community, LPI has developed the world's most popular FOSS skills certification program, which has been delivered in almost every country. In order to ensure the relevance and value of its activities at a local as well as global level, LPI has created affiliations with many national community organizations to supplement its thousands of volunteer assistants and supporters, its advisory board from across the FOSS community, and its Board of Directors which spans three continents. In the service of its community, LPI has developed a sustainable business model while working to improve access to professional skills, standards and ethics everywhere on Earth.

The global LPI community understands and appreciates the significance of the WSIS process; we sought accreditation primarily in order to stage interactive educational events, designed to assist WSIS delegates in the fulfilment of the conference's Statement of Principles and Action Plan. It was also our intent to assist the WSIS conference in its encouragement of FOSS techniques, as a proven method of bridging the technology gap while decreasing technology dependence and creating economic opportunities in developing countries.

Unfortunately, the events of the last week at the Third Preparatory Committee, in advance of the Geneva Summit, have given us cause for alarm. It is with sincere concern that LPI notes the directions WSIS has recently embarked upon, based upon the changes indicated in the drafts documents of the last week for both the Statement of Principles and the Plan of Action. Because this change of direction is so drastic, we have been urged by our community to call to your attention the regressive nature of this new approach.

We have seen the language in these documents shift markedly away from directions and policies that would close the technology gap between developing and developed countries. Instead, we see new language that over-emphasizes the preservation of policies and activities that, so far,

have made most of the world increasingly dependent on a very small number of companies (some of which have already been successfully prosecuted in some jurisdictions because of monopolistic commercial practises).

In their current form, the WSIS documents make no mention of the absolute requirements for community-driven, unencumbered standards regarding networking protocols, file formats, and other methods of communications between computer systems and applications. The lack of such open standards effectively separates technology users from their own information, putting such data under the control of the owners of proprietary formats and protocols. The current global IT environment clearly demonstrates that unregulated private ownership of such technologies serves to inhibit innovation rather than encourage it.

Standards exist to protect the users and consumers of technology. As vendors of technology have technology biases as well as vested interests in reducing freedom of choice, they cannot and should not be expected to consistently act in the best interest of consumers in matters such as the definition of standards. While technology sellers may compete amongst themselves for dominance, their collective goals -- often expressed through "vendor neutral" consortia -- are often quite different from those of the public.

Furthermore, in light of the stated WSIS aims to improve security, access and co-operation, it is extremely unfortunate that most references to FOSS have been dropped from earlier drafts of WSIS documents. FOSS is not a technology itself, but rather a set of methods of development and distribution of technology -- as such, FOSS is technology neutral, in keeping with WSIS aims.

Use of FOSS methodologies has proven to improve technology access in developing countries; its practise of unencumbered source code openness assures and improves security, as has been demonstrated by governments and civil society throughout the world. We believe that WSIS will better serve the advancement of the global IT community by recognizing and encouraging FOSS techniques which are especially useful at pooling resources, both human and technical. Using FOSS techniques reduces dependence on development funding, encourages self-sustainability, and offers the potential to create competitive IT industries in any country.

LPI is fully aware of the WSIS conference's ability to bring together governments and civil society in order to improve the global state of IT and its potential to reduce poverty and improve education. We believe that recent moves to marginalize the value of FOSS do a disservice to the Summit, as well as to those who will come to learn from it. Emphasizing private property in IT, without recognizing its detriments and without calling attention to collaborative approaches to IT ownership and innovation such as FOSS, is in our view, a regressive step that would in fact set the realization of the Information Society backwards rather than move it forward.

If the goal of WSIS is truly to close the global technology gap rather than widen it, innovative approaches such as FOSS must not be ignored. To de-emphasize FOSS while emphasizing proprietary ownership of IT resources, is to increase concentration and dependence while denying freedom and self-sufficiency to those who want and need it.

We urge the WSIS conference to reconsider its current direction, to re-introduce the encouragement of FOSS and open standards that existed in previous draft documents, and to recognize that expanding the vague concepts of "intellectual property" without specific and concrete limits,

serves to stifle both innovation and competition, while concentrating control of the world's IT resources in the hands of the very few. Certainly you would agree that doing so does not advance the visions and goals of the WSIS Conference.