# NGO-in-a-box Phase 2: Concept Paper
## The Tactical Technology Collective

*Executive Summary*

NGO-in-a-box is a physical box of CDs consisting of a complimentary set of peer-reviewed and selected FOSS tools and materials tailored to the needs of non-profits. Each thematic edition of NGO-in-a-box is shaped by a team of experienced practitioners, with the aim of providing organisations not only with the software they need in relation to a given topic, but also with the relevant implementation scenarios and materials to support this. Its primary goal is to increase the accessibility of FOSS to non-profits in developing and transition countries by reducing the selection and testing process, cutting download barriers and providing tailored solutions. Since its birth in September 2003, six versions of NGO-in-a-box have been released. These have included regional versions for Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia, as well as a thematic NGO-in-a-box focusing solely on security.

The past 18 months have enabled Tactical Tech to test out NGO-in-a-box as a vehicle for the promotion and distribution of FOSS to the non-profit sector. In the coming year the project will move in to its second phase, diversifying the reach and content of the boxes and expanding the boxes outside of their current Source Event[1] anchor. This next phase will see a new approach to the way NGO-in-a-box editions are designed, distributed and revised. It will see several new editions launched[2], as well as connections made with complimentary initiatives that have emerged in the past 18 months.

*Context*

NGO-in-a-box aims to tackle two primary issues; appropriate software selection and access to such software and related documentation.

There is currently an enormous amount of Free and Open Source software available. The landscape is so diverse that overview and orientation have become central needs, especially for those who have little time for searching and testing new software. Many technologists working with non-profits will not start deploying FOSS due to the overwhelming task of reviewing and choosing tools by themselves. There is also a real fear of selecting unstable tools or getting locked in to tools produced by projects that die away. The technical needs for evaluating the tools are often quite high, limiting again the number of people who will try them out. There are real disadvantages here as many NGOs could often benefit from these solutions, if only the navigation process was easier.

Activities of the non-profit sector are extremely diverse, they range from providing services to engaging in

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[1]

Source Events are workshops organised by Tactical Tech that bring together approximately 100 practitioners working with technology and the non-profit sector from a given region or specific area.

[2]

Editions envisioned in this next phase include; localisation, migration, alternative access, advocacy, security version II, and GIS.

advocacy and from hosting resources to providing education. The operational context and related needs of each of these groups is equally wide ranging. As organizations seek out tools and techniques relevant to their specific area, the task of gathering recommendations and compiling sets of inter-related applications that work well together is extremely daunting, yet the needs are often common across specific sets of groups. The task of keeping up-to-date with activities in the sector can add another layer of complexity. There is currently very little software packaged specifically for the NGO sector. Sets of software (proprietary or open source) that are aimed at low resourced groups do not exist. It is not possible to find kits that address broad thematic areas such as migration or security, and especially specific areas such as advocacy. Equally it is hard to find collections of tools and materials that address regional needs; incorporating the specific needs and skill levels of a particular region, considering local languages and promoting regionally produced tools and materials.

Trusted recommendations aggregated by topic or by geographic region would go a long way to helping groups seeking solutions and simultaneously could promote technology solutions to low-resourced groups.

In the case of developing countries, once a tool or set of tools have been selected, downloading software from the web can be at best difficult and at worst impossible due to a lack of consistent and high speed Internet access. When available locally, off-line distributions and software are often out of date or are limited to specific types. The support systems for FOSS solutions are frequently on-line. Obtaining help on forums and IRC channels is commonly known as the natural and easy way of solving problems with FOSS deployment and usage, as well as downloading updates and new bug-fix versions. When using FOSS in a low or no bandwidth environment, users are devoid of this important advantage.

By creating bespoke sets (either by regional focus or theme) of reviewed and selected FOSS along with the relevant documentation and materials to low bandwidth places and low resourced groups, the NGO-in-a-box project attempts to cut down some of the barriers to access of FOSS mentioned above and at the same time provide bespoke packages tailored to the needs of non-profits.

*About NGO-in-a-box*
NGO-in-a-box addresses the above challenges by providing technical service providers and support staff within NGOs with bespoke box-sets of tools and materials aggregated around specific themes. Tactical Tech works to form networks of established experts who can act as topical and regional editorial teams. These teams work together to actively recommend and select tools and materials around a given topic.

Where other projects may aim to provide neutral or comprehensive overviews of tools available in a particular area, NGO-in-a-box strives to provide specific recommendations and forms of distribution based on a grassroots approach. It delivers up to date peer-reviewed and selected tools and materials based on the experiences of informed practitioners and field experts. Moreover it aims to do so in a format designed for use in developing countries and by low-resourced groups. Predominantly the box-sets are targeted at IT intermediaries and service providers (eRiders, consultants, trainers), system administrators and self-taught technologists working with small to medium sized non-profit organisations. With NGO-in-a-box they should have the tools and materials they need to promote and implement a range of FOSS solutions for NGOs in their respective situations.

Box design and content: Editorial teams

During the first phase of the NGO-in-a-box project expert teams were formed ad hoc around particular training events. Discussions between trainers in a given area were organised in the run-up to a particular workshop or training, the resulting recommendations were then compiled in to a thematic box-set and distributed to event participants.

In the projects second phase, Tactical Tech will build on the strong points of the project. Future editions of NGO-in-a-box will begin with the development of a dedicated editorial team made up of trainers, practitioners and experts working in a specific area; such as alternative access, advocacy or GIS. These dedicated editorial teams will be selected for their existing experience utilising FOSS in a particular context and will be invited to work together on the design of the box-set. They will be tasked with agreeing on an inter-related set of tools, materials and guides around a given theme or in relation to a specific region. In some cases they may even decide to create or commission new materials to compliment existing resources. Once the first version of a particular box-set is released, feedback, changes and updates will be coordinated by a few members of the editorial team, who will continue to contribute to and update the edition over a longer period. Tactical Tech will take on the role of commissioning and coordinating the editorial teams, this will involve providing them with a pre-defined remit and structure, as well as an online coordination and publishing system. Tactical Tech will work with the editorial team to promote and distribute the resulting box-set as well as evaluate its use in the field.

Collaboration will be sought with existing complimentary projects and with those that emerge in the future, for example CSIR's initiative providing an educational collection of FOSS tools and materials. The aim will be to establish a partnership with such projects, diversifying NGO-in-a-boxes offerings whilst providing the project partner with an increased reach, established user community and on-line system.

## Distribution: Local hubs and events

Through its regional editions the NGO-in-a-box project has always strived to cater to the needs of localisation. In the future, we aim to take this one step further by creating points of localisation that last beyond the one-off interventions of the Source Events and other specific trainings. We hope that these points of localisation, known as hubs, will also help to increase distribution and promotion of the boxes in each region.

In this next phase, Tactical Tech will extend the distribution of NGO-in-a-box outside of the workshop and training context, and begin to work with a group of existing non-profit organisations established in the local technology and non-profit space. Working together with these established groups, Tactical Tech will create regional hubs[3] for NGO-in-a-box. This grassroots trajectory will be utilised not only to encourage local groups to drive and steer the growth of the resource by creating their own local editorial teams, but also to overcome the physical distribution challenges of box-sets to particular areas.

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 Regional hubs are envisaged in 2005 and 2006 in India, Southern Africa, Eastern Africa, Western Africa and the Middle East.

These local distribution and development points will;
- measure needs and respond to demands by assembling and maintaining local up-to-date version of the boxes
- actively promote the project in their immediate region
- put together new boxes in collaboration with local editorial teams suited to local needs (or at least single disks containing software and documentation compilations)
- translate boxes developed by Tactical Tech or other hubs
- conduct out-reach efforts, training and where possible collaborate with other groups providing training and support to NGOs
- contribute to on-line community efforts to refine and keep up to date versions of the boxes
- distribute the boxes within a given area and make them available on-line for local Internet users (mirroring)
- evaluate the local use of the box and gather feedback to influence future versions

Each of these hubs will be coordinated by Tactical Tech and connected with hubs in other regions. Partners will be sought around the basis of their interest in the project, their capacity, their existing reputation and their potential reach to the non-profit sector.

In parallel, Tactical Tech will continue to promote NGO-in-a-box through its Source events and other workshops. It will also actively seek to increase distribution by collaborating with international organisations providing training to non-profit service providers in developing and transition countries.

## Feedback and revision: On-line facility

An on-line community space will be hosted by Tactical Tech for those working on and interested in NGO-in-a-box. The purpose of this will be to not only showcase versions of boxes, but also for members of the community to be able to contribute to keeping boxes relevant and up to date, providing the best selection in relation to a given theme and adding new items as they emerge. This space will provide hubs, editorial teams, source event participants and other interested parties with a space to share opinions on particular tools, their use, how they personally use given software products and what they would like to improve. We hope to create an opportunity to make use of accumulated knowledge across regions. Providing use cases and success stories from different organisations, allowing the comparison of activities, with the aim of extracting useful patterns and avoiding common errors.

The focus for this community is an extension of Tactical Tech's Source Events, that is, its aim is to gather "practitioners" - not actual geeks who create, deploy and improve the software, but mainly end users, who can think tactically and strategically in the non-profit context, and encourage them to share their knowledge with others.

The online facility will also allow users to download software, this will serve to extend the reach of NGO-in-a-box outside those groups where a physical box-set is more convenient. In regions where higher band-width is available, such as Eastern Europe, it may not be necessary to distribute actual CDs, however the

collection and review facility may still have significant value for practitioners on the ground.

*Convergent Projects: The Tactical Technology Collective*

Over the past two years Tactical Tech has built up a wide-ranging network of practitioners working with technology and non-profits. Its large-scale workshops (Source Events), small expert meetings (Guru Gatherings), and consultancy work (eRider projects and a plethora of related technology/non-profit projects) enables them to identify and bring together many of the leading actors working with implementation in the non-profit sector. Their convergent projects mutually support each other, serving to continuously grow the content of events and resources as well as the circle of people involved in these initiatives.

Phase II of NGO-in-a-box aims to take advantage of Tactical Tech's convergent projects and in addition to provide a way to effectively integrate its networks. Tactical Tech will aim to utilise its growing inter-regional and cross-issue network to create a well-grounded resource based on needs with a firm anchor in face-to-face meetings.

Tactical Tech is an Amsterdam registered non-profit foundation (Stichting). It's mission is to help non-profits in developing and transition countries to utilise new technologies. It does this through organising workshops, collating tools and materials and providing consultancy and advice to a range of projects.

For more information please see http://www.tacticaltech.org and http://www.ngoinabox.org