

## Independent advice: Norway's Friprog competence centre

*Friprog is the Norwegian competence centre for free and open source software. Set up as an independent advisory body and financed by the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform, Friprog provides advice on the use of open source software to public bodies and private companies. It also helps to shape Norway's policies towards free software. The centre was built in close cooperation with similar projects in other Scandinavian countries.*

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### **Introduction**

[Friprogsenteret \(Friprog\)](#) is an independent centre for Free Software, which aims to increase knowledge of and confidence in open source software in both the public and the private sector. The competence centre works with various actors such as businesses, public institutions, universities, colleges and R&D organisations. Its activities range from advice to public and private entities to advising the government on open source-related policies.

The centre has four employees: Heidi Arnesen Austlid, the director; Christer Gundersen, the development manager for public sector; Martin Bekkelund, development manager for the private sector; and Morten Amundsen as adviser. Friprog is fully financed by the government. Although the centre relies on public money, it enjoys independence from the government in its day-to-day basis and operations.

### **Organisation and political background**

The idea for an open source competence centre dates back to 2006. For some years already, a number of people from private companies, as well as employees of the counties of Buskerud and Troms had thought about creating such a competence centre in Norway. These ideas were finally formed and presented to the Norwegian Government in White Paper *An Information Society for All* in 2006.

#### **Quick facts**

<i>Name</i>	Friprogsenteret (Friprog)
<i>Sector</i>	Public and Private
<i>Start date</i>	April 2008
<i>End date</i>	N/A
<i>Objectives</i>	Advice on usage and implementation of free software. Increased confidence in this type of software.
<i>Scope</i>	Regional
<i>Budget</i>	4 million Norwegian Kroner (ca. EUR 500,000)
<i>Funding</i>	Public (Ministry of Government Administration and Reform)
<i>Achievements</i>	Government implements centre's advice on open document formats; creation of delingsbazaren. no repository



The document, addressed to the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform (Fornyingsdepartementet), included a detailed proposal for the creation of a competence centre. It also discussed open source and its usability, open standards and government services. The discussion on the idea and the White Paper that followed in the Norwegian Parliament was a pleasant surprise to the initiators of the White Paper.

The Norwegian politicians not only showed great interest in the ideas presented in the document, but also were unusually well informed about free software – something which is not always the case with policy makers. In addition, the parliamentarians voted to follow the recommendations of the White Paper regarding a round-the-clock public administration based on ICT and open source, digitalisation of documents, more sharing of source-code in the public sector and the establishment of an open source Competence Centre. These decisions were made by Parliament in the same year of 2006.

The decision to create Friprog was backed by research done by the Parliament and the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform (ICT Ministry). "Both the Parliament and the ICT Ministry saw outside of Norway many good examples on open source and they looked at the competence centres in Denmark and in Finland", says Heidi Arnesen Austlid, the Director of Friprog. According to Austlid, the government did not only want to encourage the re-use of software, but also aimed to create a "culture of sharing in the public sector".

Friprog consists of two parts. One is the organisation itself, the other is the sharing platform and repository. Regarding the latter one, Friprog manages a software repository, [delingsbazaren.no](http://delingsbazaren.no), which is a platform for sharing and re-using a code for the public sector. The website was built using the source code from the Danish open source repository [softwareborsen.dk](http://softwareborsen.dk). The website gives a possibility to upload and download software. The portal also provides a list with a number of vendors active in Open Source projects. In addition, [delingsbazaren.no](http://delingsbazaren.no) provides a platform for a collaboration between the Nordic countries, giving a possibility for example for a cross-border search for software. The new version of the repository launched in August 2008, provides additional content, such as video, E-learning material, screencasts and also course-material developed by the public sector organisations.



*Heidi Arnesen Austlid, the director of Friprog*

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When the competence centre started up, it only performed tasks connected with the public sector. After some time, it also started with activities directed at the private sector. According to Christer Gundersen, Friprog's development manager for the public sector, Friprog's open source Repository builds on similar centres established by other countries, especially the [softwareborsen.dk](http://softwareborsen.dk) project in Denmark. "We re-used the Danish model and we re-used the code, so we practically took the idea on the competence centre from Europe and we took the source-code from Denmark", says Gundersen. In fact, most of the organisational aspects of Friprog were borrowed from other countries and were systematically adopted to the Norwegian needs and requirements. "Some specific examples and experiences have been taken from France of Finland but most came from Denmark and also from Sweden", Gundersen points out.

The main aim of Friprog is to "establish security for choices, usage and sharing of open source and to help municipalities and also the industry to work out the goals for using more open source" says Austlid. These goals are achieved by spreading the knowledge about open source, building networks and offering various arenas for sharing. "We have about 50 different people contacting us every week. This ranges from big public organisations to small municipalities, industry and private

organisations. All of them want information about what open source is, what they can use it for, etc.", says Austlid. In order to cope with this level of demand, Friprog maintains its own network of people they cooperate with.

Regarding the public sector, Friprog aims at informing public entities about the benefits of open source, supports their increase and input into the matter and answers the questions they may have about this type of software. "Those are very soft-touch goals that we want to accomplish but that's an ongoing process: informing, educating and, of course, connecting the dots from the vendors to the public sector", says Gundersen. In 2008, he wants Friprog to make it easier for public entities to share source code, and re-use code produced by others. Although this is not an easy task, he sees much progress already. One example he presents is where one of the Norwegian municipalities have invested 700,000 Norwegian Kroner (EUR 88,000) in a system for administering courses. Today, 34 municipalities are re-using that system without having to invest in any further development. The savings realised in this manner are clearly beneficial for regional and national public sector budgets. Therefore, Gundersen believes that it is extremely important to teach public bodies how to re-use existing free software for their own benefit.

The Director sees Friprog's main goal as to be an active competence centre and independent at the same time. "That means we can criticise the government, but we can also help it in enhancing and developing a certain project. We have a really free road on going to the media and telling people about open source. I think also that our independent role makes us a type of an 'activist' organisation", says Austlid. Moving beyond some heated debates about this types of software in the past, the debate has now shifted on how to best exploit the advantages of free software.

Broad support within the government for open source, as well as the independent nature of the Competence Centre have contributed to such popularity, as has the demand for a competence centre in Norway. Without these two supporting factors the scope of the centre's operations and their impact would be limited. As things stand, the budget and funding assigned to the centre indicates that the Norwegian government is well aware of the need for more open source usage and its positive impact on the national economy.

## ***Budget and Funding***

Friprog is organised through the cooperation between two counties, Buskerud and Troms. The other actors which are involved in the organisation of Friprog are Buskerud University College, Drammen Municipality Council and ICT-Norway, the trade organisation for the Norwegian ICT industry.

Although fully funded by the government, Friprog has been designed in such a way as to deliver a completely independent advice and services in the public as well as in the private sector. Because Friprog is fully funded by the government with around 4 million Norwegian Kroner a year (approximately EUR 500,000) from the Ministry of Government Administration and Reform. Gundersen explains how the centre maintains its independence despite this reliance on public money: "We are funded as an independent centre. We have already disagreed with the Ministry on several points and in Norway we have a culture for [that type of independence and] we are able to maintain the independence because of these basic rules", highlights Gundersen.

Though complete government funding is to continue for the near future, the centre's workers are looking for additional funding sources in the future, including private vendors and municipalities. However, Gundersen points out that this might in fact reduce the centre's autonomy. He says that the independence culture is so strong in the Norwegian system, that government funding brings Friprog more room to take its own decisions than private sponsors may. Gundersen does also not expect future changes in the government to have much effects on funding for the centre. "We see

public funding as an important factor for keeping our independence but we are open to other models in the future". Austlid adds: " Maybe in the future, we need to have [additional funding] because we have a lot of publicity and a lot of people want us to come and help them. That maybe needs some more resources".

The path to gaining financial support was quite lengthy. It took about 2 years for the government to decide on the budget and official funding of the competence centre. Yet Gundersen found the process to be quite smooth, due to great support for open source among Norwegian politicians. "Everyone thought that it was a good idea when it came to politicians, both on the left and the right side. So it's a very broad consensus in Norway that open source is a good idea. The centre and the platform for sharing, both met with no real obstacles", says Gundersen.

## ***Legal issues***

Although legal problems and issues were expected to appear, Friprog has not experienced any real obstacles from the legal point of view. What was probably really helpful in avoiding legal problems was the close cooperation and collaboration with the executive. The government has been quite helpful because of its understanding of the importance of open source ,but also because it understood that an independent Friprog will require some legal assistance in order to maintain its full autonomy.

Further clarifications are expected from a legal study about various aspects of free software. Findings of the report, provided to ICT minister Heidi Grande Røys in June 2008, are not conclusive yet but the general feeling is that "the issues of sharing a code are not a problem, the issues of re-using a code are not a problem; but when it comes to the issues of making a purchase from a vendor without knowing exactly how many municipalities or public entities are on the buying side, some legal obstacles might arise", says Gundersen, e.g. related to clearly identifying the purchasing party in the procurement process.

Concerning the legal advice Friprog provides to the public and private entities, the centre works with people with a legal background from the outside of the competence centre. This type of outsourcing gives Friprog the ability to concentrate on its main goals specified for this year.



*Christer Gundersen, the Development Manager for Public Sector*

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## ***Effect on government services***

Because Friprog currently operates as an advisory body to the government, the Centre is able to influence and guide the decisions and issues concerning Norway's ICT policies and decision-making: "When the Ministry plans to buy [Microsoft Windows] Vista for all government employees, we can certainly make our point", says Gundersen.

Friprog is also active when it comes to new standards and decisions issued by the national government. For example, the [Norwegian Government has decided](#) that all official information will be available in open document formats such as HTML, PDF and ODF. According to the

government, HTML will be the main format for publishing public information on the internet. In case of PDF, PDF 1.4 and in the future PDF/A ISO 19005-1 will be obligatory when there is a need to present a document in its original layout. ODF in ISO/IEC 26300 will be used for documents where users is allowed to make changes, such as public forms. These requirements should be implemented by January 1, 2009. Friprog is responsible for informing the parties in the public sector on how to implement these standards.

At the same time, the centre tries to influence the government to use more open standards, with some success. On July 10, 2008 the Norwegian Parliament voted in favour on using more open source software. This shows that the competence centre's voice carries some influence with political decision makers.

Friprog, however, does not usually encounter great difficulties when it comes to convincing politicians of the merits of open source. Gundersen notices that the government and the decision-makers are not even concerned with the security issue of open source. "When Java was moved to open source, it gave [people] a good feeling that open source is not that different. (...) Many of the government projects developed in Java were automatically open sourced and there were no problems with safety whatsoever", says Gundersen. Most politicians and decision makers are not software specialists, "but when [they] see IBM, Google or SUN saying that open source is the way to go, then most people understand that security is not an issue", adds Gundersen.

While Friprog cooperates with both national and local governments, there are differences in what information these two types of administrations want. The national government is more interested in general issues, like efficiency and how to use the taxpayers' money for the greatest benefit. Local governments, however, look at more specific issues, like the quality of services and how to improve these services using open source.

### ***Cooperation with other bodies and impact of open source***

Heidi Arnesen Austlid points out that Friprog should be also seen as a network organisation: "We cooperate with both the industry, municipalities, organisations and different kinds of people who have a competence in open source in Norway, including academic bodies". The cooperation with other organisations and institutions brings mutual benefits. Friprog advises and helps on using open source and sharing code, but at the same time obtains information and help from, for example, academic organisations or specialists.

When Friprog was initiated, its creators and contributors not only borrowed ideas and experience from other countries and competence centres when embarking on the centre's setup. The Friprog team remains in constant contact with their counterparts in other countries: "Whenever we had a question, we could call someone or send an email and get good answers ", says Gundersen. Particularly helpful was the 'Nordic Network' between the Scandinavian countries, which has been operating for several years already. A number of meetings within IDABC and networking with various contacts were also very helpful during the creation process of Friprog. Interestingly enough, Gundersen points out that "at every meeting we have been attending, we have noticed that the same questions, the same problems and the same solutions apply. It's remarkable how similar the situations across Europe are".

Due to its cooperation with other bodies, Friprog can have a wider impact on the local and national economy. "Sharing is a really smart strategy for the future; and sharing has also economic effects. If two or more municipalities cooperate and share the code and experiences (...), that will result in a positive economic effect. It also applies to businesses, but we still have to build some stable business models in Norway", says Austlid. Friprog receives many questions and requests for help every day from small and big companies, which want to know, among other things, what will be the

future of the public sector in connection with open source. Both the private and the public sector organisations have realised the importance of free software about 3 years ago. Since that time, there has been a growing open source-based industry in Norway.

## ***Achievements***

Though Friprog started only relatively recently, the centre already has some achievements to show. Having successfully advised the government on the matter of document formats, the competence centre has shown that it can carry its expertise over into the political arena.

While similar instances of advice to the national government and other political bodies are likely to come about in the future, Friprog's key achievement in the long term will be to popularise the idea of sharing. The centre will be instrumental in helping the public sector raise efficiency and lower costs where software is concerned by promoting the re-use of code, and by leading the way on cooperation for new developments. The delingsbazaren.no site already hosts a significant number of projects, and will probably attract many more.

## ***Lessons learned***

Despite its short operational period, Friprog has already gained some valuable experience. Both Austlid and Gundersen point out that Friprog has learned much from other organisations in Europe. However, when it comes to the centre, both say that the most important aspect of Friprog is that it focuses more on users than on developers. While some other projects in Europe are developer-driven, Friprog concentrates on making it easier for Norway's public bodies to re-use existing code.

For Austlid, the most important aspect is to define the problems of the users and to listen to them. This way, usability problems will disappear faster and open source software will become more popular and useful, both in the public and in the private sector.

## ***Future plans***

Although Friprog has only been active for a few months, it has established much plans and goals for the near future. Friprog wants to become more efficient and to be able to invest more money into its operations due to a growing demand for its services.

The Centre also plans to launch a new website in autumn 2008. Advancing beyond the current page, which is rather basic, it will not only feature a new design, but will also be more concrete on guidelines and advice, with one section for the public sector, one section for the private sector and also one general on the usage of open source and how to start [with open source]", says Austlid. Also planned are news feeds and a forum for various discussions in order to build communities and enable the exchange of information, for example between academics and the private sector.

The director also mentions that the Friprog team are working on a software exchange project, which aims at facilitating code re-use between municipalities. Also under construction is a program directory. In addition, they work on a type of a 'software bank' with various types of software to be used at home, in the public sector and in the private sector.

One of the most important items on Friprog's agenda is to put more emphasis on re-using the code created by others. In order to help municipalities and other governmental organisations realise that re-using already existing code is beneficial for various aspects, the 'open source culture' needs to be developed further: "Getting others to base their systems on open source is the biggest obstacle because there is no culture saying that it's a good idea", adds Gundersen. Therefore, the competence centre plans to focus more in this area in the future.

## Conclusion

Despite having only been up and running for a few months, Friprog clearly shows the potential to become successful. Although Norway's political climate is already comparatively friendly towards free software, many people in public administrations have some doubts about open source. Friprog serves as a central point to provide competent answers. There clearly is demand for such a service, as shown by the growing numbers of questions arriving at Friprog via phone and email. This has quickly taken the centre beyond its origins as a regional project in the counties of Buskerud and Troms. A key element of Friprog's strategy is to focus on users, rather than on developers. All of the employees of the competence centre see this as an important aspect of their work and their success.

The centre's operational (though not financial) independence from the government is clearly an important asset. It allows the Friprog team to feed their expertise into the political process where needed, and to be seen as a neutral partner when interacting with public bodies on the national, regional and local levels.

The people behind Friprog spread the knowledge about open source in the public and the private sector, but the centre also acts as an important partner and advisor for the government. The process of informing political decision makers about open source and building links between the public sector and the vendors is an ongoing process, and the work Friprog is currently doing has already been well received, as exemplified when the government followed the centre's advice regarding open document formats. It can be expected that the centre will grow in the future, with more employees to meet demand and possibly more sponsors, to meet the growing demand for solid advice about using free software in the public sector.

## Links

- [Friprog](#)
- [delingsbazaren.no](http://delingsbazaren.no)
- [Ministry of Government Administration and Reform](#)
- [softwareborsen.dk](http://softwareborsen.dk)
- OSOR [case study](#) on softwareborsen.dk
- The European Commission's [IDABC](#) programme



*This case study is brought to you by the [Open Source Observatory and Repository \(OSOR\)](#), a project of the European Commission's [iDABC project](#).*

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*This study is based on interviews with Heidi Arnesen Austlid, the Director of Friprog and Christer Gundersen, the*

*development manager for public sector in Friprog.*