Software without Borders

BENTE GUNDERSEN/TEXT
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"I want to contribute to the development of health information systems in my own country," says Desalegn Zegeye.

Desalegn Zegeye is a PhD student in informatics and project coordinator of the Integrated Master programme in Health Informatics at Gondar University in Ethiopia. The integrated NOMA Master programme will be running simultaneously from this autumn at three universities; the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Addis Ababa University and the University of Gondar in Ethiopia. The University of Oslo is the partner institution in the North and the fifth cooperating institution is Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences in Tanzania.

The Master programme is integrated in the sense that it is uniting two independent fields of study; public health and informatics. Its overall aims are to develop health informatics systems and build capacity in the South and to stimulate South-South-North cooperation.

Result of a joint effort
"It all started in South Africa back in 1994", says Jørn Braa, the project coordinator at the University of Oslo.

"Right after the abolition of the apartheid regime there was an urgent need to develop health management information systems in South Africa. The health authorities of that country, academia and NGOs joined forces and funded HISP (Health Management Information Systems)."

The University of Oslo was involved in the project at an early stage and contributed to the creation of training programmes with the financial support of Norad at the University of Western Cape. The training programmes were aimed at thousands of South African health workers and managers. HISP is an NGO that mainly represents the public health sector and academia. It has become a core project in a global South-South-North network dedicated to developing Open Source software for health purposes. Open Source ICT platforms enable students and researchers to design, change and improve software, adap-

These programmes can only be successful if they are flexible enough to take the individual needs of each local community into account

DEVELOPING HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN ETHIOPIA/ Desalegn Zegeye, project coordinator and former Norad fellow, explains how the Integrated Master in Health Informatics has been established at the University of Gondar in Ethiopia. Left: Associate Professor Jørn Braa, University of Oslo.

ting it to local needs. This is an important tool for addressing the growing demand for better organisation of the health sector in countries in the South.

The need for research networks
During the 1990s, several research projects and training programmes were carried out with this objective. As a result of this cooperative effort between the health authorities and academia, the first Master programmes were born in South Africa and Mozambique in 2001, under the auspices of the former Norad Fellowship Programme. These programmes are still running.

"HISP provided us with the research network that is necessary to start any Master programme," explains Jørn Braa.

These programmes were the first under the Norad umbrella that

were actually taught at institutions in the South and based upon the South-South-North model.

"In 2005 we extended the project to Tanzania, where we started up with a course at Master level. Today we have an independent Master programme. We hope that the creation of these new Master programmes will be a contribution to the further expansion of this way of using ICT systems to support health structures," continues Braa.

The Open Source software has already been adapted to several countries. In fact, the use of these platforms is currently widespread in all South Africa, in both national and regional health care.

Students a driving force

Since the Master programmes started, some 50 candidates have graduated with the support of Norad. Currently all of them are employed in the project or related activities in their respective home countries.

"Our students are a driving force in this task. They actually design and develop software that can be implemented in their local environment. The next step will be to fund Master programmes and other training programmes in Malawi and hopefully also in Asia through our current students from Vietnam and Nepal", says Braa.

Desalegn Zegeye arrived in Oslo two weeks ago in order to take PhD courses in the Department of Informatics at the University of Oslo. In four months he will return to Gondar to do his field work and offer lectures for the eight students who are currently participating in the Master programme at his university. Mr. Zegeye has played an important role in the creation of the Master programme in Gondar.

Norad fellows behind new programmes

"A few years ago I was a Norad fellow myself," he says.

"I took my Master degree in Cape Town and now I am part of the development of the health information system of my own country, Ethiopia. I am very grateful for the opportunity I have been given."

According to Desalegn Zegeye, the new Master programme is highly relevant to his country.

THE STUDENT AND THE MENTOR/ Associate Professor Jørn Braa from the University of Oslo and PhD student Desalegn Zegeye from the University of Gondar have played important roles in the creation of the new Master programme.

"It is a new track in the Master in Public Health that is already well established at the University of Gondar. Master programmes and research projects that are built on local needs and interests will definitely work out."

He hopes that in the future it will be possible to create courses at PhD level in Health Informatics to ensure capacity building and further development of the field in Ethiopia.

Jørn Braa emphasises that the NOMA Master programme is not only designed for NOMA fellows.

"In fact only one third of the students have scholarships from this programme."

The Integrated Master in Health Informatics is a result of long-term strategic South-South-North cooperation.

"This kind of development cooperation is based on networking strategies. We are talking about the integration of different levels of public administration, development cooperation, research and education. Different levels of funding are also involved. The Master programme is one of the pieces in a larger picture."

An important piece, no doubt.

"These programmes can only be successful if they are flexible enough to take the individual needs of each local community into account," conclude the two project coordinators.