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Joint statement : Maximising inclusiveness and engagement through the use of Open Standards in the European Commission

Today is Document Freedom Day, the international day to celebrate and raise awareness of Open Standards. On this occasion, we would like to reflect on the importance for public institutions in general, and for the European Commission in particular, considering its leadership role, of using Open Standards in all their digital communication and services.

Open Standards are formats and protocols which everybody can use free of charge and restriction and for which no specific software from a particular vendor is required. They are essential for interoperability and freedom of choice based on the merits of different software applications. For a public institution such as the European Commission, this is especially important because every EU citizen and company should have the right to communicate and interact with its administration using Open Standards exclusively, and not be forced to install and use software from any specific vendor. That is why we take this opportunity of Document Freedom Day, to voice our concerns on the improper use of standards in the context of applying for EU programmes.

Nowadays, when applying for most EU programmes, applicants are typically required to fill in PDF forms that use elements only implemented in proprietary software from a particular vendor (Adobe), software that is currently not available on all platforms. This is a problem for many applicants who end up bereft of choice or excluded from the process altogether. It does not have to be this way, when a number of efficient alternatives exist that are entirely based on Open Standards. Generally, we would advise against the use of PDF for online forms, and would instead recommend solutions based Open Web Standards like HTML5 and XForms. With this joint statement, we call on the European Commission to address this situation and ensure that all interactions with the public can be performed entirely using Open Standards, thereby ensuring maximum inclusiveness and freedom of choice for all European citizens.

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