A Different Kind of Antiviral Donation for Africa

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Africa is suffering from yet another plague: this one infects their computers instead of their communities.

Chris Michael, writing in the English newspaper The Guardian in August 2009, summarized the situation as follows: “…Africa has become a hive of [T]rojans, worms and exploiters of all stripes. As PC use on the continent has spread in the past decade (in Ethiopia it has gone from 0.01% of the Ethiopian population to 0.45% through 1999-2008), viruses have hitched a ride, wreaking havoc on development efforts, government programmes and fledgling businesses.”<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/aug/12/ethiopia-computer-virus>

Michael points out that African organizations can hardly afford to pay $50 per year per computer for virus protection, and thus computers all over the continent are sinking into unusability. Organizations lose critical documents (“an agriculture bureau employee … lost the multi-year plan for agricultural improvements for the Benishangul-Gumuz region, Ethiopia's fourth poorest area”), suffer slow access to the Internet (“it is not unusual to wait 10 minutes to access a single [W]eb page”), randomly reboot computers, and destroy files.

Alan Mercer, a computer specialist with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) <http://www.vsointernational.org/>, is bitter about the effect of (mostly Chinese) virus writers on his African clients:

“I'd take them to Ethiopia," says Mercer. "I'd show them the man who lost his agricultural development plan to the virus he wrote. Then I'd show him the kids who will die in two years because the agricultural reforms came too late and the annual harvest failed because the agricultural development plan at the regional agricultural bureau was destroyed by his virus."

So what do we do?

I think that readers of this column can write to their own antivirus product vendor and propose that they make their products and updates available to African users completely free as a contribution to world development. Companies could work on distribution through aid agencies such as VSO, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) <http://www.usaid.gov/>, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)<http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/index-e.htm> and many others. They might even be able to claim tax benefits.

But it’s time to act. Write to your antivirus vendor with a pointer to this article and spread the word.

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