

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE · 2026

## Open draft "RETURN" proposes a market mechanism for non-scarce goods, replacing voluntary contribution with deterministic pricing

*Independent Vienna-based research draft addresses the long-documented sustainability gap in open-source software, hardware, and scientific knowledge by proposing a closed-form pricing function that converts commercial use into proportional contribution — without governance, without tokens, without discretion.*

**Vienna, Austria** — A working draft published today under the name **RETURN** (proposed SPDX identifier *Return-1.0-draft*, registration pending) proposes a structural change to how open knowledge systems sustain themselves. Instead of asking commercial users to voluntarily contribute back, RETURN specifies a deterministic formula that prices commercial use directly — proportional to revenue, with full credit for in-kind contribution and a long-memory adjustment for past behaviour.

The draft frames the open-source sustainability problem not as a moral or organizational failure but as a **pricing failure**. Classical markets price scarcity. Open systems, by definition, are not scarce. The result has been documented for over a decade: maintainers underpaid, projects underfunded, infrastructure burdened beyond capacity. Existing responses either reconstruct artificial scarcity (patents, source-available licenses), depend on voluntary contribution (which empirically reaches under 5% of commercial users), or introduce speculative governance assets that collapse into plutocracies.

RETURN proposes a fourth path: a closed-form pricing function, fixed at protocol release, operated by a minimal institution whose charter prohibits its modification. Evolution proceeds through forks rather than through governance.

*"Open systems do not fail from idealism. They fail from absent feedback. The existing models are either closed, which stalls innovation, or open without return, which depletes the commons with every withdrawal. RETURN is a minimum specification that closes that gap — not as a moral appeal, but as a pricing mechanism. Use is free. Return is priced."*

— Thomas Schüller, independent researcher, Vienna

### HOW THE MECHANISM WORKS

Under RETURN, any individual or entity may use, study, modify, and distribute a licensed work without permission or fee. Above a revenue floor of EUR 100,000 attributable to the work, a contribution obligation activates. The obligation is computed by a formula combining four inputs: attributable revenue, a progressive base rate (asymptotic ceiling 1.5%), a discount for in-kind contribution at market value, and a multiplier reflecting the entity's long-term contribution history.

The contribution may be financial or in-kind: signed attestations of code, documentation, data, research, or peer review reduce the cash obligation by their market-table value. A skilled team that contributes at 100% of its obligation pays nothing in cash. A non-contributing extractor pays the full progressive rate. Both are equally compliant.

The formula remembers. Long-term over-contributors earn a permanent half-rate discount; long-term under-contributors pay a permanent fifty-percent surcharge. The decay is three years. The protocol creates structural economic incentives for sustained participation.

## NO GOVERNANCE, NO TOKEN

RETURN deliberately departs from the recent trend of token-based decentralized governance. The protocol has no governance token, no voting mechanism, no committee that adjusts the formula, and no discretion at any operational level. The formula is fixed at release. The Executor that operates the Register and pursues enforcement is bound by its own charter to apply the formula without modification; charter amendment to change the formula is prohibited and would be unenforceable under Austrian, German, and Dutch foundation law.

If the formula proves wrong — if constants need tuning or new contribution categories require valuation — the response is a fork: a new protocol under a distinct name, new Executor, parallel evolution. Existing licensees continue under the protocol they adopted. This is the Bitcoin model of protocol evolution, applied to commons funding.

## CURRENT STATUS

The project is at draft version 0.2. The license has not yet been reviewed by qualified legal counsel; no Executor organization has been established; no public Register is yet operational. The draft is published openly to invite critique, legal review, pilot adoption by suitable projects, and outreach to existing open-source steward organizations including the Software Freedom Conservancy, the Free Software Foundation Europe, and the Open Source Initiative. Honest disclosure of the current status is treated as a deliberate feature: projects that overclaim at this stage do lasting damage to their own credibility and to the wider open-source licensing space.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RETURN is authored by Thomas Schüller as independent research, without institutional affiliation. All project documents — the protocol specification, the academic working paper "Pricing the Commons", the license text, supporting graphics, and the bilingual landing page — are distributed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and are available at **return-license.org**.

— E N D S —

|             |                                             |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------|
| CONTACT     | Thomas Schüller                             |
| AFFILIATION | Independent researcher                      |
| LOCATION    | Vienna, Austria                             |
| EMAIL       | forschung@tschueller.com                    |
| ORCID       | 0009-0003-9799-6747                         |
| PROJECT     | return-license.org                          |
| LICENSE     | Return-1.0-draft (proposed SPDX identifier) |

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

- All project documents are available under CC BY-SA 4.0 for quotation and reproduction.
- The author is available for interview in German or English. Please schedule via email.
- Technical documents available on request: protocol specification (13 pp), academic working paper "Pricing the Commons" (12 pp), license text (~700 words), one-pager.
- Suggested story angles: the maintainer funding crisis in open source; the failure of earlier reciprocal licenses (RPL, SSPL) and how RETURN differs; the wider context of pricing mechanisms for commons-based production; deterministic versus governance-based commons funding.