

# **Free as in Burned Out**

**Who really pays for Open Source Software**

Marga Manterola  
FOSDEM 2026



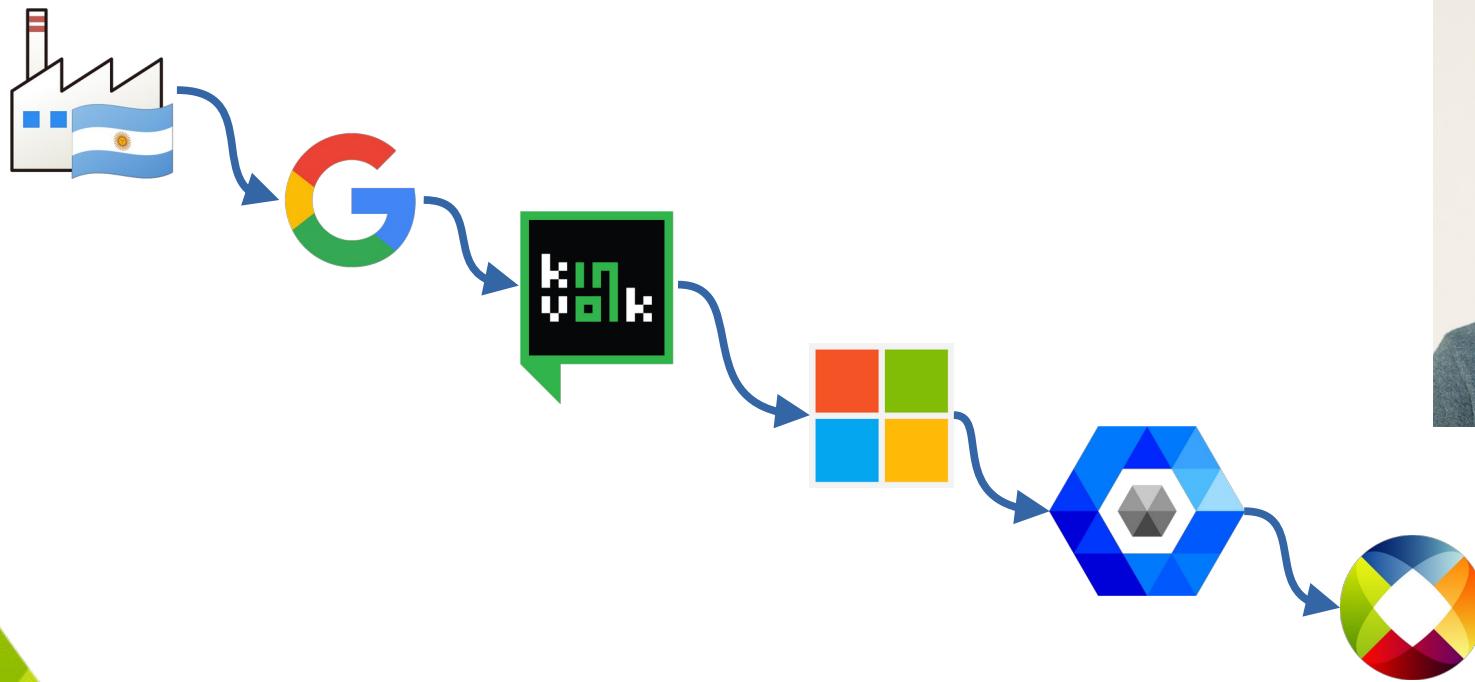


# About me

- Born in Argentina, living in Germany since 2012
- Using and contributing to FOSS for 25+ years.
- Debian Developer since 2005.



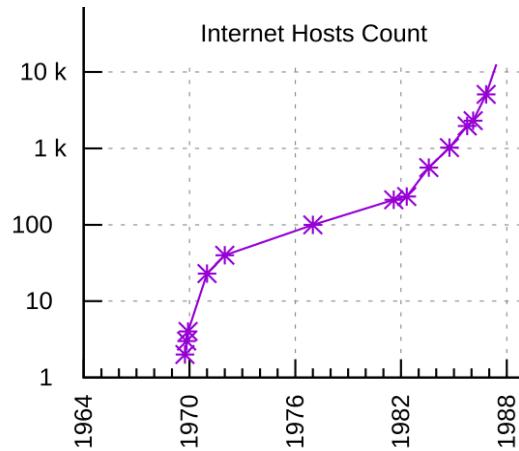
# About me



# The problem



# 40 years ago

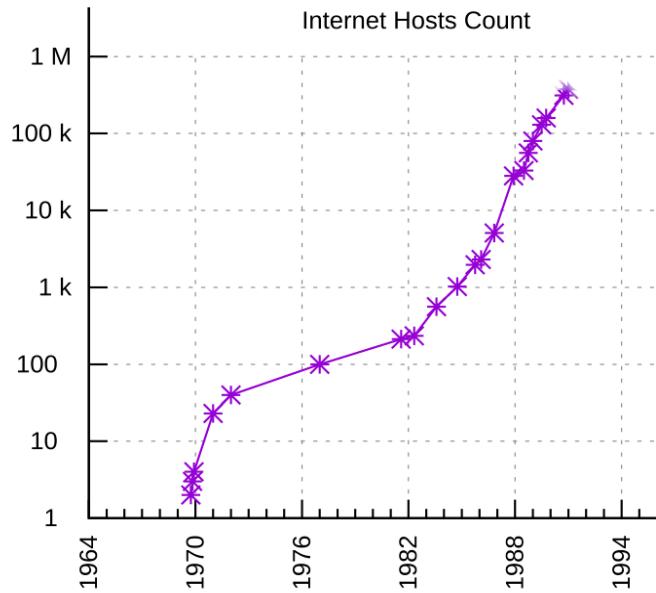


Source: Image created by Wikipedia user Kopiersperre using ke4roh's script, based on isc.org data. CC-BY-SA 3.0.

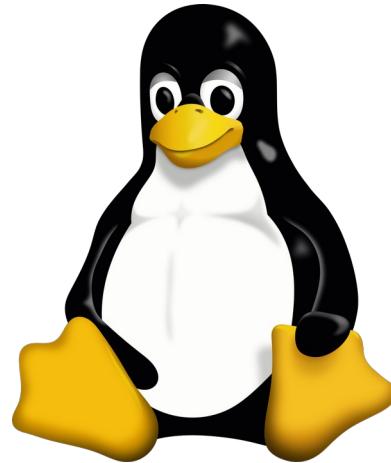


The GNU logo was created by Aurélio A. Heckert, and is licensed under the Free Art License.

# 35 years ago



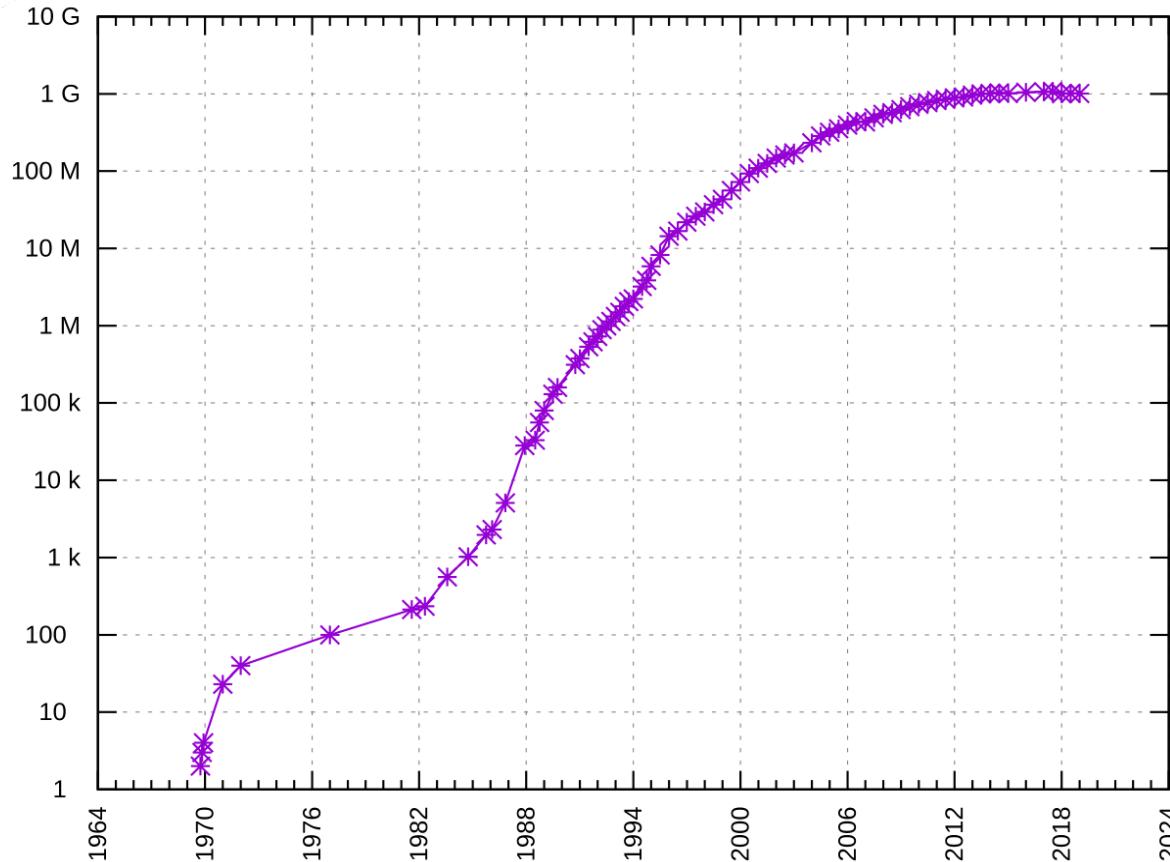
Source: Image created by Wikipedia user Kopiersperre using ke4roh's script, based on isc.org data. CC-BY-SA 3.0.



The Tux logo was created by Larry Ewing, Simon Budig, Garrett LeSage, and is licensed CC0 1.0



## Internet Hosts Count



Source: Image created by Wikipedia user Kopiersperre  
using ke4roh's script, based on isc.org data. CC-BY-SA 3.0.



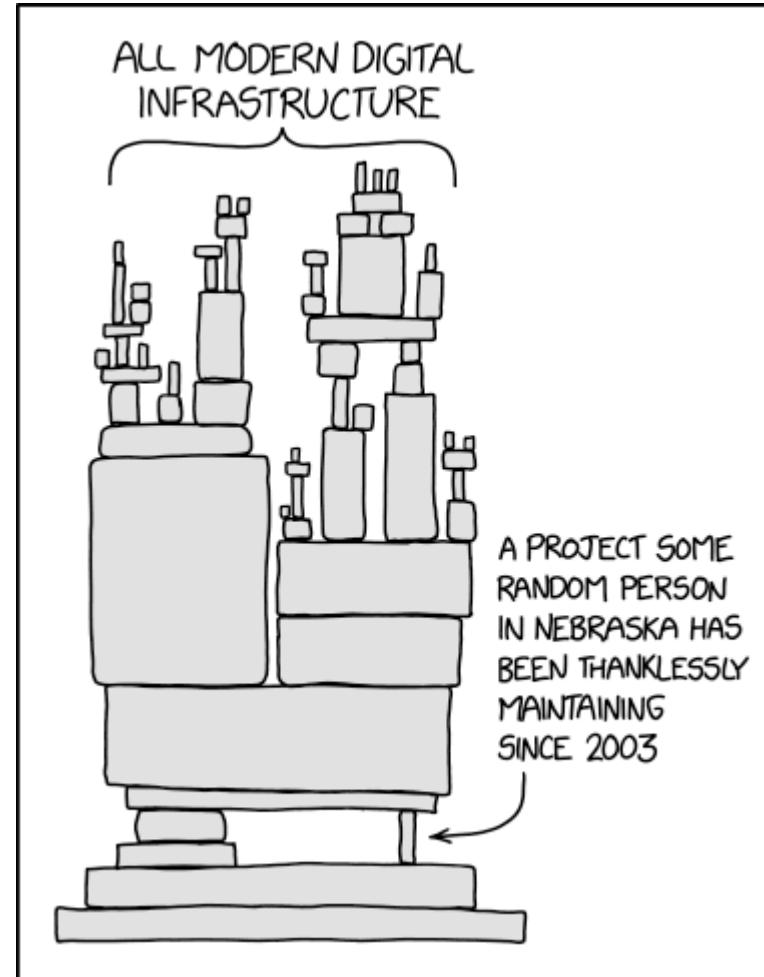
# Open Source has “won”



Photo by [Ray Hennessy](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Or has it?



Source: [xkcd.com](https://xkcd.com/1407/) CC-BY-NC 3.5



# The illusion of “free”

- People today are used to “free” services.
  - That are monetized through ads and selling your data.
- We have become used to getting things for free while still demanding high quality out of them.

# All taking and no giving back

- There are hundreds of millions of potential users.
- But today's *users* have become *consumers*.
  - They expect SLAs, fast responses, accountability.
  - They don't feel obliged to give anything back.





# Burnout



*The risk of burnout increases when there is an imbalance between the energy our work demands of us, and the resources available to replenish it.*

---

”

Source: <https://opensourcepledge.com/blog/burnout-in-open-source-a-structural-problem-we-can-fix-together/>

*Free as in Burned Out*  
Marga Manterola, February 2026



# Major burnout contributors

- Developers are struggling to make a living.
- Toxic behavior from community members wearing developers down.



*The fact that you can download a piece of software for free doesn't mean that it doesn't have value.*



*We need to stop framing maintenance as a moral virtue instead of just work.*



*Maintainers are increasingly treated as if they were vendors, without vendor protections.*



# What if we don't fix this?

- Critical dependencies might get abandoned.
- Security vulnerabilities stay around and get exploited.
- Less experimentation, more risk avoidance.



# Making money with FOSS



# Charge for features and support

- Someone needs to pay the development cost upfront.
- Hard to get steady income.
- One of the first things that get cut.

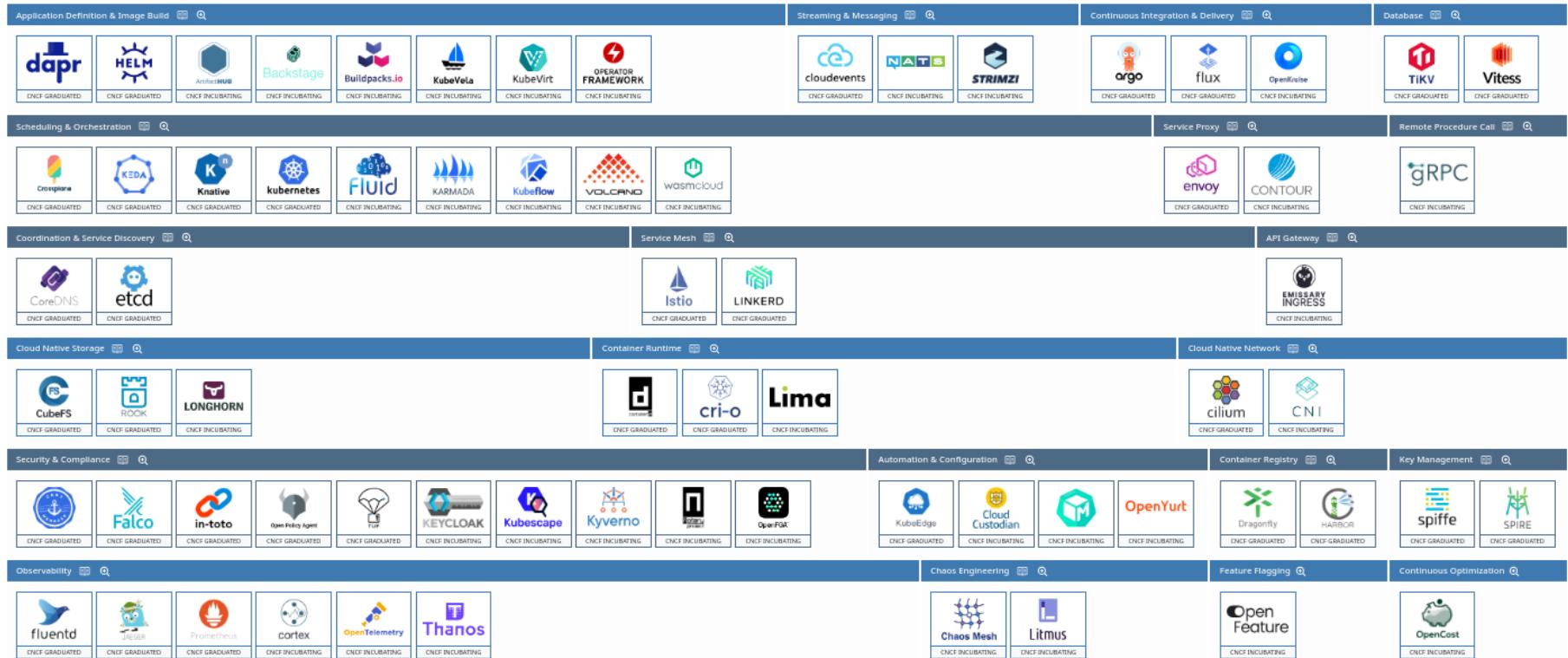


# Open Core

*Open Core is publishing some piece of software as Open Source, while keeping some other piece as closed source and charging licensing costs for that other piece.*



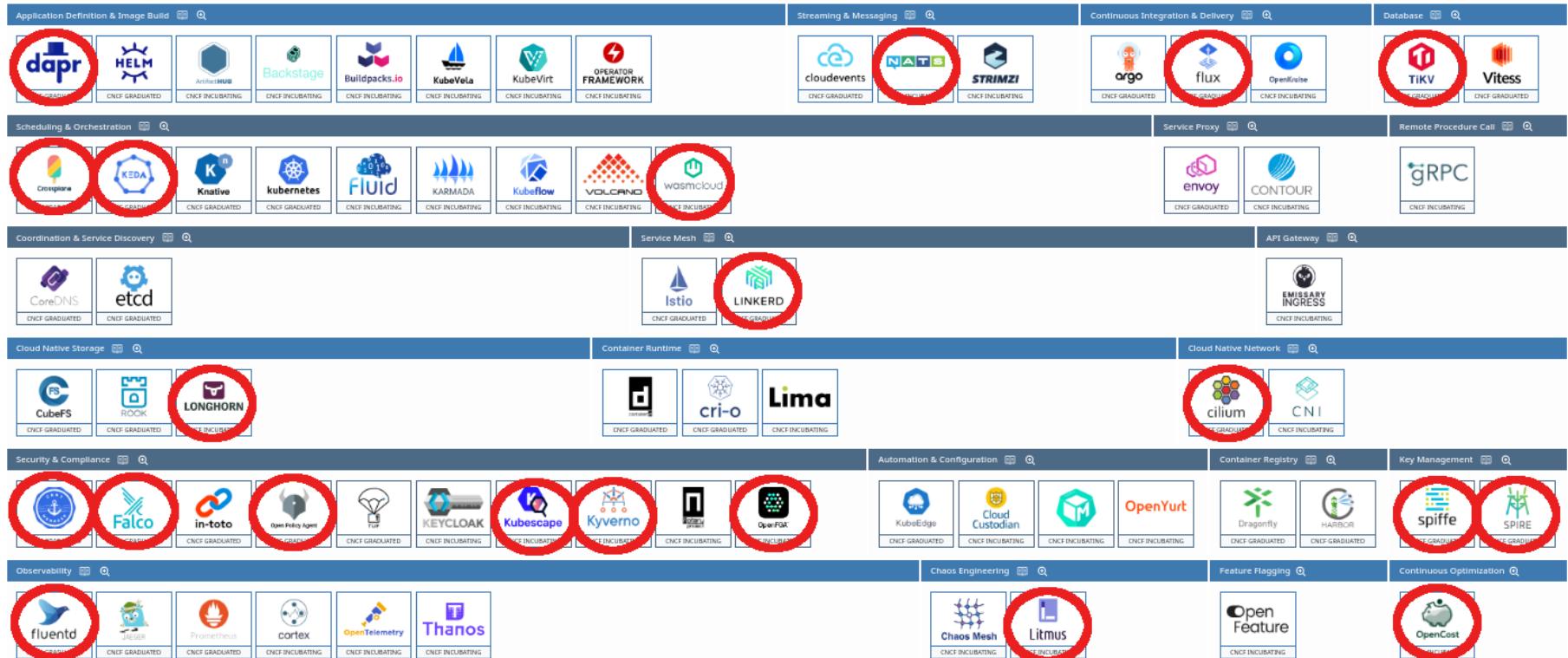
# CNCF Landscape



Source: <https://landscape.cncf.io>



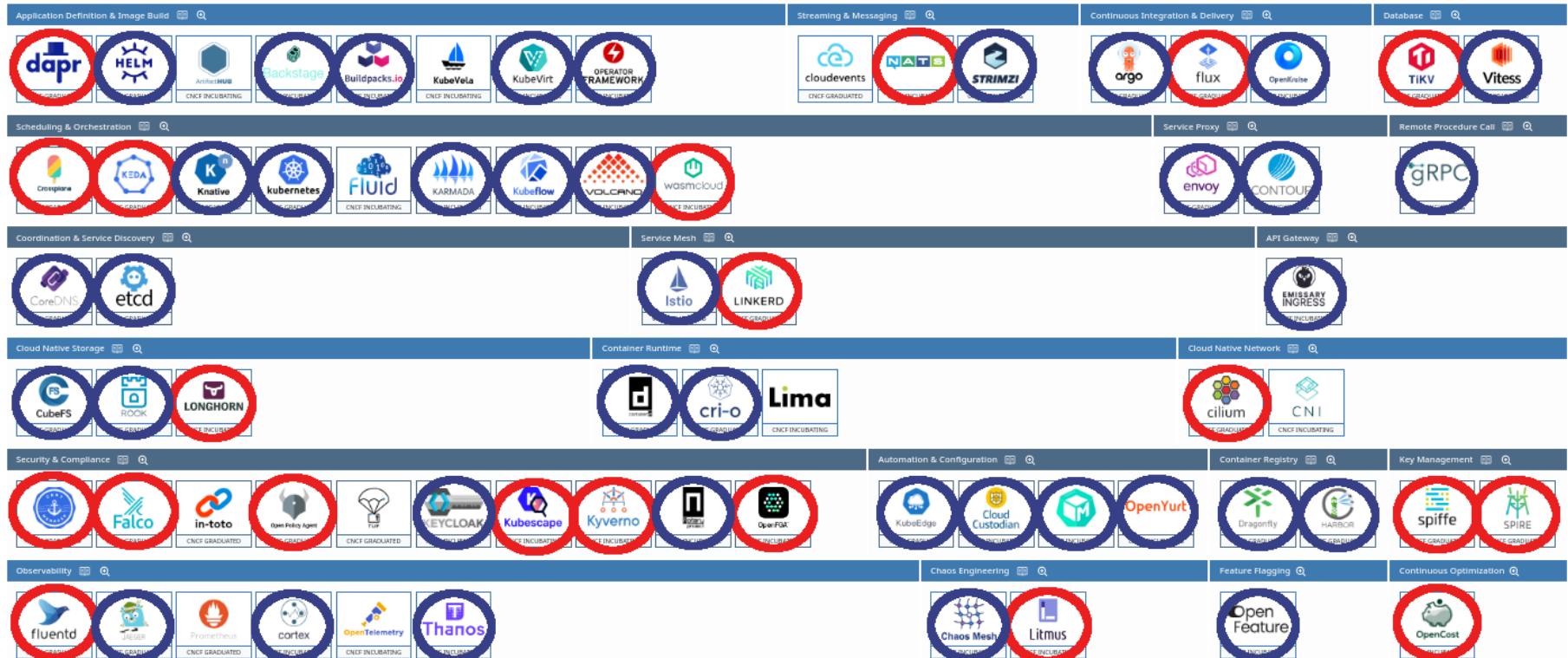
# CNCF Landscape



Source: <https://landscape.cncf.io>



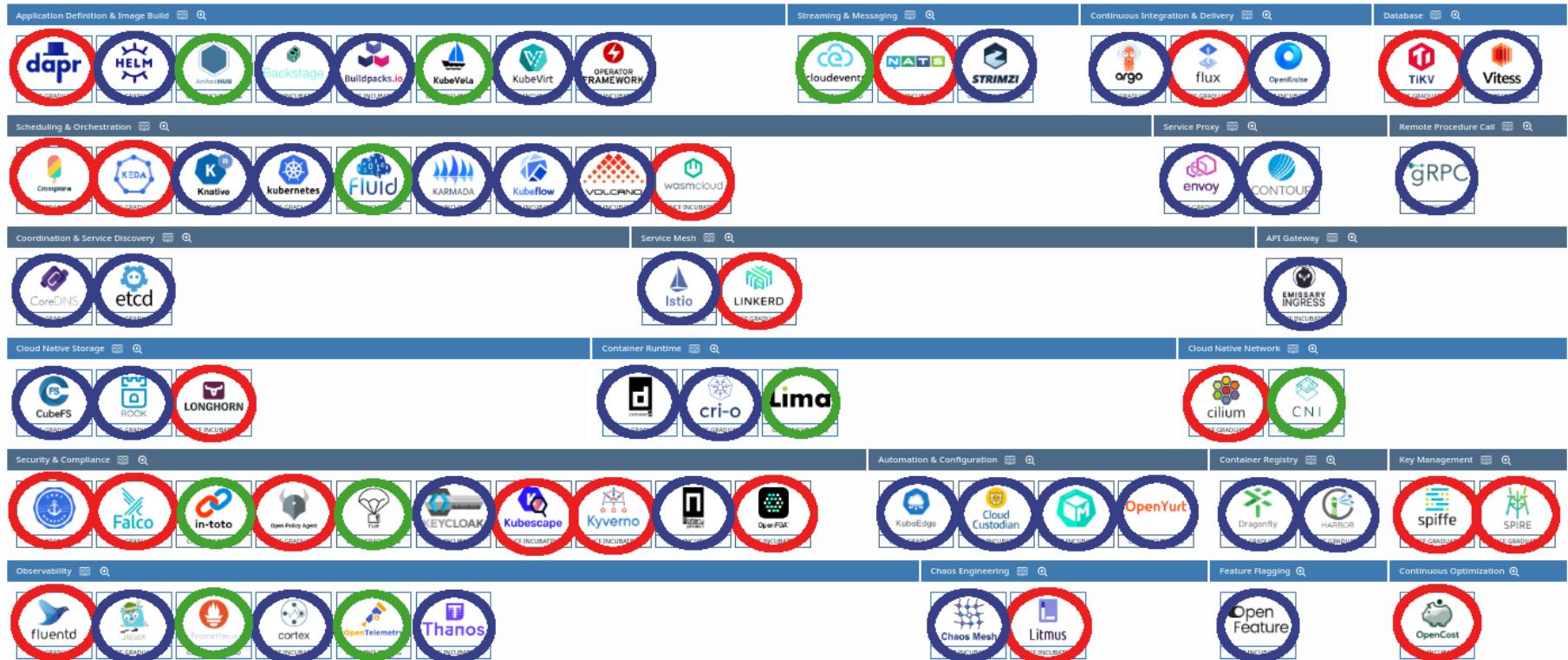
# CNCF Landscape



Source: <https://landscape.cncf.io>



# CNCF Landscape



Source: <https://landscape.cncf.io>



# The Hashicorp / Terraform SNAFU

- On August 2023, Hashicorp announced they would move all their projects to BUSL.
- Companies that had built products on top of Terraform got together and organized a fork (OpenTF → OpenTofu)
- Several companies committed to donating a number of FTEs for a number of years.



# Alternatives



# Crowdfunding and donations

- GitHub sponsors
  - 40 million dollars donated through the program
- Open Collective
  - 2692 collectives in the Open Source Collective
  - 426 collectives in the Open Collective Europe





- NLNet distributes funds from the EU's "Next Generation Internet" program.
- 1567 projects have received grants.
  - Many are small, not so well known.
- Grants also tend to be small, funding specific features or functionalities.



# Sovereign Tech Fund

- Part of the Sovereign Tech Agency, a German body with funds coming out of the German government.
- Aims to pay the costs of maintaining the digital infrastructure (used by everybody, not just Germany).
- Grants are generally larger, aimed towards larger projects.





- Initiative started in 2023. Companies commit to donate at least 2000 USD per developer per year.
- Goal:  
*establish a new social norm in the tech industry of companies paying open source maintainers, so that burnout and related security issues can become a thing of the past.*
- Sort of like an Open Source Tax, but it's voluntary and each company decides where the funds go.



# Companies employing FOSS devs

- Various companies employ FOSS maintainers and let them work on their projects 20%, 50% or even 100%.
- Having maintainers on the payroll benefits the company as the project gets maintained and the company gets the expertise.



# Is this enough?



Photo by [Christian Dubovan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

34 / 46

*Free as in Burned Out*  
Marga Manterola, February 2026



# It's not enough

- It's complex to navigate the options, requires significant work to get the funding needed.
- Grants require ongoing work to ask for them, there's uncertainty whether you'll get them or not.
- Constantly asking for donations feels like begging.



# No juniors → Little diversity

- This model only pays for senior maintainers.
- Less experienced developers need to work nights and weekends until they have enough experience.
- This is a ***privilege*** that impacts diversity.





# A better world is possible



*Open Source is making the world better, today.*

*People working in Open Source are constantly adding a lot of value that benefits everybody.*



*People working in Open Source should be able to do  
it as their full time job, if they want to.*



# Companies giving back

- Sign the Open Source Pledge.
- Alternatively, donate whichever amount fits the company's budget.
- Normalize donating to support Open Source.

# Foundations employing devs

- Explore the option of employing developers to do the work covered by the Foundation.
- This is a complex subject, so it might require discussions to reach agreement.
- Start by surveying members to find out their opinion.



# Companies employing FOSS devs

- Normalize employing maintainers and giving them time to work on their projects.
- “Open Source Employment Pledge”
  - e.g. 50% FOSS time every 20 devs.



# Teams > Loneliness

- Let's move to a world of teams working together.
- If you are a solo maintainer, find other maintainers in the same space to form a team.

DANKE !  
THANK YOU !  
MERCI !  
GRAZIE !  
GRACIAS !  
DANK JE WEL !





# Questions?



