

THE CONNECT INTERVIEW

BOUBAKAR BARRY, CEO, WACREN



Boubakar Barry, CEO of the West and Central African Research and Education Network (WACREN), starts the year full of excitement. Preparations for the 4th annual WACREN conference, the WOMEN in WACREN workshop and the launch of the new WACREN network are highlights that fill up his calendar at least until March. Fortunately, he found some time to answer some questions we had regarding these highlights and the impact of WACREN in the pan-Africa R&E landscape.

What will be the main themes the WACREN 2018 conference will focus on?

The main theme of this year's WACREN annual conference is "WACREN – Unleashing Potentials". There are 3 subthemes associated with that main theme. These cover important subjects such as advanced network technologies and services, building and strengthening user communities, and NREN business models and use cases. We have received a good number of high quality papers on these topics and we can expect a very exciting conference.

What concrete outcomes do you expect from WACREN 2018?

The annual WACREN conference has always provided the opportunity of bringing together the WACREN community as well as WACREN friends for face to face interactions and exploration of collaboration opportunities. It is a unique opportunity to strengthen the relationships between members of our community and between them and friends from other world regions. This has a high value for us. This year's conference will also feature a special event: we will be launching the WACREN network. We are currently working frenetically to establish the first WACREN links and the interconnection with GÉANT.

Looking back at the previous conferences, what has been the biggest development this edition of the WACREN conference will offer?

The feedback we receive from the participants since we started organizing our annual conference is that they are of high quality and that improvements are noticed every year. This is despite the low-level of staffing we currently have. This means that besides the efforts of the staff, we also get a lot of support from our local hosts and the community at large. The number of participants is also increasing year after year, and we expect to witness the same pattern this year. And as I said earlier, there is a very important highlight at this year's conference: the official launch of the WACREN network.



What will the new WACREN network have to offer in terms of incremental changes for the W&C Africa R&E sector?

Higher education and research institutions in West and Central Africa are among if not the least connected in the academic world. This is not due to lack of infrastructure, but rather due to poor regulation of the telecommunications sector leading to very high connectivity prices. Some institutions pay as much as more than 1,000€ per Mbps per month! Yes, 1,000€. In these conditions, no institution can sustain the provision of broadband connectivity to its community. Some institutions with tens of thousands of students have a total bandwidth of less than 100 Mbps.

WACREN and its members are here to change this, so that the education and research community in the region finally enjoys high capacity connectivity that allows them to learn, teach and do research under unprecedented favourable conditions.

How can other NRENs in the W&C African region benefit from the network?

The network is actually for the NRENs in the region and their constituencies. We currently have 12 member NRENs but all countries in West and Central Africa can benefit from the infrastructure we are putting in place.

Fortunately, the AfricaConnect2 (AC2) project funded by the European Union and that WACREN is implementing in collaboration with GÉANT for West and Central Africa gives us a huge opportunity to speed up the deployment of our regional network. The backbone is being deployed and the first NRENs will be connected to it before the end of the first quarter of 2018. Users of these NRENs will notice a huge difference from what they are experiencing today.

Are there more countries that have the potential to be linked to the countries in the region and/or Europe?

AfricaConnect2 and other projects funded by the European Union under the H2020 framework (TANDEM, SciGalA and MAGIC) have helped the WACREN community a lot. Today, we are on the eve of launching our regional network. As of today, 6 NRENs have made contributions to the counter

funding that WACREN has to provide for the implementation of the project. These NRENs will be connected in priority, and we expect that they will all be connected within the next 3 to 6 months. Other NRENs are close to also contribute to the AC2 counter funding. We are confident that by the end of this year, at least 10 NRENs will be connected to the WACREN backbone.

It is however worth mentioning that WACREN is an open, inclusive organization. Even NRENs that have not contributed to the building of the backbone under AC2 can still benefit from connectivity and other services from WACREN, though not under the same preferential conditions than for the NRENs that have contributed to the effort of building the backbone.

How do you see WACREN work in a bigger context of the pan-Africa R&E landscape?

WACREN works hand in hand with its sister organizations ASREN and UbuntuNet Alliance. Today, if we want to communicate among us, the traffic has to go through Europe. One of the objectives of the AfricaConnect2 project is not only to facilitate the connection of these three clusters to GÉANT, but to also facilitate direct interconnections.

It is therefore planned that the three regional networks covering Africa interconnect, so that traffic between them won't have to transit through Europe or the US. I am confident that this will happen soon.

Women in WACREN workshop: 22-26 Jan 2018, Lagos, Nigeria.

Leveraging a broader promotion of maker culture and hackerspaces in NRENs, this event is part of a programme aimed at reducing current imbalances in gender participation. It aims to support female students and staff to improve STEM skills through experimentation with robots and electronics and learning to program these devices.

The participants wound down at the end of the 5-day training workshop in the "ICT for Girls" community day, a networking opportunity open to faculty and guests from other women tech hubs with representation from government and industry.

Were the expected outcomes of the workshop met?

Definitely. The workshop was over-subscribed, but this is not new, as all of our workshops are over-subscribed, sometime more than 300%. This shows the huge demand in capacity building in our region.

We had this excellent female-only workshop in Lagos with 30 participants from 5 countries, facilitated by three instructors, two from WACREN and GÉANT's Head of Software Development Mandeep Saini.

We intend to replicate this workshop in other countries of the WACREN region.



How do you predict the current imbalance of gender participation in IT will change in the coming 5 years, based on the last workshop and its participants?

We cannot develop our region without more than half of our population. The fact is that we have a big challenge involving women in our activities, because they are technical, and there are few women in science and technology in our region. But we are committed to contributing to change this. From the high demand we saw in this first female-only training event, we see that there is a big potential to progress.

WACREN is highly committed to this. That's why we have instituted the Women in WACREN initiative, to empower women and encourage them to be involved in scientific and technical activities. We do our best to encourage them, for example through incentives. This event was the first that WACREN organises with full sponsorship for international participants (travel, accommodation, etc.). Generally, for all of our capacity building workshops, we provide partial sponsorship only. This shows how committed WACREN is in promoting and encouraging the involvement of women in science and technology in general and in IT in particular.

Given the success of the Lagos workshop, I am quite sure that we will make a substantial and noticeable progress in the next couple of years.

On January 15 it has been announced that following a tender call in June 2016, GÉANT has awarded a 15-year contract to MainOne for connectivity services. This means that WACREN joins the global R&E networking community through a network that provides a 10Gbps link from Lagos to London where it connects with the GÉANT network. West and Central Africa are therefore provided with access to R&E collaborations with over 50 million researchers, academics and students across Europe. As part of the contract, an additional link will go out from Lagos to Accra. Not only will this contract connect the first two countries in West and Central Africa, but it will also form the building block for the WACREN backbone support of R&E communities across the entire Central and Western part of the African continent.

"When the first connections will be up in the first quarter of 2018, the big hole that currently exists in the global research and education networking map will finally be closed."

Boubakar Barry, CEO WACREN.