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 Mbit/s 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 Mbit/s.

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 favorable conditions.

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

The network, initially 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 AfricaConnect3 (AC3) project funded by the European Union and that WACREN is implementing in collaboration with GÉANT for West and Central Africa goes beyond, 1,000€ per Mbit/s per month. 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 to participate in or other women tech hubs with a 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 have been oversubscribed, sometimes more than 300%. This shows the huge demand in capacity building in our region. WACREN has 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 Mandiep 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. If 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 gap to fill.

What is the main theme the WACREN 2018 conference will focus on?

The main theme of this year’s WACREN annual conference is “WACREN – Unleashing Potential”. 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 are there more countries that have the potential to be connected to the countries in the region and/or Europe?

AfricaConnect2 and other projects funded by the European Union under the H2020 framework (FINDREN, SubSahel and MAGIC) have helped WACREN maintain a community. 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 closely monitored 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.

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

WACREN works hand in hand with its sister organisations ASREN and UbuntuNet. Today, if we want to communicate among us, the traffic has to go through Europe. One of the objectives of the AfricaConnect3 project is to facilitate the connection of these three clusters to GÉANT, but to also facilitate direct interconnections. It is the plan for the future that the three regional networks covering Africa interconnected, so that traffic between them won’t have to transit through Europe or the US. I am confident that this will happen soon.

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 which connects 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.

“...the first time that connections will be set up in the first quarter of 2018, the big hole that currently exists in the global R&E networking community networking map will finally be closed.”

Boubakar Barry, CEO, WACREN.