Open Access and Open Science in Africa:
An interview with one of the LIBSENSE Pioneers

Omo Oaiya, Chief Strategy Officer at WACREN – the West and Central Africa Research and Education Network – tells CONNECT about a relatively new collaboration called LIBSENSE, where librarians and NREN advocates aim to develop sustainable approaches to benefit researchers in science, global collaboration and improve the ease of accessing valuable data. Let us introduce you to one of the LIBSENSE champions...

Omo, tell us about yourself

I am a long-time NREN advocate currently serving as the Chief Strategy Officer for WACREN. I was the pioneer CTO and led the infrastructure committee of the task force that set up the regional REN. Before that, I had been offering consultancy and project management support to research and academic institutions in Nigeria and other parts of Africa for the better part of the last two decades.

Could you tell us more about LIBSENSE?

LIBSENSE is a collaboration between libraries and NRENs to develop sustainable and relevant approaches for Open Access and Open Science in the African context. Open Science, an international trend aimed at sharing research outputs widely, is transforming science and greatly increasing the impact of research. In nature, however, there are important local and regional aspects of how Open Science is implemented. Services, policies and infrastructure that may be appropriate in the "global north" do not necessarily resonate with other regions. You will find more information at **https://spaces.wacren.net/display/ LIBSENSE**

The history of WACREN and Librarians

Librarians have always been key stakeholders in our community but the activities that led to LIBSENSE started in 2016.

In the TANDEM project, funded in the framework of European Commission Horizon 2020 Programme, we established a Focal Point community. These were people tasked by the REN to establish and coordinate the contact with their communities and raise awareness for the NREN activities and services. Within the NREN, an Institutional Focal Point (iFP) is a dedicated contact person embedded within a higher education institution or research organisation. Librarians were consequently identified as having a natural role as iFPs.

In Sci-GaIA, another H2020 project WACREN was involved in at the same time, we were working with Science Gateways and federated Open Science platforms, and engaging the researcher community with hackfests to provide use cases to help clarify e-Infrastructure requirements and adopt new methods. I led a task in the project to monitor the successful implementation and uptake of e-Infrastructures in Africa through a survey which ran for 2 years. Over 60% of the respondents identified the development of a repository as a current or planned infrastructure. This mirrored results from the earlier TANDEM survey on the needs of NREN users in West and Central Africa, where access to content and ability to share data was ranked by more than two-thirds of the respondents as highly desirable and useful.

The requirement for Open Access repositories further highlighted the role of the librarian, so we embarked on the LIBSENSE (Library Support for embedding NREN services and e-Infrastructure) initiative to address both infrastructure and human capacity needs.

How successful was the third LIBSENSE Workshop?

The Tunis event hosted by ASREN was very successful and followed in the pattern of the preceding workshops in the other African regions. Although there were regional specificities like the need to improve the visibility and

Pictures
Far Left:
Omo Oaiya

Above:
Discussions at
WACREN 2019

discoverability of Arabic content, most of the other needs were common and included hosted repositories, exposing content in a common and coordinated way, federated identity management for libraries, institutional support for open scholarship, user support frameworks and capacity building.

This final event successfully concludes the first phase of LIBSENSE networking activities which aimed to establish a community of practice related to Open Science across the continent. This community will share experiences and information, support the participation of new voices in the scholarly communication landscape, and lay the foundation for their leadership in the implementation of Open Science in their countries.

How can LIBSENSE benefit researchers in Africa?

Open Access is one of the most significant conduits for inclusive and free access to scholarship for the marginalised and has the mandate and potential to strongly promote unhindered participation in knowledge production. Making scientific processes and results more transparent and accessible in the Open Science paradigm allows others to evaluate, use, and analyse them in new ways, which speed up scientific discoveries, reduce redundancy of experiments, and provides a mechanism for innovation, social justice and economic growth. LIBSENSE aims to increase capacity to support, maintain, deploy and reconfigure digital scholarship services which directly benefit researchers.

What is next for LIBSENSE?

The LIBSENSE initiative has drafted templates for data exchange model agreements that cover the data acquisition policy for aggregators and data usage policy. Draft metadata guidelines to ensure interoperability across African repositories have also been released for public comments. The next step will be to continue the advocacy and community building around strategic development of Open Access publishing and e-research infrastructure. This will be complemented with training programs targeting digital skills needed by the librarians and researchers as well as workshops targeting senior university management who make decisions regarding investment in these digital services to raise awareness of the importance of the Open Access and Open Science.