

# FEAST, more than a feasibility study for the African research and education communities' connectivity - a real chance for making a better world

The African territory has 30,321,130 km<sup>2</sup>, which is more than the sum of the total land mass that Argentina, China, Europe, India, New Zealand and the United States of America occupies in the world's map. A huge continent that lacks of connectivity, an serious number of researchers and scientists that cannot collaborate with the rest of the world in finding solutions for real problems that are –as we all know- affecting the African population. The FEAST study is analyzing the feasibility of interconnecting existing and emerging sub Saharan African research and education networking infrastructures and connecting them to the European backbone network, GÉANT.

María José López Pourailly

**T**here's no need to explain why is so important to integrate Africa to the Advanced Networks fabric , at least not to the community gathered in CLARA and the ALICE2 project, because Latin America knows about the benefits of connectivity thanks to the ALICE project that created the RedCLARA network that is currently connecting 13 Latin-American countries. Latin America knows how important this is, that is the reason behind pursuing the connection of Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay; we cannot grow as a region if a part of it does not share that growth process. We cannot globally grow if a continent is not sharing that growth process..

FEAST (Feasibility Study for African – European Research and Education Network Interconnection) has been made possible by funding from the European Commission Information Society and Media Directorate General. This ten-month feasibility study (it should finalize in October 2009) is carried out by a partnership of DANTE, TERENA and the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology, KTH, which is the main contractor. Several European NRENs have pledged their support to the project. The initiative, co-funded by the Africa-EU Partnership Agreement, will support the establishment of sustainable and extensible regional backbone networks dedicated to the interconnection of Africa



Gerti Foest y Cathrin Stöver.

NRENs (sub-Saharan region) to each other and to the world via the pan-European GÉANT Network.

Gerti Foest, of DFN in Germany, is in charge of the NREN Coordination and Applications of the study. She has been deeply involved in FEAST and certainly has a clear vision of the African situation and of the meaning of collaboration. We spoke with Gerti about FEAST, the conversation started during the TERENA Conference held in Malaga - Spain (TNC2009) in June 8th to 11th, and continued through the net a few days after the meeting. The following interview is the result of that conversation and it certainly shows the importance of FEAST and what the communities connected to RedCLARA can do to contribute to the future African Connection.

Many countries compose the sub-Saharan region, is FEAST aiming to reach all those countries or just some of them?

The FEAST study concentrates on a number of East African countries, mainly those which are organized in the UBUNTUNet Alliance

You are carrying out a survey in order to perform your feasibility study. How many different stakeholders/countries answers do you envision would be a good sample in terms of representing the reality of the sub-Saharan region?

Of course we envision to get as many answers as possible from all countries targeted in the study. However, this has shown to be a difficult task and I don't think it is possible to set a number here. The situation in the countries differ extremely so in my opinion it is not possible to draw a general picture of the sub-Sahara region.

Africa is a huge continent with huge problems to solve: hunger, poverty, health, basic education, major social-political-economic conflicts and differences that many times are traduced into wars, among others. Each African country government has to manage to solve these problems, how does FEAST partners envision to put the issue of bridging the digital divide into those governments agendas?

This can only be done by the African partners in their respective governments. In some countries (e.g. Kenia, Rwanda. Malawi) there is already quite an awareness in the governments. The establishment of NRENs which show that a cooperative approach is much more effective than individual approaches helps to convince governments to acknowledge the importance activities to overcome the digital divide.

Currently there are just a few NRENs in the sub-Saharan region, 10 of them gathered in the UnbuntuNet Alliance. How has been perceived the FEAST study in those countries that don't have an NREN, do they value positively the idea of counting with a regional backbone interconnected to GÉANT in the future or are they reluctant? Do they see the importance of having this kind of connection? Which are their main doubts and needs?

As the FEAST study deliberately covers countries that either have already established an NREN or are in the process of doing so, I cannot really answer this question. I think the best way to convince governments and other stakeholders who are still hesitant is to demonstrate the importance by “success stories” in a similar way as CLARA is doing in Latin America.

In terms of applications, your area, which would you say are currently the applications that are more needed?

What we need are applications that have a visible impact on the development of the most problematic areas in these countries which are education, health, agriculture and the environment. Applications that help researchers to cooperate with researchers in Europe and other parts of the world in these areas are most important.

Do you think that the broad international community -not only Europe- has something to do in order to help Africa in this process of advanced connection?

Definitely: Yes. As FEAST is a European funded project the main focus is of course on cooperation and collaboration between Europe and Africa. But it is most important – and even requested – that also other continents are getting involved. Especially those that have experienced similar problems and can therefore contribute even better than Europe.

What could Latin America, the community gathered in CLARA and in the ALICE2 project, do in order to contribute to the FEAST activities?

I think there are a lot of similarities between the experience made in the ALICE projects and CLARA and the activities planned in FEAST. The establishment of personal contacts between people involved in CLARA, ALICE, EELA, etc, and people involved in the FEAST activities would in my opinion be the best way to contribute. This kind of contribution has already started e.g. with holding a Grid-workshop in Malawi in November 2008

and could be extended by various kinds of cooperation between application activities in the area of, health, climate research and others.

What do you think has the rest of the world has to learn from the experience that you have had in FEAST?

This is a very broad question but I think what the world can learn from activities like FEAST, ALICE and others is that even though it is sometimes very difficult to put individual interests aside, it is worth to try hard to come together, cooperate and work together. It is eventually for the benefit of all.

For more information about FEAST, please visit <http://www.feast-project.org/>.