
AFRICA: Digital library expansion underway

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A two-year programme aimed at establishing and expanding digital libraries in Africa is underway and is expected to run until the end of next year. The initiative by the Southern African Greenstone Support Network, or SAGSN, follows a pilot project undertaken during 2007 and 2008 in 11 African countries.

Greenstone is a suite of open source software for building and distributing digital library collections that is produced by the New Zealand Digital Library Project at the University of Waikato. Its development and distribution is being done in cooperation with the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) and the Human Info NGO.

In an interview with *University World News* Amos Kujenga, SAGSN regional coordinator, said the SAGSN initiative was aimed at promoting the establishment of digital libraries using Greenstone Digital Library Software.

"Digital libraries are an effective way for libraries in higher education to support teaching, learning and research," said Kujenga, who is also a systems analyst at Zimbabwe's National University of Science and Technology (NUST).

This month, he added, SAGSN expects to draw conclusions on expressions of interest to become National Centres received from Kenya and Senegal.

The librarian added that between 2007 and 2008 **Electronic Information for Libraries** (eIFL), a non-profit organisation that supports the wide availability of electronic library resources in transition and developing countries, facilitated a Greenstone pilot project to train librarians and archivists from Southern African countries including Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

That project resulted in the formation of a regional support network consisting of five national centres at university libraries or affiliated organisations in Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

"The success of the pilot led directly to the formation of the Southern African Greenstone Support Network in late 2008," Kujenga added.

SAGSN paved the way for the current 2009-2010 initiative that is at strengthening the existing national centres and networks in Southern Africa through centre-specific investments and activities, as well as extending the network to other African countries.

The project also seeks to "work towards a self-reliant and self-sufficient network of national centres in a broad landscape of libraries, archives and museums," Kujenga added.

Information posted on the Greenstone website says the aim of the Greenstone software is to empower users, particularly in universities, libraries and other public service institutions, to build their own digital libraries. It says the software has been used to radically reform how information is disseminated and acquired in the fields of education, science and culture around the world, and particularly in developing countries.

The establishment of the Greenstone project in Africa was largely as a result of the efforts of Dynal Patel, who in 2004 was a senior student in computer science at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

That year Patel proposed the need for a Greenstone organisation in Africa whose main aim would be to support African users to establish and develop digital library projects. Patel's proposal was supported by Unesco in the form of a grant to the University of Waikato, which commissioned a **study** that recommended the initiative.

In August this year, *University World News* **reported** that an international conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, had recommended the urgent setting up of an African digital library and archives programme. It argued that the continent lacked a comprehensive system for accessing and storing information.

The conference suggested that the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) champion the initiative as the continent is lagging behind in the global drive to build digital libraries and archives.