




# AFRICA COMMONS

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## BASELINE REPORT

<https://africacommons.net>

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Digitisation provides a platform for discovery of the special and hidden African collections. Africa Commons through Coherent Digital uses technology to enhance quick meta data processing and enhance discovery, while using simplified and reduced cost scanners.

## Introduction

The voices of Africans telling their own stories have over the decades been accessible locally as most collections have not been published using formal channels and where published, the digital copies are not easily accessible. However, there is a need to tell these stories globally. In most cases these collections are only available in hard copy format. Making these collections available digitally enables access while at the same time giving a global voice to the writers of the stories.

There are however several challenges within African institutions that pose a hurdle to digitizing their collections. These challenges mainly include;

- Limited financial resources to purchase digitizing equipment and software
- Lack of appropriate infrastructure
- Lack of professional capacity to initiate, implement and sustain a digitisation project. There is a need for capacity building to enable skills for preserving collections electronically.



Digitisation is one of the advanced methods of managing information resources. It helps improve visibility and availability of information materials. In developed countries, national libraries and other research libraries are engaged in projects to digitize significant collections reflecting the history and culture of their respective countries. There is a need for African institutions to also engage in such projects as it enables preservation of special collections and gives Africa an opportunity to be proactively involved in the development of the Global Information Infrastructure.

Coherent Digital is an organization that provides digitisation services for special collections. The organisation finds the items, digitizes them, licenses them, indexes them, and links to them. Some are openly available, others behind paywalls. Some have been digitized for the first time, while many are recovered from CD-ROMs and hard disks. The system enriches the content using Artificial Intelligence and other automated tools and produces curated collections that is available to researchers and students on easy-to-use, discipline-specific web platforms. The Africa Commons project was launched with this background and potential solution in mind.

Africa Commons provides an opportunity to make visible Africa's special and endangered collections digitally, using low-cost infrastructure and at a higher speed. To establish the project there was a need to do a baseline study to understand current scenarios, map them against the literature and find institutions that are ready to digitize. An online survey titled '*Providing Access and telling the stories of Africa: A digitisation approach*', was launched to over 176 unique institutions. This was sent around at least three times,

and emails, phone calls (where possible) and virtual meetings augmented the survey to better understand the current contexts within the African institutions.

This report presents findings from this survey, analyses the data, and provides recommendations as a way forward.

The target of the baseline was libraries, museums, and other related heritage institutions in the Southern and Eastern Africa regions. This included national libraries, national archives, museums, university libraries, private libraries, and church libraries. A total of 176 unique institutions were contacted via email to introduce the project, provide details and to access the survey link. A reminder was sent thrice which was augmented by phone calls where possible. Three library consortiums circulated the message on their mailing lists. The survey took an average of 15minutes to complete. The completion was done on behalf of each institution by a designated official. The survey had a 18% response rate and about half of which engaged further on email, with some requesting virtual meetings.

**The countries that responded are:**

- Uganda
- Lesotho
- Ethiopia
- Botswana
- Eswatini
- Zimbabwe
- Liberia\*
- Ghana\*
- Namibia
- Malawi

\*Two of these countries are from West Africa, which shows some cascade in the communication channels and an interest from that region.



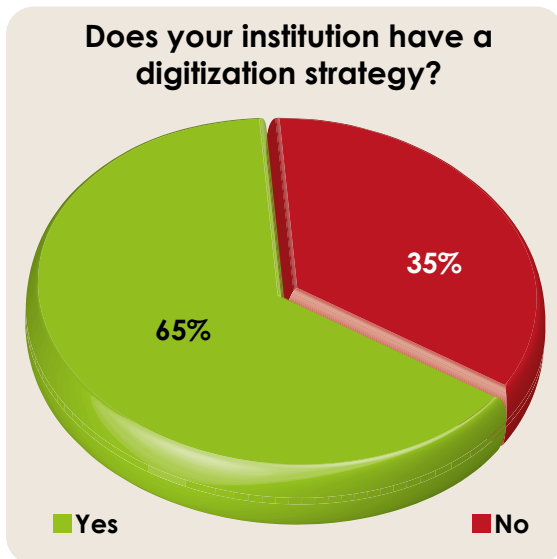


A total of 28 institutions responded to the survey, with a further 3 coming from duplicate institutions from different departments. The following institutions responded to the survey:

<b>Table 1: Responding Institutions</b>
<b>Ghana Library Authority</b>
<b>Busitema University</b>
<b>Lerotholi Polytechnic</b>
<b>Addis Ababa University</b>
<b>Botswana International University of Science and Technology</b>
<b>University of Eswatini</b>
<b>Lesotho College of Education</b>
<b>National Library &amp; Documentation Service / National Free Library of Zimbabwe</b>
<b>Africa University</b>
<b>National University of Lesotho</b>
<b>African Methodist Episcopal University</b>
<b>University of Liberia</b>
<b>Uganda Martyrs University</b>
<b>Busitema University</b>
<b>Makerere University</b>
<b>National Agricultural Research Organisation</b>
<b>Busitema University Library*</b>
<b>Bishop Stuart University</b>
<b>National Library of Namibia</b>
<b>Mzuzu University</b>
<b>University of Malawi, Chancellor College</b>
<b>Malawi Adventist University</b>
<b>Saint John of God College of Health Sciences</b>
<b>Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources</b>
<b>National Archives of Malawi</b>
<b>University of Livingstonia: Kaning'ina Campus</b>
<b>Kamuzu University of Health Sciences*</b>
<b>Mzuzu University*</b>
<b>Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (Formerly Kamuzu College of Nursing and Malawi College of Medicine)</b>
<b>University of Malawi Library</b>
<b>Pentecostal Life University</b>

It is essential to understand the institutional strategies regarding digitisation to establish the priorities and commitment to providing access to collections. A majority of the institutions (n=65%), have an existing institutional strategy. However, having an institutional digitisation strategy does not mean it has been implemented.

**Figure 1: Existing digitization strategy**



The survey results show that the main and most common obstacle mitigating digitisation for the institutions is a lack of appropriate infrastructure. Most institutions highlighted the need for them to have scanners and computers to use in the digitisation process. Some alluded the lack of servers and appropriate software to sustain digitisation. Other institutions pointed out the challenge of a lack of funds to start the digitisation process. National libraries and archival institutions work with shrinking budgets as their main sources of funding is government and incorporating digitisation to that budget becomes a challenge. There is also lack of expertise and professional capacity when it comes to initiating, implementing, and sustaining a digitisation project. One of the institutions emphasized on the need for creating awareness first on the need to digitize its collections as most of the staff do not understand the importance of the concept of digitisation. This points to the need for awareness and change management as part of the capacity building.



**Table 2: Digitization Needs and Challenges**

<b>In what ways do you need help to digitise your African Collections?</b>
Insufficient funds to purchase digitisation equipment
Insufficient funds to purchase appropriate software
By providing up to date machinery and solutions
I need skills and equipment such as scanners and software to implement the digitisation plan
We want you help us in digitalizing our students ' thesis.
We need to assess and evaluate which material is eligible for digitization within the copyright law of our country Botswana
We need scanners and a server for the digitization of the Special collections
we require a scanner and the software to digitize.
Scan the documents
Equipment to digitize our African collections
We would need to be assisted in the form of equipment for digitisation
Technical and financial support
We a Library Management software, equipment and capacity building.
The collection belong to a sister institution that are still operating within the traditional methods of manual systems.
My current need is to create awareness amongst these people about the advantages of digitizing their material
By providing technical support and tools for digitizing the resources
We need capacity building and if possible support with equipment.
We have a lot of publications that are grey literature and we wish to scan and produce digital copies of these to ease the sharing to them over online platforms
We need a modern digitalization equipment and skills training though some staff have moderate skills
Training
Infrastructure in form of scanners and computers with big space to keep and access the digitised information
Funding
Copyright issues
Equipment
Equipment and expertise
A working scanning machine that scans multiple pages automatically instead of manually plus a UPS and server computer and an air conditioner to keep the machine cool. Training for the personnel is also essential.
Equipment, Resources as well as expertise
Identifying digital library software. Installation and customisation of digital library platform.
Using the system.
We need a modern scanner so that we are able to digitize our reading materials (especially local collection) with speed, the one we have is slow and the quality is poor.
Provision of equipment
Resources for the whole processes
Human resource training
Policy drafting and implementation
Equipment
Technical support to help in the maintenance of DSpace software.
Financial support to help us rigorously help faculty to embrace the strategy.
Training of staff in digitization process and dissemination of the digitized items
Digitizing equipment to digitize our collection (Powerful automatic scanners and other items)
Improve our ICT infrastructure to support the digitization process (severs, backups, batteries etc)
Steady power supply
Collaboration on the provision of digitized content for online access

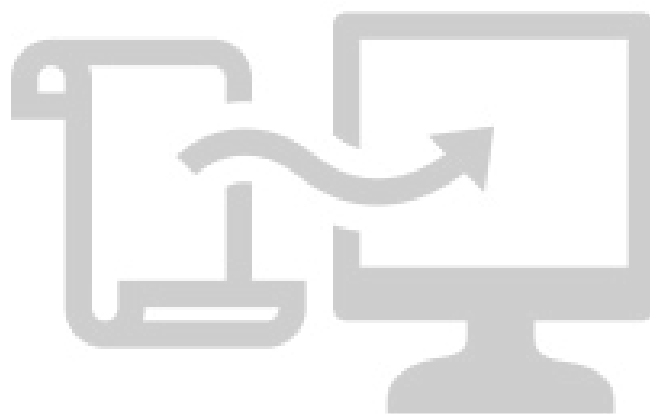


One of the challenges identified is an understanding of the copyright laws of the countries and how digitisation works within these laws. This is critical as most copyright laws on the continent are old and do not incorporate or are ambiguous on digital resources. The need for access to steady electricity supply was also identified as this affects the digitisation process, but more importantly access by the users.

The survey also sought to understand the types of collections needing digitisation. The institutions have a mix of dissertations, thesis, historical documents, manuscripts, government publications and rare collections that mostly qualify as archival material, as their priority collections. A majority of these collections are categorized under Special Collections. One institution pointed out that they have historical periodicals which have ceased publication and date back to 1904. In order to preserve such collections better, whilst allowing access there is need for digitisation. The other types of collections identified include images and photographs, articles, journals, speeches, pamphlets and periodicals.

**Table 3: Summary of Findings on Top 5 Collections**

<b>Magazines and Newspapers</b>
<b>Manuscripts</b>
<b>Dissertations and Thesis</b>
<b>Historical Documents</b>
<b>Government Publications</b>
<b>Archival Materials (rare collection)</b>
<b>Speeches</b>
<b>Periodicals and Pamphlets</b>
<b>Past exam papers</b>
<b>Grey Literature</b>
<b>Articles and Journals</b>
<b>Images and Photographs</b>
<b>Artifacts</b>
<b>Audio Visuals</b>



The most common subject areas identified are agriculture and history. One of the libraries identified historical images of missionary work, and battles in their Special Collections. Table 4 provides a summary of the main subject areas identified.

**Table 4: Summary of Subject Areas of Collections**

<b>Agriculture</b>
<b>Science and Technology</b>
<b>Health</b>
<b>Education</b>
<b>Political Science</b>
<b>Religion</b>
<b>Art and Humanities</b>
<b>Geography</b>
<b>Engineering</b>
<b>Management</b>
<b>Literature</b>
<b>History</b>
<b>Environmental Studies</b>
<b>Sociology</b>
<b>Development Studies</b>





It was critical to understand the research value of the collections identified for digitisation. As value is subjective, the responses differed widely and there is a need to get in-depth understanding on these collections. Table 5 shows the research value of the collections.

**Table 5: Research Value of the collections identified**

<b>What is the research value of these collections?</b>
<b>For consultations by researchers and scholars</b>
Research, teaching, learning, potential funding, risk assessment
<b>Institutional memory</b>
They have historical value and cannot be replaced once damaged
Most of them are of historical value and for reference
<b>These are materials that you cannot find even with publishers anymore. They are rare books and documents.</b>
The material is of research value because some records were created during the course of the events which were taking place at that time. The narration and documentation of the events was done as the events were in progress. Furthermore, some of these records were created by the actual people involved in the changing of the course of history for example letters and agreements written by Cecil John Rhodes and Bishop Hartzell making them very rare and unique. This qualifies them to be primary sources which had not been tempered with and not have been edited. They give the actual information without any other scholar interpreting them because they carry the actual hand writings and signatures of the record creators. They give the actual dates, amounts of money involved, names of people involved, terms and conditions and signatures without any bias hence forth making them authentic. The material gives a narration of cultural dilution in the Mutasa community through the coming in of Cecil John Rhodes and Bishop Hartzell. It gives evidence of the socio-political changes which took place during colonization as the native black community encountered the foreign white race. We see the change in statesmanship as the tradition ruling system of chieftdom ships is being override by the government system being introduced by Cecil John Rhodes. The material is of cultural value for it narrates the religious transition which took place during this period as focus is shifted from the local native religion to the newly introduced Christian religion. The long-term accessibility and preservation of these documents will provide unhindered remote access to a wider base of users.
<b>They help researchers to identify potential research gaps</b>
Rare books that are not in print anymore.
They are used as a base for further research on the indigenous knowledge
They are very valuable as most of them repackage the results of research for dissemination to farmers and policymakers.
<b>They act as reference repositories for scholars, students and academic staff engaged in research</b>
<b>They are original to BSU have been subject to plagiarism</b>
Highly important, We are a repository library with services offered to the public, researchers, historians and politicians. The space is an issue as this materials are of great value and therefore cannot be weeded out as public and national documentation can be lost forever.
<b>Malawi history and institutional memory</b>
Students will not duplicate research
<b>It will keep the history of the Seventh Day adventist church and the university</b>
Help to improve practice in health facilities.
Brings new policy after the change.
<b>There is a lot of research value from the said publications from researchers and teaching staff as most of it contains primary data</b>
Colonial administrative history and early missionary work in Malawi, and general history
<b>They contribute new knowledge to the already existing in different fields of study</b>
To provide access to research outputs for further research and avoid repetition
<b>Have historical value</b>
Largely, all our collections if well utilised might greatly help towards the improvement of health care in Malawi and beyond.
<b>Researchers, academicians, students and the general public use our collection to do their research. The Malawiana collection is the backbone of research activities in the university.</b>
They provide Malawi Scholarly Content

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD



### Recommendations and Way Forward

The Africa Commons project provides an opportunity to African academic, cultural and heritage institutions to preserve and provide access to their otherwise hidden collections. All the institutions that responded have collections that need to be digitized and all of them are interested in engaging further with Coherent Digital via Africa Commons. There is a need to design the project further taking into consideration regional and country nuances.

It is key that Africa commons moves forward with engaging each institution individually with objectives to:

- Understand further the current state of the identified collections
- Understand the existing infrastructure
- Understand the existing staff and capacity building needs
- Understand the copyright laws of each country that responded
- Break down the processes of digitisation to allow institutions to start at the paces according to their capacities
- Formalize agreements with the interested institutions
- Provide the infrastructure where possible
- Engage local partners who can do the manual work when needed
- Help institutions review their digitisation strategies to enable implementation

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this baseline study has clearly shown the need for digitisation within the Southern and Eastern Africa regions. It has helped identify the gaps, the nuances of each institution and country, the opportunities, and the demand for digitisation. These will need varied approaches in order for implementation to take place. Preservation of these collections is urgent as most are brittle and not properly stored due to poor infrastructure. Equity and access are key priorities for all these institutions and the need to showcase African collections cannot be over emphasized.



