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A Revised FILM FILM Policy for Ghana

Film in Ghana will definitely take a different direction if the draft of a National Film Policy for Ghana currently under debate and study is adopted and becomes operative.

The draft policy recognising the economic and cultural potential of film and video in Ghana seeks 'to strengthen the role of the public and private sectors in the production, marketing, promotion, distribution and exhibition of film and video in Ghana'.

Objectives

The policy hopes to achieve this by evolving a dynamic, economically self-sustaining and culturally-conscious industry, which will among other things make film and video a vehicle for public enlightenment, education, entertainment as well as promoting national pride and unity. The creation of a favourable investment climate in addition to the requisite infrastructure, training and appropriate administrative machinery will ensure the attainment of the set objectives.

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The Ghana Film Industry Corporation

The policy recognises the contributions of existing institutions to the effective operation of the draft policy. The GFIC, which is a government corporation slated for conversion into a limited liability company under the State Owned Enterprise Conversion Act of 1993, will among other business functions provide equipment and laboratory facilities, crew syndication and consultancy for film and video.

The National Film and Television Institute (NAFTIF) will continue with its training of personnel to cope with the growth and sustainability of the industry.

The policy seeks to make it mandatory for all TV stations in Ghana to allot 40% of their features'

transmission time for local productions. It further encourages the formation of an association of film and video exhibitors and distributors to enable local productions to reach many parts of the country through regional and district viewing centres to be built.

The draft policy gives recognition to the Film Guild of Ghana as an umbrella organisation of all involved in the making of films and videos in Ghana. The Guild among others will have to ensure professionalism in the industry in Ghana.

National Film Board

The main thrust of the policy is the proposed National Film Board of ten made up of representatives from recognised institutions and identifiable bodies in the industry, the Ministry of Information and government appointees to work with a permanent secretariat.

The functions of the Board will include advising and representing government on matters relating

to the industry; aiding in the administering of code of ethics and the maintenance of standards in production. It will also be expected to conduct research in film and video, promote Ghanaian productions on international markets and collaborate with copyright administrators in the compliance of laws on piracy and disbursement of royalties.

Some functions assigned the Board could be a duplication of the work of other existing institutions or bodies. For example, acting 'as an arbiter in all matters relating to the production, distribution and exhibition of film and video', strays into the Office of the Copyright Administrator and the law enforcement agencies.

The Board is also supposed to 'ensure the maintenance of the highest technical standard for all local productions'. How does it achieve this? At the same time the policy recognises the Film Guild of Ghana as an overseer of this area. Wouldn't there be a clash somewhere as who is competent enough to dictate standards in the profession?

NAFTI is recognised by the draft policy as the professional training outfit in the country and yet the Board is asked to 'set standards for training'.

National Film Archive

The National Film Board is to assist in establishing a National Film Archive. However, no mention is made of how it is to be set up. Who is to establish it and how is it to operate? Does the existing National Archives have the capability of modern film and video storage and cataloguing? It is disturbing how the policy recognises the potential of film and video as tools for the preservation and dissemination of our cultural heritage and yet does not place much weight on archiving and preservation.

National Film/Video Fund

The most interesting aspect of the draft policy to Ghanaian filmmakers is the proposed National Film and Video Fund to be overseen and administered by the National Film Board. This raises a lot of concerns, comments as well as criticisms.

Unless there will be no Board member who is actively involved in production, distribution or exhibition, there is bound to be some undue advantage in the disbursement of the Fund. The National Film Board is supposed to compose of experts in the field to handle matters concerning all aspects of film and video in the country. These will surely be film directors/producers, writers, media practitioners, scholars, etc. What happens when a member of the Board applies for funding for a production? Does he sit on the assessment of his

own work? The criteria for example to be used in the evaluation of applications for funding is not covered by the policy but rather left for the Board to formulate and implement.

It should however be possible for the Board to be made to undertake the initial professional assessment and screening of applications on the basis of quality and standards with the expertise at their disposal and a separate three-man committee operating outside the Board handling the final allocation and disbursement of the Fund.

The sources for servicing the Fund are very elaborately identified. These include a government grant, 50% of entertainment tax on film and video shows, 50% of fees charged on cinematographic products either locally manufactured or imported, interest on loans taken from the Fund and revenue from specialised events and souvenirs under the industry.

The private sector is also listed in line with encouraging private investment and they are to enjoy tax relief on their contributions to the Fund. Additionally, non-governmental and foreign organisations and agencies are also expected to contribute with reference to current active roles they are playing in many sectors of the country.

Film and Video exhibitors and distributors are required under the policy to assist the Fund by buying rights for premiere showings. The policy should however further ask them to contribute a small percentage of their profits to the Fund in order to sustain the industry as they stand to lose if no productions come out. Beneficiaries of the Fund should also be made to repay their loans within specified time in order for others to benefit. This will prevent total depletion of the coffers of the Fund.

Historical development

The GFIC possessed the best cinematographic infrastructure in the sub-Saharan region when it was established during the colonial era. It continued to operate and assist in national and international drive of the policies of Nkrumah after independence, especially with the production of documentaries and newsreels. It also provided training grounds for Ghanaian filmmakers in the late 60s through the 70s. Successive governments however did not give it the needed attention and as such it went obsolete. Film production in Ghana therefore came to rest on the shoulders of individuals who could brace the storm with all sorts of funding methods. Ghanaian films that lifted high the nation's flag in international circles have all been privately produced with no state support.

The proliferation of video production in Ghana was also by private individuals, mostly amateurs with low-cost equipment. Currently, the modern-equipped production studios in Ghana are all privately owned. The banks in Ghana still do not see the economic viability of film and video production and so will not easily grant you loans as they do for other businesses. Standards and quality work have been sacrificed in the face of financial constraints.

A National Film/Video Fund is therefore a very welcome idea whose birth is long overdue. Filmmakers would no longer have to compromise on artistic excellence due to inadequate funding. However this Fund raises many questions not covered by the draft policy, especially its disbursement criteria. Will it seek to assist only established and experienced filmmakers who have marketing potentials and ignore newly-trained and inexperienced ones badly in need of exposure and some good start? What about productions of national significance politically, socially and culturally but commercially not very promising? What will be the ratio of documentaries to features, celluloid to video?

The draft policy is still under scrutiny. The Goethe Institute in Ghana in conjunction with the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI), Ghana Films Industry Corporation Limited (GFIC) and the Ministry of Information, organised a two-day seminar (10-11 June) in Accra on the draft policy. It was led by a German expert on film policy and promotion, Prof. Klaus Keil, also the Executive Director of the Filmboard Berlin Brandenburg. It was well attended by filmmakers, scholars and policy makers.

It is hoped that the final draft policy will be in a better shape judging from the trend of the debates going on amongst those concerned. Thus if it becomes Law after passing through Parliament it would revamp the industry and raise professional levels on the video scene in Ghana. This will definitely affect the future of cinema on the African continent as a whole. **GR**

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