

Many filmmakers rely on a variety of financial avenues to get their films made and globally, film funds are one of the crucial ways many African filmmakers get to make their films. There are a variety of funds that support the development and growth of an African film industry and identity. *Screen Africa* examines some of the funds that are open to Africa.

Global fund reaches out

The Global Film Initiative is based in the US and offers production grants twice a year to filmmakers whose work exhibits artistic excellence, authentic self-representation and accomplished storytelling. The aim of the initiative is to contribute to the development of local film industries while offering audiences a variety of cultural perspectives.

Santhosh Daniel, director of programmes, explains that they have supported a number of films that represent a broad cross-section of Africa, including projects by many first-time directors and emerging women directors. “A number of these, such as *Another Man’s Garden* (Joao Sol de Carvalho, Mozambique) and *Hollow City* (Maria Joao Ganga, Angola) have been distributed through our Global Lens film series, a touring series of films from Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. They have been afforded the opportunity for wide exposure in the US and Canada.”

Africa can often be stereotyped as films on civil war, HIV/Aids, and poverty seem to be how people perceive the continent. Daniel says that they do not attempt to restrict what African films should be. “We do not have a standardised set of criteria and evaluation. As such, we don’t have a ‘type’ that we typically consider for grants. We place equal value on political and social perspectives as much as artistic vision, and oftentimes search for films that are unusual in cultural and aesthetic scope, so as to

support filmmakers working with non-traditional narrative structure.”

The Global Film Initiative has supported films from all over Africa. “They all range in theme and topics. Some of these include *The Fifth String* (Selma Bargach – Morocco) which is a triptych about faith and *Waiting the Vote* (Missa Hebie – Burkino Faso), which is a political narrative about a dictator of a fictitious nation whose rise and fall is mysteriously guided by the force of a sacred meteorite.”

Daniel explains that they are ultimately looking for films “that have well developed narratives, a deep and unique understanding of visual storytelling, a strong sense of place or voice and a very specific lens by which a landscape and culture can be experienced”.

Asked whether there is a Eurocentric expectation on what types of stories should be coming out of Africa, Daniel responds: “I wouldn’t define the view as singularly ‘Eurocentric,’ as all cultures outside of Africa tend to expect a certain standard redemptive, inspirational or politically brutal story from the continent. Asia is almost indistinguishable from Latin and North America in its approach to Africa, and the same can be said for Europe and the Middle East. So, rather than ‘Eurocentric’ I’d say that there is an ‘underdeveloped’ view of what types of stories should be coming out of Africa.

“I say this because although much of the world is intent on helping Africa – either in the form of monetary aid, or social, political and economic reform and revitalisation – most populations do not regard Africa and its people as a society with history, culture and ultimately, very personal stories to be told. This is ironic, as storytelling in African culture is entrenched in human evolution as any other culture, but as the continent is almost singularly approached via its need for physical survival, it’s not uncommon for the world outside of Africa to expect films that address these humanitarian concerns with equal urgency.”

Unique style

Daniel believes that Africa has over the years developed its own unique style of storytelling. “This is especially true of sub-Saharan Africa. The continent does seem to have developed a distinct style guided by the more modern phenomenon of television serials and soap operas, and the tradition of the ‘storyteller’ or griot. The griot is a uniquely African style of storytelling that for years has been regarded as the crucible, guardian and purveyor of

Tribeca an open forum

The Tribeca Film Festival takes place in Manhattan, New York. The Festival was launched in 2002 by Robert de Niro, Jane Rosenthal and Craig Hatkoff with the aim of showcasing films from around the world.

Artistic director Beth Janson says that they support films, “which are artistically significant but also accessible to a wide audience. I believe it is evident that Africa is making its mark as this year a short film from South Africa, *Father Christmas Doesn’t Come Here* (Bhekumuzi Sibiyi), won the Best Narrative Short Film.”

Janson explains that they have funded a variety of international films. “Some of the better known ones include the documentaries *The Oath* (Laura Poitras) and *Fixer: The Taking of Ajmal Naquishbandi* (Ian Olds). Narrative films have included *Entre Nos* (Paola Mendoza and Gloria LaMorte) and *Amreeka* (Cherien Dabis). These films all have a clear and strong story arc but leave a lot of room for nuance.”

Janson believes that the perceptions that people have of Africa, “often do not reflect the diversity of the continent. I think there is a need to support independent film movements across Africa, those that are more established and those that are just starting to take root. I also think that it is very difficult to generalise about a ‘unique African style’ as each region has identifying characteristics. That said, filmmaking in Africa definitely has European roots and the language of cinema is still very much about the picture. When you are watching an African film I find you have to adjust how you listen; you listen with your eyes as much as you do with your ears.”

Janson says she has noticed that “outsiders are telling African stories. I don’t think that anyone should be excluded from telling any story, but when there is a lack of balance of who is telling the story, that needs to be addressed.”

The biggest challenge is accessing an American audience. “We have not yet found an African filmmaker who can reach an American audience. There is a small audience for foreign films in the US, and the challenge is not to reach that audience, but how to move beyond that audience. The Tribeca Film Festival wants to fund films that won’t just preach to the choir, but have the capacity to resonate more broadly.

“I am excited about the next decade. I want to see what happens to cinema as more cross-cultural exchange happens on the continent itself. I think that the current generation is taking the opportunity to learn from a rich European cinematic history while also engaging with a totally international culture online. There are a lot more African filmmakers that tend to approach the festival than in the past.”

African history, and has no modern comparison stylistically. An audience must imagine an individual recounting a story verbally without the traditional ‘narrative arc’ associated with Western storytelling. This oral tradition is the backbone of African culture, and in their attempt to merge this cultural phenomenon with more contemporary forms of visual storytelling, African filmmakers have evolved a truly unique cinematic style that is very compelling – albeit not universally appreciated – merging the past and the present.”

Some of the main themes to emerge from Africa, according to Daniel, revolve around civil conflict, the effects of war on individuals, strong contemporary social themes which involve immigration/migration, women’s rights, health and in recent years, gangsterism and crime.

Asked about the challenges of

funding African films, Daniel says that many African filmmakers do not have a local industry infrastructure that keeps them aware of funding opportunities. “As such, our primary challenge is finding and notifying filmmakers that funds are available. The challenge is also to find African filmmakers and producers working in Africa, as opposed to those working in the US or Europe.”

The revered Senegalese filmmaker Ousame Sembene once said that ‘funds’ make beggars out of Africans. Daniel responds: “This is always an interesting question to consider, and I think it truly depends on how the funds are given: to support growth of African cinema or to seed and appropriate stories that support a western notion of Africa and ultimately, prove to be more profitable for the world external to Africa, than Africa itself.”

For more information on the funds discussed, see:

- Hubert Bals – www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com
- Global Film – www.globalfilm.org
- Berlinale WCF – www.berlinale.de
- Tribeca – www.tribecafilm.com
- ACP Film – www.acpfilms.eu

ACP promotes cultural values

ACP Films is a programme of the Group of African Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP) implemented by the ACP Secretariat and financed under the 9th European Development Fund (EDF). The objectives of the fund are to recognise, preserve and promote cultural values and identities from these regions.

Moussa Swandago of ACP Films says the aim is to develop the audiovisual sector in these regions. "We offer support on three levels, for production and post-production (€3.8m), promotion, distribution, dissemination and networking of the ACP cinema (€1.7m) and the support of professional development and training of ACP professionals in the cinema and audiovisual sector (€1m)."

The content ACP Films seeks "are full-length feature films, animation (short and medium length). With regards to documentaries we look for both medium and long format but exclude things like reporting, television magazine programmes and institutional films," says Swandago. "We also finance the production of TV films, fiction series, documentary series and animation series (only series that include a minimum of six episodes are eligible for the support programme. However, mini-series of at least three episodes may also be taken into account if the length of each episode is more than 30 min).

Selection criteria

"Selection criteria are based firstly on relevance and action. This means we consider the problems of a region or state to those of the target groups and beneficiaries in particular. Others include effectiveness and feasibility, sustainability and eligibility."

Applicants need to be nationals of a Member State of the ACP Group or of the EU. It is critical that they are a properly constituted legal person for 12 months from the launch date of the call for proposals and capable of producing a balance sheet or progress and financial report. They also need to show that they have sufficient sources of funding to ensure the continuity of their organisation throughout the action for which the grant is sought. They must demonstrate sufficient experience.


Swandago comments that African cinema today is characterised by its youth. "There is a new generation of filmmakers and new tools have emerged, particularly digital technology. There is a generational movement with passion and an incredibly strong link between them, irrespective of country. This is promising."

"This new generation is characterised by its age (about 40). Looking very closely we see that they have studied cinema very little but they are eager to make important films, related to their own history and to Africans' realities. They convey fresh ideas and their works are not a cinema of representation or academic. There is a certain radicalism in terms of form, which makes each film unique. The films' characters give them a generational identity. Another element is the freedom of these films. The filmmakers act on a long-standing need to make a film. This is a cinema of need, a lightweight and free cinema that results in very good films."

Any themes suitable

Themes tend to be about African history and reality. "These are works that carry within them the fight against poverty because they are about Africa. However I must stress that filmmakers are free to submit any proposals."

The biggest problem with the development of African cinema is the lack of funds. "This situation will be addressed by setting up a constant and consistent economy in the production sector. To do this, we are taking care to develop sources of financing and the economy of distribution."

"We believe that the future of African cinema is promising. Filmmakers show more daring in their themes and their views. New information and communication technologies provide more opportunities at less cost and at the same time they are diversifying their partnerships and funding sources." 

World Cinema Fund

The German Federal Cultural Foundation and the Berlin International Film Festival partnered in order to set up the World Cinema Fund (WCF) in support of filmmakers from transition countries. The aim of the fund is to produce films which would otherwise not be made. The fund has an annual budget of €500 000 and provides support in the fields of production and distribution.


Vincenzo Bungo, project manager of WCF, explains that the World Cinema Fund looks at funding films from Africa, Latin America, Middle East, Central and South East Asia and countries in the Caucasus region. "Our most important criteria are that the film must portray a strong cultural identity and have a strong visual concept of the director."

Bungo says that some of the films they have supported so far include *Faro* (Salif Traore – Mali) and *Shirley Adams* (Oliver Hermanus – South Africa) "We funded *Faro* because it was a strong script and the story was important outside of Africa. With *Shirley Adams*, this is a film by a talented young filmmaker with a strong voice, a wonderful poetic attitude, an original point of view and a particular sensitivity."

Africa also has many different voices and ways of making films, says Bungo. "It is a huge continent with cultural, geographical and economic differences. We cannot compare film production in Magreb, particularly Morocco, with the Egyptian film industry, or the rare films produced in West Africa with the production realities in South Africa or Nollywood. Diversity should be the richness of African cinema."

Asked what they found to be the main themes coming out of Africa, Bungo says that the question is not easy to answer. "We also do not have priorities. We could say that the challenge isn't to find the ultimate topic or story. The real challenge is to find the right way to tell a particular story. Filmmaking is about finding an interesting film language and the cultural identity of the film. We are interested in themes which are linked with the cultural reality of the country, or a region."

Bungo says that the challenges do not just revolve around content: "We do need better scripts, but there are challenges around the whole infrastructure from screenwriters, directors and producers."

The aim of the WCF is to contribute to African cinema. "We know how difficult the situation is. The continent is huge and has so few cinemas. There is barely a film industry in most of the countries. It would therefore be great if our festivals could screen more African films." 

Hubert Bals Fund

The International Film Festival Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) objective is to bring socially relevant films from developing countries closer to completion. HBF approves grants that often enable filmmakers to realise their projects.

Janneke Langelaan, co-ordinator of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, explains that the HBF is open to a variety of stories and mainly feature length fiction films (documentaries are supported by the Jan Vrijman Fund of the International Documentary Film Association in Amsterdam). "We appreciate original stories and also stories that are authentic and in contact with the culture of origin. However there is no restriction with regards to genre in relation to the origin of a filmmaker."

The HBF has most recently supported the following projects: *Hawi* (Ibrahim El Batout – Egypt – post-production and final financing), *Confusion Na Wa* (Kenneth Gyang – Nigeria – for digital production) and *Ibn Battuta* (Tariq Tegula – Algeria – script and project development). "We have also previously supported *Soul Boy* (Hawa Essuman – Kenya), *Gabbla* (Tariq Tegula – Algeria), *Aujourd'Hui* (Alan Gomis – Senegal) and *Sur La Planche* (Leila Kilani – Morocco) to name but a few."

Langelaan says that these projects were chosen because they are different and exude something special. "The stories are intense, urgent, beautiful or funny. Their images are equally evocative. All of these filmmakers are talented; some are young debutants while others have been around for years."

In 2009 and the start of 2010, HBF has also supported and was involved in the International Film Festival Rotterdam's (IFFR) focus on Africa: Forget Africa. "These films are both short and medium length and are about Africa."

Asked if Africa has developed its own film identity, Langelaan responds: "It may be too early to say. The filmmaking situation in Africa has always been difficult. Not many films have been made when compared for instance to India or East Asian countries. Maybe Nigeria comes the closest as they are prolific."

"Many of the themes that we see are connected with the great issues of the continent. For instance the movement of people from the countryside to the cities which involves changes in tradition and lifestyle."

Regarding funding, Langelaan says that there are opportunities inside and outside Africa. "In Europe there are a number of foundations. However one has to be dedicated as there are bureaucratic issues and one needs to go through the process. I think that the positive for Africa, is technology. Digital has made it easier to shoot and distribute films. More films will be shot which will mean that the quantity and quality will improve. It will also bring greater diversity and we might stop talking about African cinema as a general thing but will see it as lot of different things." 