

Marketing & distribution are significant barriers for SA filmmakers

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Making a film is an outstanding accomplishment, but marketing and distribution are still cited by South African filmmakers as significant barriers to profitability and participation in the global creative industry.



Source: © Durban Film Mart [Durban Film Mart](#)

The push for better access to marketing and distribution platforms is not simply for cultural value or to generate revenue for a few firms.

Economic impact

The economic impact of the film industry can be leveraged to fulfil economic goals. Nearly 70% of the budget for films goes to other sectors.

Additionally, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the film industry contributed R7.2bn in 2019/20 and created or sustained over 31,000 jobs, according to the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) *2021 Economic Impact Assessment Study*. The Covid-19 pandemic hit the film industry hard, declining to R2.9bn in 2020/21 with 12,775 jobs.

However, data from the NFVF going back to 2017 shows that the industry had plateaued in terms of growth - a view backed by UNESCO's *2021 Report on the African Film Industry*.

The Report indicates that while the film and audio-visual sector employs about five million people and contributes an estimated \$5bn to Africa's GDP, this is still far beneath the economic potential of the sector which remains "largely untapped".

Film firms can pursue some strategic actions to realise the higher value and create sustainable enterprises.



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Surge in demand

Filmmakers should create content that appeals to both local and global markets.

The exponential growth of on-demand streamers such as Netflix, Showmax, Amazon, and new entrant Disney+, has led to competition for original content to attract subscribers.

A 2020 study by Netflix estimated that for every local view of a South African title, 26 views were by households outside of the country.

Further, the move locally to digital terrestrial television means that audiences will inevitably discover more channels and content options. South African filmmakers must be well-positioned to take advantage of the surge in demand for new productions.

Explore regional opportunities

South African filmmakers must explore regional opportunities. African countries with varying and dynamic film industry models present the opportunity to cultivate both production and distribution partnerships.

Viewing trends show an increasing demand for South African content in African countries, and cross-boundary productions present great opportunities for South African-produced original content.

IP investment

Film firms should also adopt a strategy to invest in their intellectual property (IP). Limited ownership of IP means that filmmakers are unable to fully capitalise on their products and have less control over distribution.

Firms that participated in the global film value chain research confirmed that because of investment in their IP, they are better positioned to take advantage of global opportunities as they can make more autonomous decisions regarding their content. This element of control in turn improves their ability to become more profitable players in global value chains.

A gateway for filmmakers

Events like the Durban FilmMart (DFM) currently taking place till 31 July, are therefore crucial as they are the gateway for filmmakers to get their products to screens. At the DFM's annual Pitch and Finance Forum, a panel of potential co-producers, sales agents, broadcasters and film funds will assess 20-30 official African fiction and documentary projects in development.

The forum is an opportunity for African filmmakers to find new markets at home and abroad at a time when the digital revolution is pushing audiences to explore new content platforms and the appetite for geographically and culturally diverse content is growing.

In addition to the critical production and funding partnerships derived from exposure at festivals and markets.

Supporting policies

The actions of film firms must also be bolstered by supportive policies.

The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) has helped several firms enter the international market by funding their attendance at international film festivals.

However, an amendment to the current DTIC Rebate and Incentive programme to include incentives for marketing and distribution spend would alleviate some of the challenges faced by production companies related to low demand and limited domestic and global markets.

Potential to transform the SA economy

As film production and consumption evolve, marketing and distributing strategies must also keep in step.

The growth story of Africa's film industry must not end with rising numbers of subscribers to streaming platforms.

Africans are more than consumers; we are creators too.

If filmmakers can distribute their products to the right audiences, our local stories will not only cross cultural and geographic boundaries but will also bring back much-needed revenue and unlock the potential of the film industry to transform the South African economy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zama Mkosi is a qualified media and entertainment lawyer, with over two decades' experience in the creative industries and the CEO/Founder of multiple businesses including MyWord Group - a specialist provider of Film, Television and Entertainment insurance solutions.

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