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## Apt step to making use of showbiz potential

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Film industry in Ethiopia has not yet been given commensurate attention though it is increasingly becoming a rewarding business and a tool for social transformation these days. The country, being the second populous nation with diverse culture in Africa, is far-off in making use of the showbiz potential due to absence of well established institutions which work on the development of the industry. It lacks formal training and its practice remains amateurish. Few attempts being made in film and media production in the country which concentrate relatively solely in the capital — Addis Ababa even seem to be less comprehensive in content, approach and scope.

Mindful of nonexistence of institutions which offer training and create discussion platforms for the betterment of the country's showbiz, Dhaba Wayessa initiated Sandscribe Communications to fill the gap. In fact, it is not the first time for him in contributing to the development of the country's art and culture. Dhaba's pioneer venturing in film and media is founded on his emblematic literary works. Higher learning institutions students and teachers have been using most of his literary works as reference materials in learning and teaching activities. Besides, his works have become the very foundation for Afan Oromo literature and other related art products. He is well known for his novels, a number of radio dramas and the famous staging of his first drama, "Dukkanaan Duuba."

### **Establishment of Sandscribe Communications**

His brief life history shows that Dhaba developed a deep love and passion for literature and arts since he was a student. His industriousness for success through establishing centre which works towards the flourishing of literature, film and media to bring about socio-economic transformation in the country is typical in this regard.

Inspired by the impact of film, television and other media outlets on the social, cultural and political lives of peoples and well aware of lack of opportunities for Ethiopian youth to equip themselves with proper education in film making and TV production on the other hand, Dhaba found that creating training and production opportunities in showbiz industry was decisive.

Sharing ideas with friends and confirming that they do have common vision of film and media development, he established Sandscribe Communications aiming at closing the gap in film and media training as well as production opportunities in Ethiopia. The name "Sandscribe" was inspired by Christ's scribbling in the sand as it was mentioned in the Book of John 8:1-11; which signals the seeking, finding and touching of a human heart for forgiveness and redemption.

Despite its huge population size and its mosaic culture, Ethiopia's showbiz industry is at its infancy. Particularly, due to the age-long question of ethnic self-determination and governance except for some gains since the last two decades, film production in most Ethiopian languages are almost non-existent.

The establishment of Sandscribe Communications is therefore, very important to promote culture of self-expression, articulating own values and bringing important issues to the public mind in this regard.

What Nathaniel Wright, an African-American author of powerful, sometimes controversial novels, short stories and non-fiction said, “Men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread.” This expression holds true here. Besides its source of revenue and job opportunities for citizens, film and other art products are instrumental in nurturing positive social values and self-realization according to Wright. Dead on target, Dhaba’s ardor for establishing Sandscribe Communications is for the same cause. Explaining as to what necessitates for the establishment of Sandscribe Communications, Dhaba said that it is to create a climate for young people to engage in creative and socially responsible films.

According to Sandscribe Communications General Manager Tesfaye Mekonnen, there are very few Ethiopians who have equipped themselves with the proper film education. Apparent problems ranging from lack of appropriate knowledge and skill in the field to technical setbacks have limited the predominantly young Ethiopian filmmakers to amateurish level of production and market of only local consumption.

Sandscribe Communications is, therefore, working to substantially contribute to the development of local film and television industries and to the positive social transformation through quality cultural products such as films and other audiovisuals. It combines research, training, and production. Currently, Sandscribe Communications evolved to the level of engaging both local and international professionals and entrepreneurs, he added.

Offering training and organizing seminars

“We believe that growing market of the media and entertainment industry presents a growing need for quality training and production. Opportunities for jobs in television and movie productions will create revenue for local communities and the nation and will utilize local resources thereby further stimulating the local economy,” Tesfaye remarked.

Sandscribe Communications has been offering short and medium training and workshops on film and media inviting high profile international experts. Three of such workshops ran back in 2010, 2011 and 2012 enabled young Ethiopians interested in making film and media business. A number of young private Ethiopian filmmakers, actors, producers, directors and script writers as well as media practitioners drawn from federal, Addis Ababa City Administration and Oromia TVs, and culture and tourism bureaus have been benefiting from the training.

Sandscribe Communications has also organized seminars aimed at promoting the country’s showbiz industry through exploiting the potential and opportunities in the sector. Indeed, the discussion forums and seminars have brought together stakeholders from academic, business and government offices to properly expedite the development of film industry. One of such seminars was held in the mid December 2014 which attracted young Ethiopian film makers, government officials, business persons and academicians from home and abroad.

On the half day seminar, the question of capital investment and system that governs film business and other relevant issues for film development in Ethiopia was entertained. Professor Stephen Greenwald, Director of Film and Media Initiative at Wagner College of U.S. made relevant speech on the seminar highlighting the business aspect of the industry. He outlined the key ingredients of a sustainable film industry and what he had learned about Ethiopia’s strengths and weaknesses when measured against that standard.

He has been professionally involved in the motion picture and media industries for over thirty years as an attorney, financier, corporate executive and producer. He served as president of Metropolitan College of New York. Stephen is the co-author of “This Business of Film”

(Random House, 2009). Hence, he shared the participants his invaluable experience of various countries concerning film business.

### **An exploratory trip to investigate the possibility of film and media development in Ethiopia**

Prof. Stephen Greenwald was of course in his exploratory trip to investigate the possibility of film and media development in Ethiopia. This writer sat with him to get an insight about the purpose of the team's visit and his observation of the potential of film industry in Ethiopia.

“There is a culture and certainly history of film making in Ethiopia and the potential too. But much of the foundations that you need to develop viable film industry are still missing. If you compare with other countries like Australia [one of the countries he recently visited], a number of film schools have been established and a lot of highly qualified people are in the film industry. They have also government funding programme to encourage film development,” he added.

According to Prof. Stephen Greenwald, there are a number of basic elements important for the development of film industry missing in Ethiopia. These are among others, education and lack of financial resources for private capital markets through government funding to enable the film industry flourishes. “What is important to have here is private capital market, government funding and education for the film industry to flourish. The other missing element is also viable distribution structure. Nevertheless, the potential for film industry, particularly the size of the population is promising,” he commented.

He also explained that upon exploiting the potential, film is a big business for the citizens as a source of employment and revenue stream for the country. It is also a good platform of promoting country's image. “Film industry is clean industry and do not damage environment as it requires only idea and technology,” he added.

Concerning the establishment of Sandscribe Communications, Prof. Stephen Greenwald said it is very important for two reasons. First, it has created a platform where people in the industry interact to share expertise and skills. Second, it is stimulating the conversation on the development of film industry in many ways. Discussion is very important to address the challenges in the industry and bringing as many stakeholders as possible together. “I found in Ethiopia openness and eagerness to discuss and move on to the development of film and media industry. I am happy about that. I am also hopeful to write about the film business and to work with the people in Ethiopia. I foresee film cooperation programme with Ethiopia to build the industry and I will be back,” he added.

Dr. Steven W. Thomas, Professor of Literature and Culture and Director of Film and Media Studies at Wagner College also explains the initiation of Sandscribe Communications and the purpose of their trip to Ethiopia. For him it was for the second time visiting Ethiopia. His first visit was in 2010 when he presented on his subject of scholarly research, “How American Literature Represents Ethiopia,” at Addis Ababa University.

Then, he also attended the international short film festival in Addis Ababa which was aimed at encouraging and developing young talent film makers and actors. The festival included films and filmmakers from all over the world, including Morocco, Australia, Iran, Japan, France, Sudan, China, Brazil, and Kenya.

Three years later, he was working to expand on what Sandscribe has been doing. “There are three goals set to be met as part of the second trip,” Prof. Steven Thomas said: to investigate the potential for film industry development in Ethiopia, to organize seminar and short training

and to investigate and foster possible educational connections and international exchange programmes between Ethiopian and US students. In general, it is an exploratory trip to find out possible film and media development in Ethiopia through relationship between Wagner College and colleges in Ethiopia as well as with Sandscribe Communications just to identify educational connections which bring American and Ethiopian students together.

According to him, in order to grow, film requires some changes and some work from government institutions, business sector and the education sector. All these three sectors need to dialogue and talk about the development of film and possible way of fostering film industry. Some smart conversation can work in addressing the challenges. In this regard, the work of Sandscribe Communications in bringing together pertinent individuals and institutions is commendable. "I think one of the things it is doing is unique in that it is trying to actively connect the art/artistic part, the education part and the business part. It is thinking outside the box and we can predict what can happen in the future," Prof. Steven added.

As a common saying goes, "Mighty oaks from little acorns grow," great things may come from small or modest beginnings. Sandscribe Communications' modest beginning but targeting big in the country's showbiz industry is a pioneer venturing. It is spearheading to establishing academic institute expected to provide rigorous undergraduate and graduate programmes of study in the theory, creative, and technical aspects of filmmaking, television production, and the performing arts. Dhaba's instinctive urge for the growth of art and culture inspired him to work with determination to realize his vision of providing quality training and the production of mature entertainment media and art products in Ethiopia and even beyond.