

Ciné Droit Libre: A Festival of Mobile Cinema Screenings in Burkina Faso

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Mobile Cinema Screenings Are the Way to Go

Ciné Droit Libre is the first film festival committed to the cause of human rights and freedom of expression in French-speaking Africa. It offers a space for open debate on issues of major interest, such as good governance, socioeconomic development, justice, corruption, socio-political crises, etc. First held in 2005 in Burkina Faso, and with its credo “one film, one theme, one debate”, the festival soon became a key player in the area of human rights.

Over the years, the need to involve the population of the inland areas of Burkina Faso has been increasingly felt. In fact, ignorance is rife among the inhabitants of the inland cities. The number of people that have access to socially engaged films is limited, while the lack of a space for expressing opposing points of view has a negative impact on their level of awareness when it comes to human rights issues.

In 2007, Association Semfilms, the organisation behind *Ciné Droit Libre*, organised the mobile cinema

programme for the first time. Mobile cinema screenings very rapidly became a success in Burkina Faso and, what's more, they permitted their organisers to learn about and assess the fundamental rights violations in the rural and remote areas of the West African country.

The mobile cinema programme (referred to in French as *decentralisation*) opens up the debate about all sorts of abuses, the lack of awareness of fundamental rights, the constant fear of speaking out, and serves as an effective remedy for the people. Its aim is to reduce human rights violations by increasing civic education for, and raising public awareness among, both the people and the authorities. The idea is to put the people—and thus human rights—at the centre of concerns. The programme takes into account all of the aspects that contribute to this change in behaviour so that the citizens themselves become the primary advocates of their own rights.

The Organisation of the Mobile Cinema Programme

Each year, in between October and December, the mobile cinema screenings take place in public spaces

in seven Burkina Fasoan cities. Most screenings are open-air screenings. From one year to the next, the cities change, with the exception of Bobo-Dioulasso in the west and Ouahigouya in the north of the country, two cities where Ciné Droit Libre has established film societies. In its initial stages, the organisation of the festival is composed of a small coordination team responsible for the creation of the programme as well as the selection of the cities where the films are to be screened. Once the festival has started, this team is reinforced by other people who have their own specific tasks. Generally, the cities are chosen by taking into account, among others, the following criteria:

- The topicality of the themes and the extent to which they relate to the problems of the respective city
- The theme and the language of the films
- The availability of invited guests who are informed in advance in order to have constructive debates
- The interest shown by civil society partners active in the area of human rights

The equipment used consists of a sound system, a video projector, a generator and a small light unit. We just acquired an open-air cinema. For transport we rent 4x4 vehicles.

Mobilisation Strategy

The mobilisation strategy is based on the public space and its unrestrained access, on the quality of the invited guests (engaged artists that enjoy popular-

ity and well known human rights activists) and on the films whose themes are of interest to the people. The strategy is implemented making use of a communication plan that consists of:

- A radio commercial in French and local languages
- Posters, programme booklets and flyers
- Grass-roots communication throughout the entire city orchestrated by a “town crier” on market days and on the actual day of the festival (special emphasis goes out to this form of communication)

In addition, in the cities where Ciné Droit Libre film societies have been established, the mobile cinema programme is organised in the form of mini festivals that take longer (two to three days) and have more films on offer. At this moment, Ouahigouya and Bobo-Dioulasso are the two cities that are livened up by the monthly activities of these very film societies. Moreover, partnerships with the Olvida Library in Ouahigouya and the French Institute in Bobo-Dioulasso allow Ciné Droit Libre to organise the screenings through adequate frameworks and to benefit from the communication activities of these two institutions free of charge.

Another effective mobilisation strategy upon which Ciné Droit Libre relies upon is the combination of artistic activities and the cinema screenings and debates (film concerts) and above all, performances by committed artists who prove to be very popular, such as Sams’k Le Jah, Smockey, Sana Bob and



Outdoor screenings attract large audience numbers. Photo: Archive of Ciné Droit Libre.

others. Since its inception, Semfilms has supported engaged artists that have been censored by the authorities through the making of video clips or by offering them a stage (during festivals) and a space (web tv: www.droitlibre.tv) for the promotion and distribution of their works.

The film concerts benefit from innovative concepts such as a concert by the Grandes Gueules (“the Loudmouths”) stand-up comedy and the onstage providing of information about human rights. The presence of artists that are renowned among youth, significantly contributes to attracting large crowds.

Since 2013, Ciné Droit Libre has extended its successful concept of the “Festival Village” in Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouahigouya with outdoor screenings in popular neighborhoods. In addition to the screenings, people can have a drink, eat kebabs, watch concerts or stand-up comedy, and participate in discussions. The cinema screenings and debates, along with the concerts, act as a springboard for other forms of communication for the protection of human rights, such as the collection of signatures for petitions, etc. Each night, between 2,000 and 7,000 people attend the activities at the Festival Village.

Obviously, with such big crowds these discussions are different from the discussions we organise indoors. Yet, we manage to organise good discussions with interesting resource people as our guests. Usually, there are also plenty of questions from the audience.

Difficulties Experienced and Lessons Learned

One of the recurrent difficulties of the mobile cinema programme is getting permission to occupy the urban spaces for the film screenings and debates. In some cases, the authorities called the engagement of the festival into question and were reluctant to authorise the occupation of these public spaces. This has led to tough negotiations time and again. To counteract this situation, Semfilms has teamed up with a dozen civil society organisations, like human rights organisations, youth movements, and trade unions, and relies on their efforts and synergy.

These strategic partners of the festival take on the responsibility of requesting authorisation to occupy the public spaces. In return, Semfilms helps out these organisations by making awareness-raising films available to them and by offering them free training courses during the festival on the use of videos and the internet in relation to the promotion of human rights.

Conclusion

Over the last seven years, the extension of the Ciné Droit Libre festival has proved that the mobile cinema programme remains one of the rare opportunities for an open debate in the provinces. It gives a voice to the people of the inlands of Burkina Faso, who, little by little, have overcome their fear and denounced all violations of their fundamental rights. Every year the

festival is taken to seven different cities to screen the best films of the festival. The most popular films are films that focus on land issues, political films on corruption and mismanagement, or movies that portray heroes like former president Thomas Sankara, assassinated journalist Norbert Zongo, former Prime Minister Lumumba of the Republic of Congo, or former South African President Nelson Mandela.

Putting into practice the mobile cinema screenings has allowed Ciné Droit Libre to establish close contact with the isolated inland population. Year after year, the festival has shown its relevance and value to the citizens of Burkina Faso—in particular in the remote areas of the country—and that's why its organisers attach particular importance to it.

A 2013 survey on the impact of the Ciné Droit Libre festival, carried out in the capital Ouagadougou and several other cities where cinema screenings have taken place, reveals that:

- In three years time, the festival has reached out to more than 275,000 people.
- Around 64% of the respondents consider that the festival has instilled in them respect for the values of human rights and freedom of expression.
- Around 41% of the respondents think that the festival has advocated for consolidating the democracy in Burkina Faso.
- Around 35% of the respondents believe that the festival has contributed to good governance.



Performances by engaged artists in Burkina Faso. Photo: Archive of Ciné Droit Libre.