

## COVID-19 PUBLIC STATEMENT

ISSUED BY BULAWAYO CULTURAL AND CREATIVE SECTOR REPRESENTATIVES

DATED: 18 MARCH 2020

For inquiries contact Lisa Sidambe [lisa.interaffairs@nhimbe.org](mailto:lisa.interaffairs@nhimbe.org)

### To:

The Ministry of Youth Sports, Arts and Recreation

National Arts Council of Zimbabwe

Bulawayo City Council

International Partners

International Cooperating Professionals

Cultural and Creative Sector Audiences and Clients

### Background and Context

COVID-19 has significantly impacted arts and culture programming, having implications on mobility, access to public spaces, funding and the flow of cultural goods and services. In various jurisdictions globally, there has been the formulation and implementation of measured responses (mostly by governance structures in the global north) to these disturbances, with a call to tech and creative sectors to join in these concerted efforts, particularly in developing and strengthening digital resilience initiatives for cultural and creative industries ecosystems; to achieve a balanced flow of cultural goods and services in the absence of physical mobility.

In joining in these efforts, Nhimbe Trust convened a meeting for Bulawayo Cultural and Creative Industry actors at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, to facilitate a dialogue on current and prospective ramifications of COVID-19 on programming and ease of doing business in the arts and culture sector. The objective thereof, was to map emergency response strategies in the immediate term, that can be operationalised to mitigate risk and ensure continuity in the sustenance of the livelihoods of artists and cultural professionals. The issuance of this public statement has been informed by a resolution of that meeting, which identified the express articulation of the sector's challenges as an immediate step that should be taken to engage government, government functionaries and other stakeholders that have a significant role to play in the culture and creative sector value chain.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment of extreme uncertainty for the arts and culture sector, having implications on the economic status of artists and cultural professions, particularly with regards to compromising initiatives and programming that is intended at championing sustainable livelihoods. In this era of fake-news and misinformation, there has been the sprouting of conflicting information on the scale of the health security threat of COVID-19 and the precautionary measures that should be taken thereof, to protect audiences and clients from an impending health risk. We would like to applaud the government of Zimbabwe for taking a position on COVID-19

precautions, through a public statement that was issued by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa on Tuesday the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 and further applaud some arts and culture professionals for heeding to this call by taking measures to suspend or postpone their programming. While we acknowledge that this period of uncertainty requires concerted efforts and a fulfilment of our duties and obligations to protect our audiences and communities, we wish to highlight that implications of these efforts should not be undermined. Operations and programming of our respective sector and sub-sectors place reliance on access to communities and large-scale assembly. We hereby make the following submissions:

- 1. Sector Specific Interventions:** The actual implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and culture sector are still a moot point. In the absence of government leadership in the coordination of the collection and collation of information on the real impact of the pandemic in the sector broadly and specific sectors in particular, there is a risk that our already crippled sector will monumentally be suffocated, reversing or undermining government and private sector efforts and initiatives that have to date, injected substantial investments to catalyse the sector's growth trajectory. It is our submission to government, that there should be an urgent measure designed and implemented to take stock of losses that have been incurred by artists and cultural professionals, for the purposes of identifying and formulating targeted interventions that can, in the immediate term, inform resource mobilisation efforts that are intended at mitigating current and impending losses. We applaud government's pro-activeness in allocating specific resources and re-assigning resources to COVID-19 response measures. Within the framework of these emergency response mechanisms, this a plea to government to consider channelling direct resources or re-assigning some budget lines to the Arts Development Fund for the purposes of capacitating emergency targeted responses. Such a deliberate step, which is consistent with the ethos of the recently launched National Arts, Culture and Heritage Policy, will be positioned within the global best-practice framework for Cultural and Creative Industries, that has seen governments such as those of Hong Kong and Singapore take urgent measures in the provision of subsidies and capability development schemes for artists, cultural professionals, and arts and culture institutions.
- 2. Technical Support:** Keen on the need to ensure that some sectors continue to thrive despite the pandemic and the concomitant inter-personal contact restrictions that have been called for, we call on government and its various stakeholders to recognise that these restrictions are an opportunity to re-conceptualise public spaces, in the spirit of ensuring that communities continue to access cultural content for the enjoyment of cultural rights and participation in cultural life. It is our submission that the rendering of technical or financial support to the sector for the championing of content digitisation will leverage the full potential of the digital environment as envisioned by the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Policy, ensuring continuity in creativity, content creation and content dissemination. However, in the absence of measures that are intended at facilitating access to such content, the digitisation value chain would not have been fully explored. We further call on government to explore possible interventions that can be streamlined to incentivise the affordability and accessibility of data by artists, cultural professionals and audiences.
- 3. Extended Support to Government Functionaries:** The suspension of operations by government departments and agencies, such as the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, although inevitable and consistent with government emergency response provisions to COVID-19, has a crippling effect on cultural and creative industries relying solely or partly on services provided by these institutions. In the spirit of embracing the entire value chain of cultural and creative industry digitisation, we call on government to extend support to these key institutions, however minimal given current resource constraints, to ensure that they remain accessible and available to render any support that may be reasonable within the scope of precautionary measures that have been operationalised.

4. **Safety Nets and the Right to Health of Artists and Cultural Professionals:** The sustainable livelihood of Zimbabwe's artists and cultural professionals has always been a major concern due to the absence of social protection and economic measures that can adequately promote the status of the artist. This concern has prevailed in periods of normalcy and given the immediate and unforeseeable devastation that has been ushered by COVID-19, the ramifications of lack of safety-nets have been amplified, exposing the extent of the vulnerability and insecurity of artists in areas that include but are not limited to lack of access to affordable health-care, lack of financial means to access health-care, irrespective of its affordability and lack of social protection measures that extend support during periods of unemployment. In this regard, this is an urgent call to government to mobilise financial, health or other critical resources that can provide a support package for artists and cultural professionals, in consideration of their right to health and the subsequent realisation of their social protection which is an absolute imperative.
  
5. **Development of Partnerships:** Cultural and creative industry (CCI) stakeholders are central to the framing of awareness programs and initiatives. Their proximity to and positionality within communities is critical to the efficient and effective delivery of any and all credible information on COVID-19. Artists and cultural professionals, as key CCI players, have already been proactive in the production of creative content, demonstrating their commitment to contribute to awareness raising. Their creative abilities have enabled the packaging of awareness programs in a format and language that communities can understand and access. For scalability, this is a call to government and other stakeholders to maximise on these creative endeavours by developing partnerships with CCIs to enhance awareness raising.

While the above submissions are a plea for government and other stakeholders to act, we recognise that as artists and cultural professionals we have an equal responsibility and duty to serve our communities. We are uniquely positioned to leverage on our influence and skills to strengthen efforts aimed at reducing the pandemic's health risk to our immediate communities, the city and indeed, the nation. We hereby call on our colleagues to take leadership in the following:

- i. **Compliance to Government Regulations:** Health security challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic require individual and concerted efforts in the protection of communities. Given the unpredictable nature of this virus and the extent of its rapid infection rate, this is a call to all artists and cultural professionals to urgently comply with precautionary and hygiene regulations articulated by the Ministry of Health and Child Care.
  
- ii. **Information Dissemination:** The dissemination of accurate information on COVID-19 is an imperative in scaling up awareness programs and initiatives, and in ensuring the security of our communities. The dissemination of unverified and inaccurate information has the devastating effect of causing panic, compromising health security, fuelling stereotypes and granting credence to fake news. We call on artists and cultural professionals to use their respective areas of influence to share information from credible sources and information that has been verified.
  
- iii. **Ease of Access to Information:** The designing and implementation of intervention mechanisms for the arts and culture sector relies significantly on the availability and accessibility of information about the sector, particularly with regards to losses incurred, disruption in programming, challenges in accessing communities for awareness, incapacity to take hygiene precautionary measures, inaccessibility of emergency support etc. We would like to encourage all artists and cultural professionals to assist in efforts

of collection and collating information, by making it widely available and accessible to government, government functionaries and any other stakeholders requiring such to inform targeted programming. Further, we encourage the wide online dissemination of any opportunities or assistance programs that artists and cultural professionals can tap into as a means of coping in these difficult times. For social media updates, opportunity sharing and communication of postponed / cancelled programming, please use the hashtags **#COVID19ZW** **#COVID19CCI**.