

# Situational Assessment Report on the Impact of COVID -19 on Ethiopian Cultural Sector



Compiled by SELAM Ethiopia

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 is now a pandemic affecting many countries globally. Ethiopia declared its first reported case on 13 March 2020 and started tighter measures including compulsory quarantine and an increased public awareness campaign.

To create broader public awareness on the prevention mechanisms of COVID-19, the Prime Minister Office together with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and other ministries established a media and art task force. Similarly, Selam Ethiopia joined the campaign by producing Eighteen educational and public awareness short video messages about COVID-19 in Eight different local languages targeting Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR and Tigray Regional states and aired through national and regional media platforms. In this campaign, more than Seventeen artists, politicians, influencers, and governmental authorities involved. Beyond campaigning on COVID prevention mechanisms, Selam Ethiopia launched a series of webinars called *Selam talks* concerned with understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the artistic and cultural sector. *Selam Talks* helped to get data that became important in assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the artistic and cultural sector in Ethiopia and helped to compile this report. Beyond the webinar, Selam Ethiopia collected documents from its regional offices found in the aforementioned regional states and produced a situational assessment report despite the limitation of sufficient data and information for statistical measurement.

The state of emergency banned the opening and presentation of any form of artistic and cultural activity thereby creating many vulnerable communities and affecting the sector seriously. As the artistic and cultural sector is directly affected by COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of venues, it is very vital and critical to understanding the scale, nature, and depth of the social and economic impacts to design an appropriate and effective mitigation mechanism and programmatic response at national level-immediately and progressively. The dynamic nature of the pandemic and its uncertain solution poses a significant challenge to the cultural and artistic sector and makes it hard to predict its impact except to note that it will be very large and, in many cases, disastrous for smaller businesses and their employees.

To conclude, for an immediate response, facilitating direct material and financial support for highly vulnerable groups of the culture sector are vital and for the long term, alleviation of policies, government structure, improvement of the sector needs to be examined and proper solutions implemented.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to WHO, the novel Corona Virus, designated as COVID-19, is a newly discovered virus. Its rapid spread throughout the world in 2019–2020/21 has had a significant impact in different sectors. Especially, the artistic and cultural industries like movies, theatre, circus, and media activities have been seriously affected due to the suspension or cancellation of performances and shows.

Currently, COVID-19 has already affected the entire globe and the number of infections in Ethiopia is increasing every day. Even though the government is trying its best to control its transmission and create public awareness, the situation seems to get worse. Many governmental, public, and non-governmental organizations are merging their resources to tackle the epidemic in the country.

Albeit directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cultural and artistic sector practitioners were among the pioneers to fight the spread of COVID-19 in Ethiopia. By creating multiple engagements to develop public awareness on the prevention mechanism of COVID-19, the practitioners designed many television and radio spots, advertisings, music, and dramatic presentations. The television and radio productions were used to inform and educate the audience on the different coping mechanisms of COVID-19. Supporting such interventions and as one of the main actors in the cultural industry of the country, Selam Ethiopia become one of the pioneers to give an immediate response in combating the current crisis.

As a socially responsible organization, Selam Ethiopia produced and distributed eighteen short video messages on the prevention mechanisms of COVID-19 in 8 different local languages by targeting Addis Ababa city administration and Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR, and the Tigray Regional States. More than Seventeen artists, politicians, influencers, and governmental authorities involved in this successful campaign entitled **#we will prevail**.

Following **#we will prevail** campaign, Selam Ethiopia, in Collaboration with Selam Sounds Group (SSG), presented a series of cultural forums through an online platform called *Selam Talks* at various levels. *Selam Talks* were held in the Amharic language at the national level, Amhara and SNNPR regional states and Afaan Oromo and Tigrigna language at Oromia and Tigray Regions, respectively. Besides, *Selam Talks* also held at continental level focusing on East, West, and North Africa consequently.

After conducting such interventions and in a bid to understand the level of COVID-19 effect on the cultural sector in Ethiopia, Selam Ethiopia took the initiative to collect data. Despite the challenging situation, the organization collected enough data and consulted different governmental documents to produce a situational assessment report pre and post COVID19 at Oromia, Amhara, Tigray, and SNNPR regional states and Addis Ababa City government - specifically on music, films, media and circus which will help decision-makers, associations, and donors to understand the severity of COVID 19 impact on the culture sector.

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Regardless of its active engagement in creating public awareness on the prevention mechanisms of COVID-19, the challenges of the artistic and cultural sector have not been given proper attention. The Ethiopian artistic and cultural sector has suffered enormously given its low level of income, lack of government support, and lack of sufficient market. Hence, this assessment report tried to address the main challenges of the artistic and cultural sectors to look for urgent short and long-term interventions.

## EFFECT OF COVID 19 IN THE ETHIOPIAN CULTURAL SECTOR

Unlike most African countries, Ethiopia did not introduce total national lockdown.

The country's 'sustained moderate to strong measures' strategy focused on taking bold measures early and scaling them up gradually. Preparations began in January and February, and national response was declared with Ethiopia's first reported case on 13 March, accompanied with tighter measures including a state of emergency on 8 April 2020. The State of emergency includes the 'banning of all public gatherings of more than four people'. The ban has been applied to all religious, governmental, non-governmental, commercial, political, and social gatherings. Furthermore, where the gathering is of a group of four people, individuals are expected to ensure that they are always two meters apart.

This strict measure significantly affected those fields that require the gathering of people/audiences. Especially, the artistic and cultural sectors need to get public gathering in the theater or cinema hall, in open spaces, in bars and lounges, and different spaces. Banning public gathering means banning any kind of artistic and cultural productions.

The global health crisis and the uncertainty resulting from it deeply affected organizations' operations as well as individuals (both employed and self-dependent) across the sector.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** had a sudden and substantial impact on the Ethiopian **artists** and **culture** sector practitioners. Despite their attempt to uphold their mission in providing access to cultural and artistic productions, due to the state of emergency, it became impractical to continue their professional and daily career. Many different theatrical productions, cinema screening, live performances, dance shows, circus presentations, music shows, and other artistic and cultural productions were canceled or postponed for an unknown end with a devastating effect on the cultural sector of Ethiopia.

## CULTURAL INDUSTRIES AFFECTED BY COVID 19 - MUSIC, THEATER, FILM, CIRCUS, AND MEDIA

### *MUSIC*

Due to the Corona Virus pandemic and the subsequent state of emergency in Ethiopia, the music activity has been one of the hard-hit fields. From individual singers to big bands, from Azmaris to all the cultural houses in the country, from wedding performances to live big band concerts, all are canceled. These activities involve thousands of practitioners in every field from writing to singing, producing, advertising, selling, etc. Many halls and performance spaces were closed and some (like Millennium hall) changed into a temporary COVID treatment center.

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The halting of such public gathering impacts the life of everyone who contributes to the activities of such considerable business environment like music. Since our music activity did not yet involve in using technologies for all its activities, the involvement of practitioners in every field becomes necessary, hence, its halting affects many people in the field.

According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism draft mitigation strategy of the culture sector released in June 2020, 90 % musicians lost their job, and near to 20,000(Twenty Thousand ) artists missed annual cultural festivities and events which will allow them to support their livelihood. As the negative impact continues, it will not only affect those directly related with the music activities, but also others who are indirectly related with the production of music like record labels, performance halls, streaming services, event/concert equipment suppliers, DJs, technology startups, and other companies who are in the various corners of the music industry.

Music artists are trying to use the internet as a mechanism for distributing their new works. However, unfortunately, due to complicated issues with the internet and lack of audience willing to take such adventures, it is practically becoming impossible. The impact of such a challenge added to the current situation with COVID-19 makes the music activity unable to continue.

Hence, as there is significant uncertainty around how COVID-19 will evolve, the long-term impact on the music industry and associated ones in tourism and hospitality –are hard to predict except to note that they will be very large and, in many cases, catastrophic for smaller music and music-related businesses and their employees.

## FILM

Due to different causes, the Ethiopian film industry has been on a temporary decline before COVID 19 and stopped activities completely during the state of emergency. The Ethiopian Herald, a daily newspaper, quoted Ethiopian Film Makers Association (EFMA) announcement about the Ethiopian film sector as the main field that has been hit hard by COVID-19 pandemic despite its serious shortages of technological devices to make good films. According to the association, the amount of financial losses of cinema houses due to the lockdown is estimated to be around 100 million Birr. The draft mitigation strategy of the culture sector prepared by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism estimated near 10,000 (Ten Thousand) direct and indirect stakeholders in the film industry have been affected by COVID 19.

The film industry generally affected multiple practitioners who are in the chains of film production and distribution. Practitioners in the film industry are also those who cover the works in television dramas and commercials. Thus, the impact on the film industry, directly and indirectly, affects the general broadcast medium. The closure of cinema halls also impacted not only those who produce films, but also other young people who work on the different chains of the film distribution and show.

The consequences felt by the film sector ranges from lower attendance at film festivals, cancellation of movie or tv series shooting, cancellation of film shows, postponement of new film releases which is expected to create the financial consequences that likely be felt by studios, filmmakers, theatres, technicians, tv stations and more for next few months or even years

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## CIRCUS

Circuses are among the cultural enterprises particularly affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. By its profession, circus has a unique feature: starting from training up to a stage show – it requires a full crew or group participation, attendance and, unluckily, it is highly vulnerable to COVID 19 effect. Due to this, famed circus operators are forced to cancel their shows and lay off artists.

Due to the transmission behavior of the pandemic and the state of emergency, the Ethiopian circus groups found in Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, SNNPR, and Addis Ababa are not able to show their performance locally and internationally. Beyond canceling their performances, they cannot do any kind of exercise or training. This is causing stress among the performers as they are gaining weight, which is not advisable in such a profession.

Unlike any other artistic and cultural form in Ethiopia, all circus associations, even individuals, get a financial income from their international performances through creating a larger market and participating in annual festivals globally. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic's global nature, since March 2020, all international doors are closed and there is no way to get an income and they cannot be able to take care of themselves, their families.

## MEDIA

The COVID 19 pandemic has also affected the medias activities and several television and radio show that are backed by the government and private organization sponsorship. Since the business in general and the hospitality industry in particular, are affected critically, they cannot support television and radio programs. The broadcast media in Ethiopia has been very dependent on the sponsorship packages and is directly affected by the consequences of the COVID pandemic. Due to such challenges, it is becoming very difficult for media organizations to continue operating. Some of the media organizations reportedly shut down due to lack of funding to administer their office.

In general, the Corona Virus pandemic slowdown the entertainment, cultural, and hospitality industry and impacted all segments in the supply chain including stop-off and Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) and other related sectors found in all over the country.

Accordingly, the effect has impacted the culture sector seriously and is heading to a serious catastrophe:

- The artistic and cultural sector has been one of the hard-hit areas of development in the country. The challenge impacted many people in the chains of artistic production. From music writers to players, singers, distributors, publishers, advertisers, producers, etc all are impacted directly or indirectly culminating in lack of any kind of income.
- The broader supply chain of the tourism industry is also affected by the pandemic. Especially young women and men who depend on their livelihoods working in hotels, event organizers, artists, music and film producers, actors, logistic suppliers, technicians, agents, and managers have been affected significantly.
- The number of vulnerable people in the artistic and cultural industry is increasing every day thereby creating a fear that it might lead to a serious crisis in the cultural sector if the country

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## CONCLUSION

For people staying at home during the pandemic, cultural and artistic activities have been serving as a well-being, a diversion, an intellectual outlet, a way to explore and find meaning in life. The artistic and cultural sector is vital to inclusive development and for the improvement of societal culture and engagements. Cultural and artistic interventions have also significant benefits for promoting indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms and maintain social solidarity and strengthening communities in Ethiopia. They can also help in supporting the nation-building process by promoting political, social, and economic ideologies that are important to society.

The Corona Virus pandemic has impacted the cultural and artistic sector significantly thereby requiring governmental and other institutions interventions. To address and support sector urgently, government support is vital. From creating a platform for a wider and deeper discussion on the issue, the direct support of the practitioners in the field, the government's response is critical. Hence, the culture sector needs to be addressed and urgently supported to maintain their well-being, preserve the continuation of their daily life, and protect their basic human rights issues.

As observed in the other sectors in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic has a significant impact on the country's overall development. Among other sectors, the artistic and cultural sector of Ethiopia is highly exposed to the impact of COVID 19 and needs critical attention to understand the scale, nature, and depth of the impact. The attention will also help to design an appropriate and effective policy and programmatic response at the national level for the sector.

If not given proper attention, the artistic and cultural sector is posed with an existential threat. Artists and cultural practitioners are considering changing fields to get incomes for their and their family's survival. Such activities will undoubtedly impact the sector and create a negative trend for the country's cultural and artistic development.

The future of the internet world and new technologies may take time to be utilized by the Ethiopian artistic and cultural sectors. Since the internet coverage in the country remains to be little, it is impractically to hope its use of the development of the cultural and artistic sector.

Despite its active engagement in creating awareness to the public about the prevention mechanisms of COVID-19, the artistic and cultural sector of the country did not get proper attention and support. Due to its vulnerability, weak marketing ability, and low financial flow, the artistic and cultural sector needs immediate support.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Considering the relevance of the artistic and cultural sector, Federal and regional government offices, culture sector associations, civil societies, and other stakeholders need to create a new coalition or collaboration to combat the impact of COVID-19 on the sector. Thus, to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, here are major recommendation points:

- Set up a crisis fund by establishing a national task force from national and regional government offices, associations, and civil societies to facilitate immediate financial support for the culture sector professionals (artists and stakeholders) that can be accessed through charitable organizations.
- Work closely between federal and regional actors to achieve national and regional dialogue platforms to create links between regional-to-regional, regional-to-federal government, between professional associations and its members at various levels and collaborate on a possible mitigation strategy for the challenges of the artistic and cultural sector.
- Design an appropriate and effective policy and programmatic response in a very proactive way through the well-established government structure of the federal and regional governments.
- Create a platform for a public-private partnership to launch a new funding scheme to encourage research projects that support the innovative use of media, information technologies, and boost the digital era for the sustainability of the sector.
- Encourage government support by rolling out a series of tax relief measures to alleviate the burdens of culture sector business, especially for small firms and self-employed enterprises to combat COVID 19.

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