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## **Circus Ethiopia: Dilemmas of a Development-oriented Entertainment NGO in Ethiopia**

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### **Abstract**

As in most other sub-Saharan African countries, the circus had no historical precedents in Ethiopia until it was introduced as a foreign art form by a Westerner in the early 1990s, recruiting children as its performers. 'Circus Ethiopia' gradually became adapted to and invested with 'Ethiopian culture'. While initially conceived as a circus proper, focusing primarily on circus art and the development of circus performance as an art or cultural form in Ethiopia, it later became an NGO that also tried to engender social or community development. Accordingly, Circus Ethiopia assumed two responsibilities: an artistic (self-defined) and a civic (donor-defined) responsibility, and still functions both as an artistic medium and as an NGO by using circus arts to educate and inform its audiences on various social and health-related issues. The paper examines to what extent Circus Ethiopia has been able to maintain itself in the light of this double, possibly contradictory, mission, and in view of its institutional dependence on outside sources. In doing so, it identifies the potential of the circus, as a cultural activity, to play an important role in development work. Furthermore, it uncovers some problems Circus Ethiopia – being a Southern NGO – faces and deals with regarding its sustainability.

### **Résumé**

Comme dans la plupart des autres pays d'Afrique sub-saharienne, le cirque n'avait pas de précédents historiques en Ethiopie jusqu'à ce qu'il soit introduit dans le pays comme une forme d'art étranger par un Occidental au début des années 1990, qui recrute des enfants comme ses interprètes. « Circus Ethiopia » s'est progressivement adapté et s'est imprégné de « la culture éthiopienne ». Bien qu'initialement conçu comme un cirque bon, se concentrant principalement sur les arts du cirque et l'interprétation des numéros de cirque comme un art ou une forme de pratique culturelle en Ethiopie, l'organisation est devenue plus tard une ONG qui s'est également assignée la mission de promouvoir

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le développement social ou communautaire. En conséquence, Circus Ethiopia a assumé deux responsabilités: une formation artistique (auto-définie) et la responsabilité civique (définie par les donateurs), et fonctionne toujours à la fois comme un moyen artistique et comme une ONG en utilisant les arts du cirque pour informer et sensibiliser son public sur les différentes questions sociales liées à la santé. Le document examine la mesure dans laquelle le cirque a été en mesure de se survivre sur la base de cette double mission et éventuellement contradictoire et compte tenu de sa dépendance institutionnelle de sources de financement extérieures. Ce faisant, il identifie la capacité du cirque, en tant qu'activité culturelle, à jouer un rôle important dans les efforts de développement. En outre, il découvre des défis auxquelles est confronté Circus Ethiopia – en tant qu'ONG du Sud – et la façon dont elle s'y prend pour apporter des solutions durables à ces problèmes.

### **Introduction: Topic and Theory<sup>1</sup>**

This paper offers a descriptive analysis and an anthropological interpretation of a particular kind of NGO in a developing country: 'Circus Ethiopia', a donor-funded organization giving circus performances imbued with development messages and entertainment. Circus Ethiopia, presently known as Circus Addis Ababa, is a unique institution which arose from an initiative by a Canadian teacher, Marc LaChance, who set up the circus as an entertainment (and rehabilitation) activity for and by children in urban Ethiopia. Until that time the circus had no historical precedent in Ethiopia, where dramatic arts are dominated by traditional performances of singers, drama, rituals, and dance.

Circus Addis Ababa (CAA) is part of a circus federation called 'Circus in Ethiopia' (CiE).<sup>2</sup> This federation of circuses differs in form and content from its counterparts elsewhere in the world, as it has been adapted and invested with 'Ethiopian' culture. The costumes, music, dance, and the combinations of circus acts reflect Ethiopian cultural traditions. Moreover, the shows are mainly held in the open air and can be observed by audiences free of charge.

Circus Addis Ababa, along with the other members of the federation, is presently a non-governmental organization. It was initially conceived as a circus proper, however. Its primary focus was on circus art and the development of circus as an art or cultural form in Ethiopia. While it did not emerge as a grassroots organization with the specific intention of engendering social and community development, it broadened its mission to include this once it took on an NGO status. Currently CAA endeavours to combine being a circus, whose central aim is to establish circus art, with functioning as an NGO that offers contributions to social and community development. This broadening of the Circus's mission has resulted in it assuming two responsibilities – an artistic and a civic responsibility.

The question this paper seeks to answer is in what respect the two aims of entertainment and commitment to the realization of social and community development can be achieved in actual performances, and secondly, how the Circus has been able to maintain itself in the light of this double, possibly contradictory, mission, and in view of its institutional dependence on outside sources. Specifically, I look at the extent to which the circus, being an NGO, is able to fulfil both its self-defined artistic and its donor-defined civic responsibilities vis-à-vis its beneficiaries in order to secure its survival.

For the interpretative framework of this study, I have employed broad theoretical concepts rather than specific theories (or theoretical concepts) to interpret data obtained through ethnographic research. The theoretical 'orientation' employed consists of two separate but correlated issues: (a) the role of culture in development, and (b) NGOs in development work.

### **The Role of Culture in Development**

Two distinctions can be made when defining culture: the limited and the broad perspective of culture.<sup>3</sup> From a narrow perspective, culture can be defined as '... that complex of activities which includes the practice of the arts and of certain disciplines, the former being more salient than the latter' (Jovanovich in Sarageldin 1992:1). And from a broad perspective, '[Culture] comprises a people's technology, its manners and customs, its religious beliefs and organization, its systems of valuation, whether expressed or implicit ... When the word is used in [this] larger sense, the extent of its reference includes a people's art and thought, but only as one element among others' (Ibid:2).

In short, the narrow definition focuses on defining culture with reference to arts and letters,<sup>4</sup> while the broader definition encompasses the narrow definition and adds to it all aspects of human existence in society.

Viewed from both perspectives, growing importance has been accorded to the cultural dimension of development. Culture from a broad perspective is said to be integral to development in that 'Changes coming at people from outside or geared from within their own society are screened for feasibility and appropriateness against criteria set by culture' (Boeren and Epskamp 1992:7). Or otherwise expressed by Salim: 'a people does not fully commit itself to a development undertaking unless that undertaking corresponds to its deeply felt needs' (1992:10).

In the narrow sense of the word, cultural activities such as 'theatre, participatory video, film, radio and television drama, craft and graphic projects (like cartoon comics and visual mapping exercises)' (Gould and Marsh 2003), have increasingly been utilized to engender possible social (and economic) development.

Three levels can be identified at which culture plays a role in development: culture as context, culture as content, and culture as method.<sup>5</sup>

*Culture as context:* Where the socio-politico-cultural environment is taken into account in project design and management, it may be challenging culture, for instance, in the context of F[emale] G[enital] M[utilation] or traditional gender roles, or it may be embedded in and draw on local social-political dynamics to enhance the development process, for example, working with monks or traditional faith healers.

*Culture as content:* Where local cultural practices, objects or traditions are engaged in the development process through the use of traditional dance or other cultural forms or items with cultural significance.

*Culture as method:* The use of any cultural form (traditional or otherwise) including song, drama, dance, poetry, music, video, radio, photography, etc.

Culture as method has two observed roles:

- (a) *As a tool* – which is used instrumentally and is generally message/content-led. The ultimate outputs are pre-determined by those controlling the development process.
- (b) *As a process* – which is explicitly about shifting power and strengthening people's control over the development process. It starts from people's own experience and involves a creative process, the output of which is not predetermined.

The first two levels – culture as context and culture as content – are vital when referring especially to culture in the broad sense of the word; while culture in the narrow sense of the word is central to the last level that is, culture as method. At this last level, as a tool, culture as method is utilized instrumentally and is generally message or content-led. As a process, it functions as a means through which power is shifted and people's control over the development process is reinforced. In both cases culture is used as a means to engender possible social and community development.

A good and successful example of the use of culture (culture as method, both as a tool and as a process) in development is Theatre-for-Development (TfD), whereby, theatre, as a 'popular' medium, is used as an instrument for development.<sup>6</sup> Through decades of assessment, and learning as a result of trial and error, TfD has evolved over the years and proven itself useful in engendering social change.

If circus can be viewed as a cultural activity or a cultural good, then one could rightly conclude that, like the theatre, it can be utilized in development work.<sup>7</sup> And similar to the theatre, one can place the circus in the category of culture as method, which in principle can be used as a tool and as a process. In order for it to succeed as an instrument for development it has to undergo

evolution, however. Making systematic assessments and affecting systematic modifications are two important elements in that process.

### **Non-governmental Organizations in Development Work**

Examining the Circus as an organization and, more precisely, as an NGO, requires an examination of the environment within which Southern NGOs (SNGOs) function, their sustainability, and their management as organizations. An exploration of this environment reveals the great financial dependency of SNGOs on their counterparts – Northern NGOs, and other bi- and multilateral donors. This dependency affects their autonomy and their capacity to survive over a longer period of time.

Sustainability does not always amount to financial viability, however. Other, immaterial aspects, such as the characteristics of an organization's internal systems, structure, work, and working culture can play a key role in ensuring its effectiveness and long-term survival. Especially an organization's vision, mission, and values, the way an organization is governed, and how the organization builds its external relations and image can play a crucial role in determining its sustainability.

An organization's vision, mission, and values are crucial to an NGO because they characterize the kind of organization it seeks to be. That is to say, they help to direct the actions of individuals, teams and groups, and to focus energy towards the achievement of common goals. Additionally, they facilitate the organization in constructing a distinctive image and identity, and they clarify strategy and inspire commitment. Finally, they inform what should be sustained and how.

Similarly, the manner in which an NGO is governed is essential, as it has implications for its general organizational effectiveness, vitality, and dynamism. Organizations seen as possessing 'good governance'<sup>8</sup> have in common the ability to act in accordance with their mission, utilize resources efficiently, and balance the interests of external stakeholders and internal constituencies. The board of directors – the governing and policy-setting body that bears legal responsibility for the organization it serves – shoulders the responsibility of ensuring good governance in an NGO.

Finally, an NGO's effort to build its external relations and image contributes to its continued existence. How? Through effective communication and by promoting a positive image, an NGO can advance its credibility and thus establish a strong and loyal constituency, which can help legitimize the NGO by, for example, voluntarily rallying support for its mission.

Accountability and capacity building are two additional elements which contribute to the functioning of NGOs, and are important for the management of an NGO as an organization. Generally, accountability refers to the 'means

by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority, or authorities, and are held responsible for their actions' (Edwards and Hulme 1995:9). Defined this way, accountability is crucial to an NGO because it legitimizes it and provides it with the means through which it can regulate itself and be regulated by others. Theoretically NGOs have multiple accountabilities to different groups and interests – 'downwards' to their partners, beneficiaries, staff and supporters; and 'upwards' to their trustees, donors and host governments.<sup>9</sup>

NGOs have thus a wide range of stakeholder groups they have to manage. These stakeholders may have different information needs, priorities for the organization, and visions of success and definitions of legitimacy. The need to reconcile these divergent demands often leads 'to a frequent confusion between means and ends' (Lewis 2001:162). Subsequently a discrepancy may develop between the 'official' and the 'operative' goals that the NGOs set. Under such conditions the equilibrium that should ideally be in place between organization-centred and programme-centred activities<sup>10</sup> risks becoming upset.

Capacity building, on the other hand, refers to the strengthening of SNGOs by NNGOs.<sup>11</sup> Mostly, capacity building is provided in two areas: technical and management capacity. While the latter involves building managerial skills, the former refers to improving the capacity of NGOs to handle various operational tasks. Both forms of capacity building do not necessarily in themselves improve organizational effectiveness, as they tend to focus mainly on 'measurable performance indicators' (Ebrahim 2003:11). Hence, in recent years, a new approach referred to as 'organizational learning' is being promoted instead. Using such an approach, improvements are undertaken incrementally through better knowledge and understanding by means of evaluation and reflection.

The two issues discussed above – the role of culture in development and the organizational capacities of development oriented SNGOs – will be essential in subsequent paragraphs, in guiding the theoretical analysis of the data collected during field research. They will be employed in assessing how the Circus functions as an entertainment or artistic medium and as an organization that is specifically an NGO. The first issue will help in analysing and evaluating the Circus's artistic work, and its impact on its beneficiaries. It will also help shed a light on to what extent, if any, there is a contradiction in the Circus's ability to fulfil both its artistic and civic responsibilities. The second issue will be essential in examining the functioning of the Circus as an NGO that is faced with challenges such as capacity building, image forming, accountability, transparency, and sustainability.

## **Circus Addis Ababa: A Descriptive and an Analytic Overview**

### ***The Initial Philosophy and Establishment of Circus Ethiopia***

The circus was originally the initiative of a Canadian, Marc La Chance, who came to Ethiopia in 1990 to teach at Addis Ababa International Community School for expatriates, a prestigious and expensive school for the wealthy. He saw and realized, cycling to and from work for a period of one year, the huge discrepancy in the life-chances and realities of those children whom he taught at school and other children out in the streets. Juggling being one of his hobbies, he decided to teach some children how to juggle balls, 'feeling that such a skill would give the youth a degree of self-esteem'.<sup>12</sup> He did this with street children near his home.

In a more organized manner, he later taught circus skills to some Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jewish) children, who lived temporarily in Addis Ababa while awaiting their transfer to Israel. He did that as an after-school programme in the compound of the North American Conference of Ethiopian Jewry (NACOF).<sup>13</sup> In May 1991 the Beta Israel started being flown out, but not before they were able to perform the first public show where they displayed their skills.

After the emigration of most of the Ethiopian Jewish community in 1991 – along with those children who performed in the first public show – Andrew Goldman, Country Director of NACOF for Ethiopia, and Marc la Chance decided to establish the Circus as a non-sectarian programme. The idea behind it was to involve non-Jewish Ethiopian children. Subsequently the Circus started to look for funding, and two months later a new project was launched with a new group of Ethiopian children.

Having established this new project, the question then was how to give it form. Marc la Chance and Andy Goldman held opposing views on that: while the former envisaged a path that would lead the circus to professionalism, the latter envisioned creating a course for the circus in which it would aim at 'social development'.<sup>14</sup> In the first case, the development of the circus as an entertainment and artistic medium was perceived essential. And in the second case, the dissemination of social and health related information coupled with the education of and career possibilities for the performers were seen to be vital. What is important to note here is that although Marc la Chance had begun with the intention of making a difference in the lives of children by teaching them to juggle balls, his ultimate dream was to establish a circus that would become a professional one. Accordingly, he strived towards achieving this vision while he was still alive.<sup>15</sup>

After having functioned autonomously as a circus proper for two years, the Circus assumed the official status of an NGO in 1993. Over the years,

CAA carved out a distinctive function for itself as an NGO. It has become a (support) 'service provider' that can be engaged by donors in order to spread their message.<sup>16</sup> The donors make available the message they want conveyed through the circus shows, while the circus provides the artistic input to give form to the message that needs to be conveyed. The circus can thus be seen as an artistic outlet with no specific focus of its own but as a voice for various issues presented to it by its donors.<sup>17</sup> Being such a medium, the circus has attracted many donors over the years, but it has also seen the departure of many since its inception.

Initially, after the Circus was established as an NGO, its activities revolved around two groups, namely the Performance Group and the Circus School group. At a later stage, in 1995, the Street Children Programme was established for street children. While the first two groups of performers came from different socioeconomic classes across the country, the last group was composed only of street children. These street children were either homeless or worked in the streets.

All three performing groups had a different position and function within the circus. The Performance Group was the core performing group, which performed both nationally and internationally. It distinguished itself from the other two groups in that it received transport allowances, medical coverage, and meals after practice. These performers were allowed to teach the other lower level groups, and they received remuneration for their coaching.

The Circus School was composed of children who received training in various circus skills on paying a ten birr monthly membership fee. These children could eventually graduate to the performance group if they showed great skill. And although they did not travel abroad or far, they could perform occasionally to their community.

The Street Children Programme came about as a result of collaboration between various humanitarian organizations and CAA. The children received training three times per week, a meal at the end of each practice, and transport money. One of the aims of the project was to assist them in independently producing shows, which they could perform outside on the streets. It was thought that the money generated from these shows would allow them to have an income and perhaps help them replace begging with more constructive activities.

Over the years the composition of the groups has changed, however. One noticeable difference today is the absence of the Street Children Programme, which ceased to exist in the year 2000. Also, over the years CAA has sustained much loss with regard to its performing group, due to defection to the West, either individually or as a group.<sup>18</sup> By 2004, the circus had established three new groups: the Performing Group, the Second Group,

and the School Group.<sup>19</sup> The Performing Group is still the core group of the circus, followed, in descending order of importance, by the Second and School Group.

### ***The Vision, Mission, Values and Objectives of the Circus***

As the Circus's vision, mission, values and objectives (can) help to understand the kind of organization it endeavours to be, it is essential to view this. According to one official document, the vision of the circus is 'to see the flourish[ing] of self-reliant circus art in Ethiopia, uniquely combined with culture to build wholesome personality of children and youth with full participation of concerned stakeholders' (Alemnesh and Yirga 2000:42).

The mission of the circus pertains to the steady growth of circus art in Ethiopia, the dissemination of socially relevant messages through circus art, and sustainability (both artistically and financially) of the circus while fulfilling the 'educational, career and safety/security needs of its performing and managing stakeholders' (Ibid:43).

With regard to the Circus's values, it considers itself an unbiased, art-promoting organ that endeavours to disseminate circus art, both nationally and internationally, while basing its 'operation on the involvement of pertinent stakeholders, accountability, transparency, partnership and networking principles' (Ibid).

Finally, the Circus specifies five items as its main objectives: to introduce circus arts to Ethiopia, to provide recreational and educational opportunities to disadvantaged children and youth, to serve as a medium for conveying messages on health matters, to perform circus shows free of charge throughout Ethiopia, and to promote Ethiopian cultures both nationally and abroad (Quarterly Newsletter of Circus in Ethiopia, 2003).

Implicitly or explicitly identified in the vision, mission, values and objectives formulated above by the Circus are its beneficiaries. After all, the circus as an NGO functions to benefit others, and these 'others' are designated as beneficiaries. The extent to which the Circus fulfils its stated duties towards its beneficiaries, *inter alia*, can be helpful in partially assessing its success or failure.

Two main groups can be identified as the beneficiaries of Circus Addis Ababa: the circus's audiences and the performers. The 'audiences', simply put, are the people who watch the circus performances. It was especially difficult to differentiate between audiences at the initial stage of the Circus's inception, as it was a novel form of entertainment, all championed it and there was much keenness to watch it by all. This has changed, however, as the novelty and newsworthiness of the circus has worn off over the years. Being a relatively young artistic form of entertainment, the circus is not yet fully entrenched in the society like, for example, the theatre.

As articulated in its objectives, among its audiences CAA especially views disadvantaged children and youths as its beneficiaries. It is assumed that these children and youths have no access to the mass media. Since the circus shows are performed outdoors by young performers and are free of charge, these shows are assumed to be easily accessible and effective in conveying messages to this target group. Research has not been carried out to verify or falsify this assumption, however.

Although there is no unanimous or unambiguous understanding among the Circus staff pertaining to the position of the performers in the circus, the performers can be designated as the Circus's second group of beneficiaries.<sup>20</sup> This is in keeping with the CAA's vision as stated above and its goal as indicated in the document *Five Year Strategic Plan & Management: 2000-2005*. Here, the goals of the Circus are described:

... to guarantee the safety/security requirements, educational growth, career direction exploration of the performing artists by insuring them while they are in action, closely monitoring their school performances and supplementing the gaps and counselling them in career selection and development (Alemnesh and Yirga 2000:44).

Before proceeding it is important to answer the following question: who are these performers? All the performers, male and female, are children and young adults between the ages of nine and twenty three. Depending on their skills, these performers are divided into musicians and physical performers. Although to a varying degree, all of the performers have a humble background. Some come from a one-parent household, headed either by the father or the mother, while others grew up in a two-parent household. Their ethnic and religious background is also divergent.

Going back to the comments made above, there appears to be a discrepancy between the staff's perception and the Circus's stated vision and goals regarding the status of the performers. According to its stated vision and goal, the benefits that the performers gain by participating in the circus pertain to their educational growth, job prospects, and their safety and security while performing. Assuming the performers are indeed beneficiaries, are these goals being met?

One of the policies of the circus is that the children performing in the circus keep studying. Accordingly the motto of the circus is: 'school first, then circus follows'. However, the reality appears to contradict this. The performers' school performance seems to be negatively affected by their involvement in the circus. Although it is difficult to determine whether there is a direct causal link between the two, what is evident is that over the years

there have only been less than a handful of performers that have reached college or university level.

Circus Addis Ababa has been a catalyst in providing some performers with job placements both within and outside the circus. These jobs were related to the performers' skills learned in their respective disciplines. But although the jobs provided these kids with an income, they could not expect to subsist on it. And most importantly, the jobs do not provide them with long-term career possibilities. After all, circus art is not a certified profession.

The safety and the security of the performers while performing is not adequately guaranteed either. All performances are done on a mat that is not well insulated. Further, due to financial constraints, the circus no longer provides the performers with medical coverage. And although there is always a qualified nurse available on the premises when the children are performing, there is a shortage of medical supplies.

On all three accounts – with regard to education, job prospects, and safety and security – there seems to be a discrepancy between the stated goals and the reality on the ground. One could perhaps rightly conclude that the Circus has failed in realizing its vision, mission, values and objectives with regard to its beneficiaries.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Circus can be beneficial to the performers in other ways. As noted by one respondent, the children can benefit from the knowledge they garner through their activities in the circus, it can help build their confidence, provide them with discipline and a place where they can 'hang out'.

Furthermore, another respondent suggested that it was important to compare them to their peers. Many kids can be found idling in the streets, smoking and chewing *ch'at*, for example. At least in the circus, these performers have a place where they can come together to do something constructive with their time. Also, the children come in contact with other people through the circus, and this can help them build networks. Finally, they get to travel both within and outside Ethiopia and discover new things.

## **The Circus as an Entertainment Organization**

### ***Circus Addis Ababa's Concept of Circus and its Artistic Work***

Circus as an art form, as performed by Circus Addis Ababa (and all the circuses that operate under the umbrella of CiE) is different from the image that is conjured up when one generally thinks of a circus in the West. Unlike in the West there are no rings, no animals, no clowns and no aerial acts performed in the circus shows. Furthermore, the shows are not performed in a tent but instead mostly in the open air, free of charge.

All the Circus's performances incorporate cultural elements of various ethnic groups existing in Ethiopia. This is reflected in the types of music, dance and costumes that the Circus uses in its performances. The main aim of the shows is to educate and inform the audiences on issues such as HIV/AIDS, personal hygiene, basic health, etc., via entertainment. It is hoped that peer education will be realized through these shows by having the children and young adult performers perform to their own peer group.<sup>21</sup>

The performances are all floor acts consisting of acrobatics, pyramids, and contortions. Circus attributes are also used in the shows, such as juggling clubs, unicycles, bouncing balls, ropes, diablo, fire sticks and rings. Most of the performances are group performances, with the exception of a few individual and duo acts. One well choreographed duo act, called the 'Jazz act', consisted of an older boy and a younger girl who each, alternately, in a creative manner, moving to the sound of music, lifted each other and their own weight up in the air, supporting themselves on each other's body.<sup>22</sup> One individual act consisted of a performer who 'juggled' small square boxes – which exhibited the letters I, S, D, A – sideways in the air until they formed the word AIDS. Yet another act consisted of a young boy who twists and turns his limbs, shocking the audience in disbelief.

In addition to the floor acts mentioned above, the circus also performs skits, short dramas, and theatre plays in combination with circus acts. These performances try to appeal to the audiences' imagination rather than being didactic or moralistic in nature. A skit that illustrates this well is one which portrays a gravedigger who becomes rich because of the massive need to bury those who have died from HIV/AIDS. It depicts a dramatic situation whereby one man's sorrow is another man's fortune.

In principle the circus performs once a week, in accordance with its mandates vis-à-vis its donor(s). These shows always have the same format. They are performed across Addis Ababa and are never announced to the public beforehand. On arriving at a particular venue, the Circus sets up its gear which consist of a small tent (where the performers can change, for example), sound equipment, a banner which exhibits the circus's name, a floor mat, etc. A rope is then placed around it to create a separation between the performers and its audience. After that the musicians start playing music at a high pitch. This attracts potential audiences who come out of curiosity to view what is happening and perhaps stay to watch the circus show, either partially or in its entirety.

The Circus also occasionally receives commissions to perform to a closed audience. This happens on special occasions when the Circus is invited to perform by embassies, organizations or individuals. In such cases the audience

and the location are predetermined. Furthermore, the performances are not per se held outdoors and are not gratis.

Finally, the Circus also carries out specific project-oriented performances. In the recent past it has successfully staged various short dramas and theatre plays, such as *The Gravedigger* and *The Hero*. These productions are submitted as projects, and receive extra funding aside from the regular funding which the circus acquires from its donors.

### ***The Circus Acts and their Impact***

Until 1995 both the Circus's costumes and acts contained foreign influences. For example, the Circus's costumes were Euro-American since they were donations from one of its overseas donors. Similarly, clown acts and tight-rope-walking were integrated into the shows. After 1995 bold changes were made, and all foreign influences were eliminated. Only Ethiopian ethnic costumes, music, and dance were henceforth used in the shows.

Ever since then, however, no new elements, in design or set-up, were incorporated in the circus shows. Likewise, the packaging and designing of the informative and educative aspect of the Circus's shows have not undergone much innovation. The same skits and short dramas are shown over and over again at different shows. Furthermore, the process by which the audience is given information and is educated has not undergone modification either.

The audiences have always assumed the role of consumer and the Circus the role of provider. The Circus designs and executes its shows without ever having consulted its audiences or researched their needs. In fact, a strategic impact assessment of the circus shows has never fully been carried out. Is the information we are sending out qualitatively acceptable and accurate? Is it in keeping with the image and values of the circus? And once we have disseminated the information, how do we follow up? Does it have any effect, or not? What is next? Is our audience one (the same) or is it different? Do we require a different approach or strategy? Such questions have neither been asked nor answered.

Admittedly, identifying the social impact of the Circus's work at individual and group (also: at institutional and societal) level is difficult, not least because of the qualitative nature of the changes it aims to bring about – behavioural change/ awareness and understanding of social issues and health related matters. Moreover, it is difficult to attribute success or failure for possible changes that may or may not have occurred with regard to behavioural change, etc., singularly to the circus. After all, the audiences are exposed to various stimuli besides the circus that could influence them one way or another.

## **Circus Addis Ababa as an NGO**

### ***A Historical Trajectory of the Circus Towards Realizing its NGO Status***

As already alluded to above, the circus initially started in Addis Ababa in 1991 and came to be known under the name of Circus Ethiopia (CE). Until 1993 CE functioned autonomously as a circus proper. In 1993 CE, along with circuses founded elsewhere (in Mekele, Nazareth, and Jimma), registered as a legal entity.<sup>23</sup> This was done with the intent to obtain an NGO status.<sup>24</sup>

In accordance with the 'letter of understanding' (Alemnesh and Yirga 2000:20) signed by the Board of Directors in 1997, in its day-to-day operation, CiE, as the head office, has the duty vis-à-vis its members to procure funding from various sources and distribute it among them. To this end, all member circuses are required to report to CiE on a monthly basis with their activity and financial report. It is upon receiving this report, in theory, that CiE allocates funding to the individual member circuses. Furthermore, it endeavours to facilitate cooperation and coordination among these circuses, provide their staff and performers with training through workshops, and supply them with facilities and equipment.

However, the above account of the relationship between CiE and its member circuses does not fully reflect the kind of relationship that exists between CiE and CAA. CiE and CAA have a somewhat symbiotic relationship – they have shared space, staff, and financial resources over the years, for example between 1993 and 1997 and again between 2001 and 2002. Furthermore, over the years the same individuals who ran CiE at management level also managed Circus Addis Ababa. These individuals carried out multiple functions both within CiE and CAA, and one individual in particular is still fulfilling double roles within both organizations. Finally, the salary of CiE's staff was paid for by Circus Addis Ababa.<sup>25</sup>

In short, CiE and CAA were and are still closely connected with one another on three fronts, geographically, economically and as regards the human resources they shared and still share. In the light of these connecting factors between these organizations, it is difficult to discuss and analyse Circus Addis Ababa and its situation without taking Circus in Ethiopia's influence into account.

### ***Organizational Aspects of the Circus***

Three founding members of the Circus played a crucial role in the day-to-day activities of CE and, later, Circus Addis Ababa. These people were Marc la Chance, Aweke Emiru, and Metmeku Yohannes.

From 1993 up to 1998, Marc la Chance stood at the helm of CiE and CAA as the Director General of the organizations. He dominated all aspects of the running of both circuses, while only the artistic aspect was in the hands of the Ethiopians.<sup>26</sup> Especially in the early years of the circus's life-cycle, he functioned as the 'charismatic' founder leader. He was able to use his contacts and personal qualities to mobilize resources and to manage the political environment within which CAA and CiE operated.

Aweke Emiru was the director of CiE and CAA until 1998. He automatically became the Acting Director General of CiE after Marc la Chance's entanglement in child abuse allegations and his consequent resignation. Not long after, however, while Aweke was away overseas, the board of directors appointed one of the founding members and chairman of the board, Metmeku Yohannes, a lawyer, to become the executive director of CiE, stripping Aweke of his post as Acting Director General. Thereafter, Aweke Emiru assumed the role of director and artistic director at CAA. After 2001, the year Metmeku Yohannes resigned his post, because the Circus had difficulty in hiring and retaining an executive director, Aweke Emiru was given the position of acting director within CiE, while retaining his position as director and artistic director at CAA.

Between 1993 and 1998, in the years that Marc la Chance was still present, the circus was run like a family business. There was an informal line of communication between the various circuses and staff members within the circuses. The directors of the various circuses knew each other on an informal basis, and the staff at Circus Addis Ababa was composed of family members and acquaintances.<sup>27</sup>

During these years the entire operation of the circuses was in the hands of a few people. CiE's board of directors, for example, was composed of the founding members and the directors of the four, and later five, circuses (i.e. CAA, Circus Mekele, Nazareth, Jimma, and later Dire Dawa). Those individuals who ran the day-to-day activities of their respective circuses were also the ones who set the policy of and bore legal responsibility for the circuses. Thus, the same people were the decision-makers, administrators and those who monitored the performance and accountability of the circuses. In short, there was no clear division between the various functions and no checks and balances that needed to be in place in order to achieve 'good governance'.

While an informal management style was sufficient to keep the circuses running smoothly at the early stage of their life-cycle, this was no longer attainable after 1998. This was owing to several reasons. To begin with, CAA lost its major donor, UNICEF, which had signed on in 1995 for a period of three years. During the time that UNICEF was on board as a donor, the

main focus of the circus, at the detriment of other priorities, was to scale-up its operation, to tour both nationally and internationally, and to develop its circus art. When it withdrew its support, the circus was left in a vacuum.

Additionally, CAA lost fifteen members of its circus troupe, which was almost half the troupe. The circus's performers along with their trainers defected to Australia, claiming abuse, and applied for refugee status there. This had grave consequences for the image of the circus, which until then only received praise from the media, both nationally and internationally. 'This has left the circus in a public relations crisis,' as Mr Metmku Yohannes rightly pointed out, 'from which it has yet to recover'.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, the permanent absence of Marc la Chance has had a devastating effect on the circus. Until then he had had a tight grip on the circus as the charismatic leader. He was indispensable to the organization, as he possessed qualities which enabled the circus to acquire resources and to manage its political environment. Of course, his absence may not have created a problem had there been a proper, professionally functioning organizational structure and a control mechanism in place coupled with a knowledge base, good reporting and filing system, and professionally trained personnel.

In the years following 1998, gradual changes have been taking place to formalize the circus's management and structure. In 2000 a consultancy team was hired to evaluate the management capacity and organizational system of the circus. Through systematic evaluation of both the internal and external environment of the circus, the consultancy team was able to take stock of the circus's constraints and the possibilities open to it. The findings were compiled in a report entitled: 'Five Year Strategic Plan & Management: 2001-2005'. The final objective of the report was to mitigate the identified shortcomings and constraints experienced by the circus within a period of four years, between 2001 and 2005.<sup>29</sup>

In 2001, a Netherlander by the name of Cees de Graaf was appointed by one of the circus's donors, Oxfam Novib, to assist the circus in its affairs, in the area of both management and organization. While he was initially hired to serve as a consultant, in 2002 he was put forward as a candidate to become the executive director of CiE. It was assumed he would be able to help strengthen the circus from within. Due to technical problems, however, he was unable officially to fill that position and had to gradually phase out his support to the circus.

In 2003 changes took place regarding the following three organs: the General Assembly, the Board of Directors, and the Executive Directors. A general assembly was first set up, which then elected a new board of directors composed of six individuals who were not directly related to the circus.

Then an executive director was recruited from outside the circus, based on his individual merits. This executive director resigned five months after his appointment. Another executive director was hired to replace him, again from outside.

As would appear from the measures taken by the circus, as explained above, they have mainly focused on building up its technical and management capacity. In so doing, they have failed to involve a process of self-analysis, learning and adapting over time.

### ***Limitations on the Circus's NGO Status: Financial Dependency and Sustainability***

As an NGO, CAA cannot participate in commercial activities. It has nonetheless creatively tried to find some means of generating income in order to achieve self-sustainability.<sup>30</sup> For many years one of CAA's most successful income-generating ventures was its international touring contracts, which are halted at present (2006). Other income generating schemes have consisted of introducing 'user' contribution fees, producing and selling circus articles, and giving closed performances to audiences upon request from third parties in exchange for a small contribution. None of these income generating activities can keep the circus financially afloat, however.

Donations and grants from donors have been and are still the vital sources of income for CAA. Since 1993 the circus has had half a dozen donors. Some of its donors in the past were UNICEF, Rädä Barnen, Red Barna, Oxfam GB, Friends of Circus in Ethiopia, Terres Des Hommes, and Dorcas. At present the Circus's major donors are Cirque du Soleil, Oxfam Novib, North American Conference of Ethiopian Jewry (NACJ), the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS) and the International Committee of the Red Crescent (ICRC).

Donor funding being CAA's life-line, it is forced to deal with multiple donors – each having different requirements, priorities for the organization, visions of success, and definitions of legitimacy. In general, an NGO that has multiple donors can expect to have to cope with numerous responsibilities. For instance, the need to accommodate the requests or demands of the various donors would require it to write (and submit) various project reports, funding proposals, quarterly reports, end-of-project reports, and to make evaluations and baseline assessments for each individual donor. If delegates of the various donors wished to come and visit it, it would have to receive and entertain them.<sup>31</sup> And so forth.

Specifically in the case of CAA, with the exception of receiving and entertaining donors, it has not been as obliging in other ways. It has eschewed its responsibility of being transparent and accountable to its donors for many

years. Interviews with several of the circus's former and present donors revealed a lack of probity<sup>32</sup> and inadequate reporting of performance.<sup>33</sup> For instance, one ICRC personnel member admitted that 'two batches of funding', provided by this organization had 'ended up in material and capital purchases'. He went on to propose that the circus 'needs to [keep a] balance between what percentages of its budget goes into the capital of purchases and what gets into the actual activity out in the field'.<sup>34</sup>

This phenomenon described just might perhaps mainly be attributed to the lack of good management and technical capacity within the circus. The circus is in dire need of bringing the knowledge base of its staff up to standard with regard to all aspects of administration. To name but a few, such skills as budgeting, accounting, fundraising, and grant writing are lacking. There is also a dearth of managerial skills such as organizing, planning, strategizing, team-building, etc. One could perhaps conclude that there is a lack of well-qualified personnel capable of running the circus effectively and efficiently.

However, as one of the Circus's former donors suggested, 'It is not only the presence of well-qualified staff that is important, it is as important that the organization has a clear direction and commitment from top to bottom. Without clear direction and commitment, even if an organization has capable professionals, they will be discouraged'.<sup>35</sup> Two things are important in order for CAA to realize clear direction and commitment. First, it is essential that its mission, vision, values and objectives are endorsed and adhered to by its entire staff. Second, its mission and objectives must evolve over time on the basis of systematic evaluation of both internal and external environment.

Especially since the Circus's public relations crisis, it too often has experienced discontinuation in its operations due to changing executive directors. The kind of leadership the Circus would need to pull its various resources together in order to (re)orient itself in one direction was undermined by this unstable environment in which it functioned. Also the absence of structures and mechanisms for control and the inability of the board to fulfil its duties by the book have adversely affected the proper functioning of the circus.<sup>36</sup> The newly appointed board of directors has yet to prove its capacity to execute its duty effectively.

Despite having been active for many years as an NGO, to date CAA's chief concern in its day-to-day operation is simply its organizational survival. Of course, an organization cannot carry out its mission and objectives without its own maintenance, and as such, concerns in that regard will always be important to any organization, including the circus. It is important to keep in mind, however, to what extent this concern for survival is dictating the goals and activities which are being carried out on a daily basis by people within the organization.

The measures recently taken by the circus, such as restructuring the organization by recruiting new personnel, assessing the circus's management capacity and organizational systems, etc., have all been directed towards affecting changes at the management level. In other words, organization-centred activities (= activities which aim to secure and maintain the organization itself) have been the Circus's main focus. Consequently activities directed towards accomplishing the organization's goals, programme-centred activities, have taken the back seat.

### **Conclusion**

Although Circus Addis Ababa started out as a circus proper and later obtained its status as an NGO, it is still a circus. It still aims at entertaining its audiences through its artistic expression, and as such it remains an artistic medium. As any other conventional circus it has the function to entertain, shock, inspire, enlighten, amuse, invert reality, etc. The circus, like the theatre, is also a cultural activity, and as such it can be used in development work.

As a cultural activity one can place the circus in the category of culture as method, which is used as a tool and not as a 'process'. This is because the output is always predetermined by the circus, with the audiences defined as 'recipients' of information rather than responsive and active participants in the creation process of its dissemination work. Used as a tool, the circus, through its performances, is able to entertain its audience, disseminate information to and educate them on various social and health related issues. In essence, one can conclude that circus proper, viewed as a cultural activity regardless of its organizational set-up (thus even regardless of its being an NGO), can be used or co-opted to function as a tool for development.

The civic responsibility of the circus stems from the fact that it is an NGO. As an NGO, according to its mandate vis-à-vis its donors, it has the responsibility of committing itself to social and community development. One aspect of Circus Addis Ababa's civic duty, which is the dissemination of socially relevant information for the purpose of educating and informing its audiences, is connected to the circus being an artistic medium or outlet. As an NGO, Circus Addis Ababa is able to carry out its mandate by using circus art – through circus acts, (comedy) skits and dramas.

Another aspect of the circus's civic responsibility pertains to the performers and their well-being. It is assumed that by participating in the circus the performers will reap certain benefits. To begin with, they will be aided in their educational growth. Furthermore, they will be provided with counselling and guidance in career selection and growth. Finally, their safety/security requirements will be met and guaranteed.

One could rightly assume that the artistic and civic responsibilities of the circus are interlinked, and reinforce each other. The only way Circus Addis Ababa, as an NGO, can carry out its mandate and its duty to its beneficiaries, is through circus art and through being an artistic institution. Conversely, although the circus on its own, as a cultural activity, could manage to realize social and community development; however, as an artistic medium it would not be able to survive because it is still a young artistic form which has yet to fully be embraced by the society at large. It needs external funding to sustain itself, and only as an NGO is it able to procure money from donors.

In principle, one could argue that the circus should be able to fulfil both functions (i.e., as entertainment and artistic/cultural medium, and as an agent of social and cultural development) without any friction or contradiction arising between these two duties. Being an NGO, however, the circus's ability satisfactorily to fulfil both its functions has been hampered by various organizational and institutional problems.

At the heart of the circus's organizational and institutional problems lies its inability to effectively deal with the issue of sustainability, both at the material (financial viability) and non-material level. At the last level, the circus's sustainability-related problems are rooted in a few areas: to begin with, its inability to effectively implement its mission, vision, values and objectives. Also, the insufficient and ineffective manner in which the Circus has been governed by the board, and the way it has dealt with its public image, has adversely affected it. Finally, the circus has not done a good job at building its capacity and being accountable to one of its significant stakeholders – its donors.

Overall the circus's main focus has been its financial viability, as the funding it receives from its donors has always been its one major source of income. The circus feels that it is placed in a position of perpetual uncertainty and insecurity regarding its future income flow. This feeling dictates the priorities it sets. Consequently, the Circus's bottom-line is its own organizational survival. However, since for its proper functioning a healthy balance is needed between the circus's organizational-centred activities and its programme-centred activities, this approach taken by the circus jeopardizes its overall sustainability.

Within the Ethiopian context, the circus is faced with a structurally embedded problem of how to survive as an NGO without violating the regulations it must abide by having such a status. As an NGO it is unable to engage in income-generating activities and is thus dependent on external funding from international development organizations. Its dependency on outside resources compromises its autonomy and diverts its focus away

from its beneficiaries. The dilemma is that the imperative of survival requires the circus as an NGO to place its own interest, that is, its organizational survival, first and to direct its prime responsibility towards its donors rather than to its beneficiaries.

### Notes

1. I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Jan Abbink for providing me with advice and guidance in the processes of writing this paper.
2. The member circuses are divided into associate and branch circuses. They are respectively, Circus Addis Ababa, Circus Jimma, Circus Dire Dawa, Circus Nazareth and Circus Tigray/Mekele, and Circus Debre Birhan, Circus Dessie, Circus Wolkite, Circus Awassa, Circus Arsi, Circus Bahar Dar, Circus Gonder and Circus Hargeisa/Somaliland.
3. The broad perspective of culture is akin to the anthropological definition of culture.
4. Herein culture is manifested in music, art, painting, dance, folklore, literature, and the cultural heritage.
5. Gould, H., 'How Culture Matters to Development', retrieved from <http://www.bond.org.uk/networker/2004/april04/culture.htm>. See also: Gould, H. and Marsh, M., 2005, *Culture: Hidden Development*, London: ECO Distribution.
6. See for general overviews, J. Plastow (1996, 1998).
7. Theories put forward by Paul Bouissac (1976), Milton Singer (1959 and 1972), and Victor Turner (1957, 1967, 1969, 1977, 1984, and 1987) help to identify circus as a cultural performance and thus establish a relationship between culture and circus.
8. Governance is the ongoing process within organizations by which guidelines for decision making, mission and action are developed and compliance with them is monitored (Tandon 2002:215).
9. According to Edward and Hulme, both 'upward' and 'downward' accountabilities can be achieved simultaneously if there is a conducive environment available within the NGO (1995:223).
10. These activities refer to the relationship between an organization's means and ends. Organization-centred activities focus on taking care of the organization by acquiring resources, maintaining the staff, and maintaining a safe environment for the organization. These activities are aimed at securing and maintaining the organization itself. Programme-centred activities, on the other hand, focus on accomplishing the organization's goal. Too much emphasis on programme-centred activities at the expense of organization-centred activities, on the one hand, can lead the organization to self-destruct. Unless an organization maintains itself, programme activities can destroy the organization, because an organization cannot carry out a project without its own maintenance. On the other hand, too much emphasis on organization-centred activities can

lead an organization to act primarily out of an interest in self-perpetuation. In this case, the organization may abandon its primary objectives and seek to maintain itself for its own sake (Suzuki 1998:13).

11. Such a formulation brings to light the relational aspect – SNGOs being strengthened by donors – of capacity building.
12. Semenuik (1997).
13. NACCOJ is the organization that is operating the programme enabling the Beta Israel to settle in Israel.
14. Andy Goldman, personal communication, January 2004.
15. Marc la Chance took his own life in 1999 after he had been implicated in a child abuse case related to the Circus.
16. Mr Tegabe, former director of the Circus, personal communication, March 2004.
17. It is very important to note that outsiders may determine the topics, but the plays are given form by the circus.
18. The Circus was twice entangled in child abuse allegations, in 1998 and 2001. In both cases it was during a tour abroad that the cases came to light, and those involved requested asylum based on these allegations.
19. My field research focused mainly on the first group, the Performing Group.
20. The prevailing view among the staff was that the performers were ‘children community workers’ and that their contribution was to give ‘service to the community’. The logic behind this view was that the ‘circus is meant to serve society’, and not ‘its members’. And since the performers were members of the circus, it followed that they themselves did not benefit but stood in service of the community at large. If, nevertheless, they did indeed benefit, it should be secondary or be seen as a fringe benefit.
21. In general, peer education assumes that certain members of a given peer group (peer educators) can be influential in eliciting individual behavioural change among their peers (in: Project proposal: The Hero: an Opera by Circus in Ethiopia, 2002:6).
22. The performers’ age and gender difference, which transcends traditional barriers, stunned most audiences.
23. Marc la Chance, Aweke Emiru, Metmeku Yohannes, Yared Eshetu and Barbara Stubbs formed the required five founding members for the registration of the circus.
24. After the Circus’s registration the umbrella organization was named CiE, the Addis Ababa associate circus was named CAA, and CE was used as a blanket name when the circus travelled abroad.
25. Aweke Emiru, personal communication, January 2004.
26. Metmku Yohannes, personal communication, January 2004.
27. Tsina Kebede, personal communication, February 2004.
28. Metmeku Yohannes, personal communication, January 2004.
29. The management of the circus conceded that these objectives were idealistic intentions and did not carry much weight.

30. The law in Ethiopia prohibits NGOs in participating in income-generating activities. This law has been somehow relaxed in recent years, however.
31. Hudock, A., 1999, *NGOs and Civil Society: Democracy by Proxy?*, Polity Press, London.
32. It denotes 'the honesty and efficiency with which resources are used' (Edwards and Hulme 1999:9).
33. It refers to 'the impact and effectiveness of the work' done or performed by an NGO (Edwards and Hulme 1999:9).
34. Alex Mone, personal communication, January 2004.
35. Hosaena Addisu (Save the Children), personal communication, January 2004.
36. The board should have been able to: (a) establish and oversee the mission and purpose of the organization; (b) select, support, and review performance of the chief executive; (c) provide long-range direction and evaluate programs; (d) ensure the financial stability of the organization; (e) promote the image of the organization; (f) assess its performance systematically; and (g) serve as court of appeal. ([Http://www.cedpa.org/publications/sustainingthebenefits/sustainingthebenefits3.pdf](http://www.cedpa.org/publications/sustainingthebenefits/sustainingthebenefits3.pdf) ).

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