Doc Together Think Tank Report

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Executive Summary

Filmmakers working in exile or under conditions of risk face complex and interconnected barriers that affect every stage of their work, from development and financing to mobility, production, and ultimately reaching audiences. While many organisations, festivals, and support structures already exist, the current landscape remains fragmented, difficult to navigate, and often inaccessible due to language barriers or strict eligibility policies.

Doc Together was created to respond to this gap. Rather than duplicating existing initiatives, the aim is to connect knowledge, share responsibility, and build more continuous and coordinated forms of support across the film ecosystem.

This report summarises the outcomes of the first Doc Together think tank, which gathered filmmakers, producers, festivals, markets, NGOs, lawyers, and other industry professionals to exchange experiences and identify practical next steps. Through six thematic working groups, participants mapped key challenges and proposed ideas drawn from experiences from their fields of expertise.

The six chapters of the report focus on:

• **Film Funding** – barriers to accessing public and institutional funds, eligibility restrictions, and the need for more flexible and context-sensitive criteria.

• **Mapping Resources and Information** – the difficulty of navigating fragmented or overwhelming information, and the need for clearer, shared, and regularly updated information tailored specifically to filmmakers at risk.

• **From Short- to Long-Term Support** – bridging emergency measures such as relocation or residencies with sustainable career pathways, professional networks, and long-term stability.

• **Visibility and Distribution** – ensuring that films not only get made but also reach audiences, through alternative distribution, advocacy, and an approach that values filmmakers beyond narratives of victimhood.

• **Mobility and Visas** – travel restrictions, costs, and safety concerns that limit participation in festivals, markets, and co-productions, and the need for more proactive institutional support.

• **Fair International Co-Productions** – addressing power imbalances, administrative barriers, and unequal partnerships, and exploring models that recognise creative and non-financial contributions more equitably.

This report provides a thorough overview of the event's planning and curation, the main challenges discussed, potential next steps, and final reflections. It has been compiled from notes taken by note-takers at each table and aims to provide a clear summary of each working group's discussion and options moving forward.

Two key priorities consistently emerged. First, the importance of developing a clearer understanding of the term "filmmaker at risk", while recognising that this definition must remain adaptable to changing circumstances and evolving contexts. Second, the need to create more opportunities that support artistic development within safe and sustainable professional environments.

Based on the discussions on all tables, several practical suggestions were identified that can be implemented by different industry stakeholders according to their resources and capacities. These include:

• Creation of support programmes for market and festival navigation

• Establishment of regional Guiding hubs that could help direct filmmakers at risk to programs, information, and contacts.

• Development of a shared visa guide, created in collaboration with partner festivals and regularly updated.

• Provision of mental health support during industry events

• Mentorship-based systems to support filmmakers attending markets, among other initiatives.

• Integration of post-programme support structures from the early design of programmes.

Participants expressed importance to continue collaborating across institutions and sectors to test and implement some of these ideas in practice.

1. Introduction to Doc Together

Filmmakers who have been forced to leave their home countries or who continue to work under perilous conditions face immense challenges in financing and producing their films, as well as in accessing support and resources.

While Thessaloniki's Agora, DOK Leipzig, and their partners, along with many international festivals and markets, have successfully hosted individuals and delegations, we recognise that one-time invitations alone are not enough to support these filmmakers in fully realising their projects and bringing completed films to audiences.

Doc Together is a new initiative launched in March 2025 by DOK Leipzig and the Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival. It is dedicated to supporting displaced or exiled filmmakers, as well as those working under perilous conditions in their home countries. The initiative aims to build a coalition for sustained support, going beyond isolated opportunities and sets out to create secure and nurturing environments for filmmakers at risk to develop and market their work.

Doc Together explores how filmmakers can access funding, resources, and industry support in contexts where national funding opportunities are limited or inaccessible due to political conditions or conflict. The initiative is rooted in the belief that better supporting filmmakers requires collaboration, cross-sector thinking, and innovative funding structures that extend beyond traditional grants. As festivals, we are uniquely positioned to contribute to these efforts by serving as connectors, facilitators, and incubators for new solutions.

As part of DOK Leipzig, in October 2025, we hosted a think tank with 60 participants, including filmmakers, producers, festival and market representatives, funders, industry professionals, lawyers, and NGOs with experience supporting at-risk artists and journalists. The discussions focused on the current situation of filmmakers facing acute or severe risks worldwide, the resources available, those still needed, and how to address issues of prevention, protection, and advocacy.

2. Think Tank

During the launch of Doc Together at TIDF AGORA in March 2025, we confirmed the fact that support for filmmakers at risk or in exile remains fragmented. Rather than working with only one or two partners, we recognised the need to engage with a broader network, moving together toward collective first steps to support those who risk their lives to create films, as well as those who have had to leave their countries to continue their work.

We began by researching institutions that support at-risk artists, journalists, and others to learn from their experience, identify potential partners, avoid duplication, and identify gaps to create a more equitable industry landscape. Many already provide vital assistance, including legal aid, relocation support, advocacy, mobility, residencies, and digital safety training. However, the consensus was that these organisations face significantly higher demand than they can cover, both in terms of budgets and capacity, as many operate with small teams. There was also a shared acknowledgement that demand is increasing in the current global context, as more countries lean toward authoritarianism; and freedom of speech and democratic values become increasingly fragile or, in some cases, non-existent.

Throughout the research process and conversations with organisations, institutions, and filmmakers, we identified six main challenges that guided the think tank discussions:

- Film Funding
- Mapping Resources and Information
- From Short- to Long-Term Support

- Visibility and Distribution of Films
- Mobility and Visas
- Fair International Co-Productions

The think tank was an on-site, closed event that allowed connections and open exchange without fear of exposure or repercussions. Participants were matched to tables at which they could actively contribute or benefit, with each group comprising filmmakers, NGOs, festival and market representatives, and other industry professionals, such as broadcasters, sales agents, funders, training initiatives, and consultants.

It is important to acknowledge that, given the event's geographical location and other practical limitations, most participants were originally from Europe or the 'Global North'. Nevertheless, representatives from other regions were included at each table to ensure, as much as possible, a diversity of perspectives.

I. Film Funding

One of the main barriers identified is that the strict eligibility criteria and institutional policies often shape access to funds. Filmmakers in exile or living under authoritarian regimes face additional barriers, ranging from nationality requirements to bureaucratic hurdles. Participants at this table were given a set of questions to trigger the initial brainstorm, and were asked to consider the issue at regional, national, and international levels:

- *What barriers do filmmakers at risk or in exile face in accessing film funds?*

- *Are the eligibility criteria inclusive? What are some examples you know of inclusive funds?*

- *Are there existing examples of flexible or emergency funding models worth adapting?*

- *What are good examples of funds tackling creative & power imbalances caused by eligibility requirements?*

I.I. Discussion Points

Barriers to Accessing Funding

The group began by reflecting on the barriers that prevent filmmakers from applying for or receiving support.

For displaced filmmakers and those in exile:

- Eligibility frameworks often exclude relocated filmmakers, who no longer qualify in their country of origin. Still, they cannot compete on equal terms with established filmmakers in host countries (e.g., Germany, France).

- Funding terminology and application language are frequently complex and inaccessible.

- Migration makes long-term and sustainable funding significantly more difficult.

For filmmakers who remain in their home countries:

- Filmmakers from countries where national funding is severely limited or instable (e.g., Ukraine), or where public funding is inaccessible to projects that do not align with the political priorities of those in power (e.g., Hungary, Georgia, Belarus, Turkey), must compete for international funding with peers who have greater access to resources.

- The issue is not talent, but structural inequality and access.

- Political instability and repression severely limit opportunities for artistic development.

- Often, only production funding is available, while development funding is urgently needed to offer time, safety, and mental space for developing work.

Eligibility Criteria and Definitions

The group found that a central challenge is defining what constitutes a "filmmaker at risk." Criteria are necessary, but overly broad definitions are challenging for small funding teams to manage. While some NGOs are currently helping to shape more precise definitions, fund representatives stressed that film funds are not experts in the topic; therefore, collaboration with human rights experts is vital. Criteria are currently being developed with the understanding that they must remain adaptable and open to revision.

Another challenge identified was that eligibility requirements often stipulate that a film be shot in the region, while in practice transferring funds to collaborators in countries with authoritarian regimes can be extremely difficult or even impossible. As a result, filmmakers are often forced to work across borders or relocate temporarily to continue their projects.

This reality highlights how funding challenges are closely tied to questions of mobility and visas. The group discussed the importance of flexible funding models when working in contexts of crisis, as financial support alone is often insufficient without parallel solutions for travel and legal access. A concrete example raised was ARTE's Generation Ukraine initiative, as Ukrainian filmmakers, for instance, often require additional financial support for per diems, or extended stays abroad in cases where returning home is not possible.

Throughout this initiative, ARTE identified the importance of early and careful coordination with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ease visa access.

The Role of Diplomacy and Institutions

The participants agreed that strong ties to Ministries of Foreign Affairs can be decisive. Producers in the Global North can play a crucial role by acting as intermediaries, connecting filmmakers to institutions and helping navigate visa processes and security risks. One example described a producer who worked closely with foreign ministries to help journalists and filmmakers leave Afghanistan and Iran, while documenting the process. As a takeaway, our participants found that producers can play a meaningful role through diplomacy, advocacy, and institutional access.

Sustainability of Funding

Political shifts pose a significant threat to funding stability. In some cases, federal offices have reduced or completely withdrawn funding. While public funds are particularly vulnerable to political changes, private funding is not entirely immune. Private foundations can also be placed under pressure to align with shifting political climates or face threats of sanctioning when their values or priorities do not align with political agendas. Examples discussed included foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, which have at times faced political scrutiny.

There was broad agreement on the need to diversify funding sources. Relying on one or two major funders creates vulnerability. Agility and flexibility were identified as crucial strategies for responding to rapidly changing risk environments. Participants emphasised that funding should be situation-specific and time-sensitive, addressing who is at risk and when, without adding new layers of bureaucracy or constraint.

Structural Limits of National and Regional Funds

A participant from a German fund expressed that federal and regional funds face structural constraints. While subsidies can theoretically be spent internationally, regional spending requirements exist to support the local economy and must pass auditing processes. This creates tension when working with filmmakers in restrictive regimes. The group commented that large film funds must develop new models of cooperation with funds in countries facing political repression.

Artistic Integrity

A major concern raised was the impact of funding frameworks on artistic integrity. Support structures often come with implicit expectations that filmmakers define themselves through disadvantage or trauma. This can lead to reductive narratives where artists feel pressured to justify their work by foregrounding suffering, exile, or political hardship. Participants reflected on the following challenges:

- It risks reducing artistic identity to political struggle.

- Filmmakers are often asked to "prove" harm or suffering in applications.

- Concern was raised about whether films must address trauma to justify funding.

- Artistic practices are being filtered through a lens of crisis, limiting creative freedom.

Filmmakers' Perspectives

Filmmakers from countries with authoritarian governments shared concrete challenges from their current professional contexts:

- They emphasized the need to support filmmakers before they are forced into exile.

- Recent political changes constrain filmmakers' access to international financial support and cross-border collaboration.

- Even when funding is secured, spending the money locally is increasingly complex.

- National funding is inaccessible for certain narratives, but leaving the country is not an option due to family and other personal reasons.

- Regional spending requirements in some countries, such as Germany, can exceed 100 percent, forcing filmmakers to spend abroad and making local production financially unfeasible.

- When national funding systems are inaccessible or have collapsed, the role of a producer is unclear, particularly in co-productions where domestic financial participation is expected.

Safety, Care, and Support

The discussion expanded beyond funding to broader questions of safety and survival:

- Filmmakers need support systems that consider families, not just individuals.

- Strong networks, solidarity, and cross-sector expertise are essential.

- The challenge is not a lack of resources, but a lack of connection among existing resources.

- The need for residency programmes was raised throughout the discussion. It was recognised that even when lives are not under immediate threat, creative work requires mental space, time, and stability.

I.II. Key Takeaways and Proposed Ideas

From the discussion, key ideas and possible solutions emerged, such as:

- Strengthening alliances between public and independent funding bodies.

- Encouraging cross-border collaboration between funds with shared or flexible requirements.

- Public and independent funds shall further strengthen their understanding and implementation of digital security practices to safeguard filmmakers in threatening circumstances.

- Cooperating with NGOs and human rights organisations.

- Implementing pilot programs to test new funding and administrative models outside existing rigid frameworks (e.g., New Democracy Fund in Denmark).

- Organising targeted meetings or conferences with decision-makers and policymakers to address structural barriers.

- Learning from existing models such as artist at risk funds and Generation Ukraine.

- Exploring alternative funding structures from the arts sector, where private funders are more active.

- Developing safe and discreet ways to transfer funds in restrictive environments (e.g., through organisations or companies in neighbouring countries to reduce political exposure).

- Adapting administrative systems, including alternative invoicing and reporting, for example accepting non-standard documentation, routing payments through intermediaries, or covering indirect costs.

- Support structures should encourage artistic diversity and creative autonomy, allowing filmmakers to explore a wider spectrum of stories and perspectives.

- Recognising and supporting the changing role of producers:
  - This role increasingly includes the duty of care and aftercare towards collaborators and filmmakers..
  - Producers frequently act as intermediaries between multiple systems, navigating international funding rules, legal frameworks, safety considerations, and cross-border production logistics.
  - Safety concerns can also affect how communication with funding bodies takes place, sometimes avoiding written communication altogether.
  - Balancing transparency requirements from funds with the film team's security needs (e.g., unpublished projects, anonymised credits, and non- traceable documentation).

II. Mapping of Resources and Information

Among the first challenges identified was the limited availability of clear, accessible, and context-specific information for filmmakers. While many initiatives, programs, and support mechanisms already exist, information is often fragmented, too broad, and scattered across different platforms, making it difficult to navigate. For filmmakers this can result in an overload of information without clear guidance on which resources are relevant to their specific situation, or on who the appropriate point of contact is. This table explored how shared resources could be collected, structured, and maintained in a practical and up-to-date manner. Participants at this table were given a set of questions to trigger the initial brainstorm:

- *What information and resources are most urgently needed (financial, legal, housing, safety, networks)?*

- *What is already available, and how do we avoid duplication?*

- *How do we ensure international and geographical coverage?*

- *What structures are needed to keep resources regularly updated and accessible?*

- *Who could take responsibility for maintaining such a mapping?*

- *How could we centralise information and make sure filmmakers can easily find it?*

II.I.Discussion Points

Defining Resources

The discussion first focused on clarifying the meaning of the term resource in the context of filmmakers at risk with specific needs shaped by lived experiences in unstable or unsafe realities.

- Resources go beyond data or funding, and include:
  - Human resources and trusted contacts
  - Legal guidance
  - Psychological and mental health support

- At their best, resources should be:
  - Useful, supportive, and practical
  - Up-to-date and accessible
  - Able to help navigate complex situations, such as:
    - Who to contact
    - Which tools are safe to use
    - Who can be trusted

Several questions emerged regarding the form resources should take. Should a manual or guide provide practical instructions for challenging situations? Should it cover multiple countries rather than be limited to a single location? Participants suggested that while strategies for setting up resources can be shared, specific details must be flexible and individualised to respond to diverse circumstances. When considering resources, other challenges should include natural disasters, loss of workspace, and urgent financial needs.

Provision of Resources

The provision of resources raises questions about responsibility, sustainability, and safety for those offering support. For instance, asylum cases require additional considerations that standard procedures may not account for. From the filmmaker's perspective, key questions include:

- What do I need?

- How do I find the resources?

- Who can I contact?

The consensus was that legal and financial support is paramount, and that practical tools, such as phone numbers and reliable contacts, are essential.

Participants discussed several aspects, such as:

- Sustainability
  - How to assemble resources and keep them up to date over time?
  - Who is responsible for maintaining them?

- Language barriers:
  - Many resources are framed from a Global North perspective.
  - Strong need for materials in Arabic, French, Spanish, and other languages, not only English
  - Safety and communication concerns:
  - Secure communication channels may be necessary in the collection and sharing of resources.
  - Sharing information openly can create risk rather than protection.

The group stressed the importance of recognising the limits of support.

- Not every well-intentioned offer is a helpful resource.

- In some cases, intervention can cause harm.

- Power dynamics must be acknowledged and rethought.

- Personal circumstances and family implications are often unknown to those offering help.

- A universal "blueprint" is seen as nearly impossible.

Centralisation

The discussion shifted toward whether resources should be centralised. It was recognised that centralisation is challenging because each locality has different legal, political, and cultural contexts, and situations can change rapidly. Existing examples were mentioned, such as temporary European platforms supporting artists at risk and general informational handbooks. Participants shared that these handbooks provide guidance but remain broad and non-specific.

The group noted that while strategies for setting up resources can be shared, specific operational details are often highly individual and context dependent. The group raised the following questions:

- Can manuals or handbooks be created that are useful without being overly centralised?

- Can support guides span multiple countries rather than being limited to a single nation?

Industry Perspectives

Festivals and industry events play a central role in supporting filmmakers at risk. They are often the primary platforms for assessing projects, understanding the filmmaker's context, and building trust. While handbooks or guides can provide general guidance, trust, networking, and personal relationships remain more effective than standardised resources.

From a commissioning and broadcasting perspective, decisions require detailed information and protocols for commissioning projects. It was acknowledged that decision-making for commissioning can often involve more political than artistic considerations.

Open questions included:

- Who provides background and risk assessments?

- Do broadcasters have internal guidelines or protocols?

- How can filmmakers be guided through commissioning processes?

II.II. Key Takeaways and Proposed Ideas

- Prioritising legal and financial guidance as the core of any resource framework.

- Favour adaptable, decentralised resource models over rigid centralised systems.

- Sharing methodologies and strategies rather than fixed manuals.

- Integrating multilingual access from the beginning.

- Relying on trusted networks, peer exchange, and relationship-based knowledge sharing.

- Embedding security awareness and ethical responsibility into all resource-sharing practices.

- Involving institutions, festivals, and broadcasters in more active roles.

- Reflecting on the role of institutions and festivals in hosting resources and identifying other stakeholders who could be involved in maintaining and updating them.

- Ensuring accessible information about existing funding for filmmakers at risk.

- Enabling tools such as:
  - Lists of guiding questions for filmmakers to assess what they need and what's available.
  - Legal support references
  - Accountability frameworks
  - Guidance on censorship
  - Mental health support and referral sheets

- When creating a guide of resources, the group suggests considering:
  - Clearly dating information
  - Peer-to-peer exchanges through meetings
  - Learning and/or collaborating with existing initiatives (e.g., Artist-Run, valued for its practical approach)

III. From Short- to Long-Term Support

We recognised that emergency support, such as relocation, temporary accommodation, or artistic residencies, is essential; however, filmmakers often find themselves in limbo once short-term support ends, or struggle to access local networks and the industry, particularly when navigating new languages and unfamiliar systems. Beyond immediate assistance, filmmakers need pathways to rebuild their lives and careers. This table focused on how to connect urgent support with longer-term opportunities and networks, using the following questions as a starting point:

- *Short term (Emergency and relocation support, residencies training initiatives), what works, and what doesn't?*

- *What happens after the end of a programme?*

- *What is missing to ensure real long-term support?*

- *How do we support integration into the job market, community building, and sustained careers?*

- *What role can mental health, language support, and legal aid play in long-term resilience?*

- *As festivals, markets, funders, and other industry professionals, what can we realistically do or assist with regarding short- or long-term support?*

III.I. Discussion Points

Working Under Risk

The group began the conversation by having the filmmakers share their first-hand experiences and the consequences of working under political and social pressure.

A filmmaker described facing unexpected repercussions after making films about human rights and social justice. Following the release of a highly political film, they were unable to return to their country. Beyond physical displacement, the participant highlighted the difficulty of finding a sustainable professional path, particularly in a market where similar narratives are increasingly prevalent. A key question they raised was how to move forward creatively and how to work with the vulnerabilities that emerge from exile rather than being defined by them.

Another filmmaker spoke about working on a film that addresses censorship and sensitive family dynamics. They explained that openly criticising the country's government would effectively close off platforms for their work. The personal toll of this situation is significant, particularly the fear of exposing family members to risk. The participant shared that the filmmaking process has required therapy and nearly twice the usual production time. A clear distinction emerged between filmmakers who can work without barriers and those who must constantly navigate them, while also struggling to maintain confidence and perspective.

What is Support

The discussion emphasised that support cannot be limited to financial resources alone.

Participants proposed a broader understanding of "assets," including:

- Collective and individual memory

- Filmmaker communities

- Archive materials.

- Networks and long-term relationships

A shared concern was that many of these assets are fragile and often disappear when filmmakers are forced to relocate or live under ongoing threat.

Safety

Safety was discussed not as a fixed condition but as a constantly shifting framework. Participants agreed that:

- Safety depends on understanding what risks one is willing or able to take.

- It requires continuous reassessment through trial and error.

- Painful experiences must inform future practices to avoid repetition.

- Any safety framework must remain flexible and regularly updated.

The group reflected on the increasing fragility of public funding in a shifting political landscape. Participants acknowledged that even strong institutional backing no longer guarantees safety or continuity.

Mental Health, Gatekeeping, and Institutional Limits

Mental health emerged as a central issue across the entire support ecosystem. From the funders' perspective, there is an ongoing challenge in curating and providing appropriate resources while navigating institutional constraints.

The group questioned the role of industry "gatekeepers" and the responsibilities involved in deciding whether to support projects that carry significant risk. Participants reflected on situations in which filmmakers faced serious repercussions due to the political nature of their work, while the institutions that had supported or screened the projects had limited mechanisms to provide further assistance. This raised broader questions about institutional responsibility and what happens to filmmakers once they move beyond the scope of specific programmes, particularly when organisations no longer have a clear mandate to intervene.

Bureaucratic frameworks were identified as major obstacles. Even within supportive organisations, rules and administrative processes can hinder timely or adequate responses.

From the perspective of training initiatives, a participant noted that managing expectations was a significant challenge and emphasised the importance of avoiding overpromising, particularly in short-term programs where months pass quickly. While peer support is valuable, there are clear limits to what institutions can realistically offer.

It was widely agreed that stipends alone are insufficient. The challenges filmmakers face extends well beyond financial survival and include legal insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and long-term instability.

Institutional Responsibility and Power

It was discussed that institutions do not have all the answers and that, at times, they have unintentionally caused harm. Participants noted that festivals and institutions can become unsafe spaces when they fail to recognise the responsibilities that accompany their power.

A participant expressed the need for psychosocial support structures to maintain resilience and prevent negativity from taking over. Participants also observed that identical policies can be interpreted differently across institutions.

However, learning to work within these systems was considered a necessary skill. This includes:

- Understanding existing rules and why they exist

- Recognising which constraints are informal rather than fixed.

- Identifying allies within governmental or institutional structures who can support safe and flexible schemes.

Thinking Long Term

The discussion around long-term support focused less on the amount of available funding and more on how resources are circulated. A core question was: how can stories be framed and communicated so that support continues to flow to those who need to keep telling them?

Participants also noted that most organisations lack post-program support structures. Ongoing needs often include:

• Legal assistance

• Secure and flexible residency options

• Continued mental health support.

• Long-term mentorships

• Access to production financing

It was acknowledged that some individuals are better equipped to ask for help than others, and that prolonged exposure to crisis and trauma can prevent someone from being able to ask for support.

III.II. Key Takeaways and Proposed Ideas

Participants highlighted the importance of anti-colonial approaches, noting that institutional expectations and imaginaries are often shaped unconsciously. Especially for those based in the Global North, this was identified as an ongoing process of unlearning that must inform how support structures are designed and implemented.

Another key takeaway was the value of working from within institutions to enable gradual change. Participants emphasised the impact of small actions, valuing small wins and allyship at the operational level, and internal advocacy, even when resistance increases at higher decision-making levels.

Participants also outlined shared principles for moving forward:

• Shifting from one-size-fits-all models toward tailored, collaborative support

• Learning from existing partnerships and cross-organisational initiatives (e.g., IDA and Women Make Movies)

• Accepting the need for triage in decision-making as demand increases and budgets remain limited.

• To use a jury system to assess cases.

• Redefining Success Metrics (e.g., productivity output vs. rest and recuperation)

• Acknowledging change and what's different in new situations.

• Understanding where project support begins and ends.

• Recognising limitations while exploring possibilities for expansion

• Integrating post-programme support structures from the early design of programmes.

Finally, the group reflected on a resource philosophy grounded in people rather than projects. Support was described as an invitation into someone's world, requiring care, responsibility, and knowledge of one's own limitations. A participant noted that small amounts of institutional or individual power can be used creatively, by finding "loopholes" within existing systems and by imagining an ecosystem based on exchange and mutual support rather than competition.

IV. Visibility and Distribution of Films

Filmmakers often take significant personal and professional risks to produce their films, yet these efforts fall short if the work does not ultimately reach audiences. This table focuses on how to ensure that filmmakers at risk are not only protected but also meaningfully visible, heard, and valued within the global film ecosystem. Participants were asked to consider the following questions from a holistic perspective, including filmmakers and their projects at all stages:

- *How can markets and festivals ensure visibility and recognition?*

- *How can we follow up with projects presented at markets and ensure festival presence at a later stage?*

- *How can industry professionals and funders collaborate to develop support programs or initiatives that ensure visibility?*

- *Can we identify successful examples of multi-disciplinary initiatives that we can learn from?*

- *What role can screenings, alternative distribution models, and co-productions play?*

- *What marketing strategies exist for international distribution when filmmakers cannot be present?*

- *How can industry professionals create specific programs to highlight films and projects without victimisation?*

- *Do we, as programmers and curators, acknowledge the importance and impact of the content we select?*

- *How do we translate this importance to our audiences and potential partners?*

IV.I. Discussion Points

Visibility, Safety, and First Contact Points

Participants opened the discussion by acknowledging that each country presents unique challenges that shape the experience of filmmakers at risk. Additionally, while visibility is essential for projects to progress, open pitching or public sharing can endanger filmmakers. It was also noted that displaced filmmakers often lack networks and clear entry points into new ecosystems, making onboarding support and practical guidance on navigating the market essential.

Challenges identified:

- Weak access to decision-makers post-relocation, compounded by gatekeeping and shrinking funds.

- Risk of information leaks via markets or social media.

- Unclear safety protocols and audience control in pitching sessions.

- Lack of standardised, practical guidance on safety and operations on this topic for festivals and markets. Need for flexible toolkits rather than universal templates.

- Mobility directly affects the continuation of work and film circulation, as international relocation can require long processing times, while regional relocation may better support filmmakers in remaining professionally active.

Distribution and Economic Sustainability

The discussion highlighted that visibility alone is not enough to sustain filmmakers. Ensuring that films reach audiences must go hand in hand with fair compensation and support for professional growth. The group discussed how regional streaming platforms can work as access points:

- Local or regional streaming models (e.g., AfriDocs and DocuAsia) can reach audiences with limited access to festivals or cinemas.

• Possibility to combine visibility with fair compensation: even small license fees or voluntary "pay what you wish" models help sustain filmmakers.

• Platforms can train emerging filmmakers and address knowledge gaps in regions that lack film schools or national funding.

As part of the discussion, participants noted that traditional distributors continue to hold significant gatekeeping power. Still, alternative visibility pathways, such as impact distribution, non-theatrical screenings, educational circuits, mobile cinemas, and community hubs, can provide filmmakers with additional routes to reach audiences.

IV.II. Key Takeaways and Proposed Ideas

• Implement a market-sensitivity code and closed sessions with rapid takedown protocols in case of breaches.

• Provide first-timer mentoring, event roadmaps, contact maps, and HR/NGO links.

• Identify at least one trusted organisation per country to support newcomers.

• Sensitivity code: The industry would benefit from shared "care" rules, including privacy, risk flags, and basic empathy training.

• Guiding hubs: Recognisable "lighthouse" hubs that could help direct filmmakers at risk to programs, events, and contacts. Umbrella institutions could consolidate information on support and training in each country.

• Create a "filmmaker at risk / in exile" category in applications to prioritise review and protective measures, carefully verifying risk related specifically to the filmmaking itself.

• Redirection of funds into impactful channels, including:
    • Small license fees
    • Micro-grants for local distribution
    • Partnerships with private foundations or corporate sponsors, especially as public funds shrink.

• Hybrid platforms combining ethical monetisation with learning components.

• Training for new filmmakers in production, safety, and digital distribution.

• Stronger local intermediaries, such as mediators, curators, and regional networks connecting filmmakers, audiences, and impact funds.

• Collaborative infrastructure to ensure sustainable visibility, compensation, and professional growth.

V. Mobility and Visas

Mobility is one of the main challenges for filmmakers at risk, and it affects almost every other area of support. Filmmakers in conflict zones or those awaiting residency face multiple layers of difficulty, including visa and travel restrictions to safety concerns and high costs, which often prevent their participation in key events and opportunities. This table explored how these barriers can be addressed, considering the following questions:

- *What are the main barriers to mobility for filmmakers who want to attend international events?*

- *How do we ensure safe and sustainable access for filmmakers who cannot travel?*

- *How can we provide accurate information to filmmakers who need relocation?*

- *Can film industry professionals create alliances with NGOs to support filmmakers at risk?*

- *What examples of best practice or policy change could we learn from or replicate?*

- *Can festivals, markets, and NGOs advocate for more flexible visa and asylum processes?*

- *What concrete action can festivals and markets take to support ongoing advocacy campaigns?*

V.I. Discussion points

Participants highlighted that visa and travel logistics are among the most significant barriers for filmmakers at risk, both personally and professionally, as they can directly affect safety, and either enable or restrict opportunities for visibility, collaboration, and funding. Challenges are both administrative and practical:

- Completing visa and travel funding documents is complex and time-consuming.

- Applicants often face difficulties scheduling visa appointments without prior confirmation from inviting organisations, while festival and market selection processes often operate on timelines that are not compatible with the long lead times required for visa procedures.

- High visa fees and additional expenses (e.g., TLS services, travel to embassies, secondary transit visas).

- Payment systems in some countries are unreliable or faulty, and some filmmakers are unable to pay for events due to banking restrictions in their home countries.

- Travel grants for pitching forums and industry events are scarce and highly needed.

Relocation

Supporting the temporary or long-term relocation of artists can be considerably challenging. Filmmakers may apply for refugee protection only after they have legally left their home country, for example, through artist residencies or events. Once in the EU, they can apply for refugee status. However, this restricts them from returning home until their residence status changes. For those holding refugee status in a neighbouring country, transferring to another country is only possible under serious personal risks, such as medical conditions or threats related to LGBTQ+ rights. For filmmakers who need to travel back to their home country for film projects, refugee status significantly restricts their mobility and ability to return.

Practical Insights

A participant from a festival and market shared valuable insights and tips that have been useful when inviting filmmakers to their events. Apart from emphasising the importance of maintaining strong relationships with embassies and foreign affairs offices, the participant shared these key practices:

- Funding proof: Demonstrating that the event covers all costs can strengthen the visa application. It helps, since embassies perceive official financial support as a strong sign of credibility.

• Purpose and return assurance: Filmmakers must demonstrate that participation benefits the event or country, not the filmmaker personally. At the same time, filmmakers must prove that they will return to their home countries after the event. Providing evidence of professional or personal ties (e.g. ongoing projects, future events, or contracts) significantly strengthens the application.

• Persistence: Reapplying with updated documents is often necessary after a rejection.

The group discussed other resources and insights:

• It is possible to receive a visa fee waiver for cultural visits to the Schengen area. However, this option remains largely unknown, limited, conditional, and not a guaranteed right.

• Talent Passport (France): A highly useful 4-year visa type that allows artists to travel freely in the Schengen area. Applicants must obtain an invitation from at least one event in France and provide proof of artistic work.

• On the Move : a network advocating for fairer artist mobility and coordinating the Mobility Information Points through its dedicated working group..

Resources for Relocation:

• France: Camera Libre provides six-month residencies with scholarships and legal support.

• Germany: : Programmes like Weltoffenes Berlin and INTRO residencies offer up to 12 months.

• Follow-up projects: Filmmakers who wish to stay after their residency should apply immediately for a follow-up project upon receiving their first invitation. To ensure "stability" for a more extended period of time. However, those not facing immediate danger may find it harder to extend their stay.

• Associations like PEN can provide additional support and guidance.

Participants highlighted the importance of carefully researching labour market regulations, as they vary by country.

V.II. Key Takeaways and Proposed Ideas

The discussion underscored the need for proactive measures by festivals and institutions. Festivals could explore additional ways to support filmmakers to ensure on-site participation.

• Allow sufficient lead time for international guests to secure visas.

• Extend event durations on paper (e.g., adding workshops) or collaborate with other events to extend the importance of travel and facilitate visa approval.

• Provide alternative payment solutions when cash is not accepted.

• Learn about visa fee waiver eligibility and include it in invitation letters, mentioning the relevant article from the visa code to improve their chance of receiving the exemption.

• Learning from Comité Visa Artistes in France, which works with the Ministry of Culture and directly contacts visa decision-makers for artists, with the aim of creating similar committees in other countries, to prevent unjustified rejections.

• Maintain publicly accessible lists of organisations assisting with visa applications (especially for Schengen visas)

• Include visa guidance on festival websites and provide regular, up-to-date visa training for festival staff.

• Advocate for broader mobility policies and participate in ongoing campaigns.

• Recommend or guide filmmakers to resources and toolkits from performing arts networks to support application preparation.

VI. Fair International Co-Productions

International co-productions are often essential for filmmakers from countries with limited national funding to access resources, support, and audiences. However, power imbalances and a lack of transparency can lead to unfair partnerships. This group explored ways to make co-productions more equitable and supportive. As a starting point, participants considered the following questions:

- *What challenges do filmmakers at risk face when entering international co- production agreements?*

- *How can power imbalances between producers in international co-productions be addressed?*

- *How could funding schemes be adapted to make int. co-productions more equitable?*

- *Are there examples of successful, equitable co-productions we can learn from?*

- *How can funders, festivals, and industry organisations support more transparent and fair co-production practices?*

- *What tools or guidelines could help filmmakers negotiate and protect their rights in co-productions?*

VI.I. Discussion Points

Participants began the discussion by noting that traditional international co-production models are based on two stable countries pooling resources. Co-productions involving filmmakers at risk challenge this model and need a different understanding of contribution, value, and identity.

The group shared that even when there is genuine goodwill, institutional frameworks often create barriers that make fair co-productions difficult for filmmakers at risk. These barriers are rarely about intent, but about rigid systems that favour stable production contexts.

Key challenges identified include:

- Institutional constraints can create high barriers to entry for at-risk filmmakers.

- Structural privilege within institutions, such as strict deadlines, English-only documentation, and heavy administrative requirements.

- Inability to account for informal or undocumented work practices common in some countries (e.g. cash payments, unpaid development, work done prior to contracts).

Rethinking Co-productions in Contexts of Risk

The group discussed how filmmakers at risk can emerge in many configurations:

- In collaborations between a high-production and a low- production capacity country.

- Even between two high-capacity countries, a filmmaker's country of origin may not be able to participate due to political or legal constraints.

- In cases where filmmakers have relocated, making national participation almost impossible due to eligibility requirements, lack of a network, knowledge of local frameworks, etc.

A filmmaker shared a concrete example that illustrates these challenges. Although most of the creative work and production effort took place in their place of residence, institutional rules prevented the financial spending from being officially documented. As a result, the country most central to the film's identity was reduced to a minor co-production partner, despite its substantial creative contribution. The filmmaker noted, "we film first and finance later," a reality that institutions often struggle to recognise when structuring co- production agreements.

In a subsequent project, co-producers agreed to maintain the primary co-production status of the country most closely tied to the film's authorship, even though its financial contribution was smaller. The contract reflected fair co-production shares based not only on money, but on overall creative and labour input. Contribution was measured in terms of work, authorship, and responsibility, not only budget.

Questions Raised

• Beyond financing, how can co-productions be structured so that countries at risk are not erased from the film's identity?

• If non-financial contributions are ignored, how do we avoid losing the originating country entirely?

• Can co-production be understood not only as a financial structure, but as a core element of a film's identity?

VI.II. Key Takeaways and Proposed Ideas

Participants discussed several possible ways forward:

• To create space for arbitration, which can help determine a film's identity in such cases.

• To shift toward creative equity models, that recognize the value of creative and production input, authorship, and risk alongside financial investment.

• To encourage institutions to adapt their frameworks by allowing more flexible payment methods and administrative procedures.

• To create intermediary or collective funding models among high- production capacity countries to support fairer co-productions.

The group stressed the need for co-production agreements that reflect rights, creative contribution, and workload. Filmmakers in countries at risk should be recognised as co- producers. This requires to be reflected on an institutional level, for example through the development of shared frameworks across countries that also consider the risks faced by filmmakers in certain regions.

One concrete idea discussed was guaranteeing a minimum ownership share (e.g., 20%) for low-production-capacity or risk-context countries, when desired by the filmmakers and when it does not increase their risk. Production companies from high-production-capacity countries could explicitly commit to working under these principles.

The discussion also stressed the importance of ethical frameworks:

• Developing and\or promoting codes of conduct to prevent exploitation of at-risk filmmakers, drawing on existing tools such as the DOK Leipzig Code of Ethics, the DOX BOX co-production code of conduct, and the EAVE Fair Co-production Guide (2025).

• Making these frameworks more visible within co-production markets and using them as starting points for discussion.

• Taking special precautions regarding protagonists, including assessing how co- production decisions and film release may affect their safety.

Concrete practical tools and structural needs identified included:

- Building trust through transparent communication and clear contracts.

- Conducting joint risk assessments involving co-producers and protagonists.

- Expanding data collection and research on co-productions involving filmmakers at risk.

- Providing legal review and protection mechanisms, such as the CNC model, where experts assess contracts for fairness.

- Exploring the idea of a centralised or European-level body to review contracts for projects at risk, while acknowledging the difficulty of defining "risk" and determining who would act as the judge.

Finally, participants emphasised that fair co-production requires a shift in perspective from producers in more privileged positions. Entering a co-production should involve asking not only what can be gained, but also what one is willing to risk or give up to ensure fairness, safety, and shared ownership.

Participants also stressed the importance of wider access to knowledge:

- Improving understanding of co-production practices.

- Addressing language barriers by making materials available in languages other than English.

- Positioning markets as spaces for learning, discussion, and framework development rather than only deal-making.

- Ensuring access to legal help and contract review as a basic support mechanism.

Overall, the discussion made clear that fair co-productions are not only a financial issue, but a structural, ethical, and relational one that requires institutional change alongside shifts in individual practice.

3. Conclusions and Reflections

O Throughout the planning and execution of the think tank, both organisers and participants expressed a strong desire to remain engaged in these conversations and to continue collaborating beyond the event. There was a willingness to support one another and to learn from different perspectives and initiatives. This reinforces the idea that collaboration and allyship between festivals, markets, funders, and institutions, along with a cross-disciplinary approach, will be essential in shaping the next steps and future activities of the Doc Together.

One of the key structural challenges identified was the need for a more adaptable and regularly updated understanding of the term "filmmaker at risk," acknowledging that risk conditions vary across geopolitical, cultural, and professional contexts. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of residencies and safe spaces that allow for artistic development. Moving forward, Doc Together aims to reflect on these and on the overall discussions and suggestions shared during the think tank to plan concrete next steps. Our goal is to continue building on the identified needs by organising events, panels, and practical programs that are relevant, actionable, and responsive to the realities faced by filmmakers at risk.

Festivals and markets are encouraged to consider creating space within their industry programmes to further explore the key topics raised in this report. There is also a need for a more centralised information point, offering regularly updated and easily accessible resources for filmmakers and industry professionals.

Across all industry segments — including festivals, markets, and funders — there is an opportunity to reflect on the following practical suggestions and consider which steps could be meaningful and feasible within their own structures and contexts:

• The creation of a support programme for filmmakers at risk or in exile, including market navigation guidance and a dedicated contact person during the festival to assist with networking and meeting set-ups based on individual needs

• Guiding hubs: Regional recognisable "lighthouse" hubs that could help direct filmmakers at risk to programs, events, and contacts.

• Identify at least one trusted organisation per country to support newcomers.

• Establishment of a group of consultants, experts in the region, who can offer information and lobbying for filmmakers at risk attending partner festivals and markets.

• Development of a shared visa guide, created in collaboration with partner festivals and regularly updated

• Organisation of a dedicated think tank focused on mapping existing support structures, with the aim of identifying concrete next steps.

• rovision of mental health support during festivals and markets (E.g. Thessaloniki Documentary Festival offers a Decompression Room and 1-on-1 support meetings with a holistic therapist upon request, Sheffield DocFest hosts events such as Documentality Sharing Circle).

• Introduction of a Meetings Angel system: If a filmmaker has travelled without their producer, a trusted producer can be appointed and accompany them to industry meetings and support them emotionally and practically

• Organisation of events focused on expanding virtual access and hybrid networking, particularly for those unable to travel to in-person events.