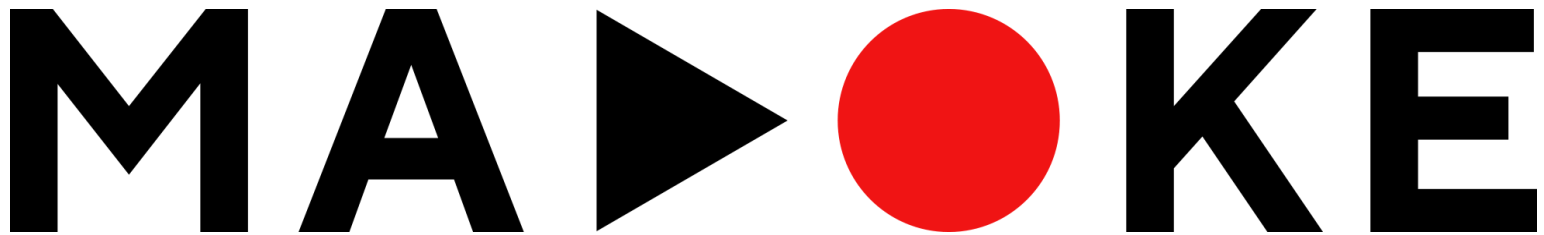


November 14, 2025

# Towards a Sustainable Future for Documentary Films

Proposal for the Renewal of the Film Financing Model in Hungary



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The Hungarian Documentary Association (MADOKE) has compiled a comprehensive set of proposals to renew the financing system for documentary films. This white paper, presented by MADOKE's leadership on November 14, 2025 in Budapest, calls for specific reforms to establish a more transparent, predictable, and sustainable support structure for documentary filmmakers. At the heart of the proposal is the belief that the future of documentary filmmaking is a matter of national cultural interest.

## Overview of Hungarian Documentary Film Financing

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# Introduction

## Overview of Hungarian Documentary Film Financing

In the past century, Hungarian television played a key role in documentary film production, commissioning films and providing production support, with dedicated documentary departments at Hungarian Television. Internationally, particularly in Europe, public and commercial broadcasters remain active in the documentary ecosystem, producing and co-producing films and providing significant professional and financial backing through an editorial commissioning system - this is no longer in place in Hungary.

Currently, funding for most documentaries comes from the National Film Institute or from independent/private financing - although unlike many Western European countries and the U.S., Hungary lacks a culture of philanthropy or patronage in filmmaking, particularly in documentaries, leaving creators dependent mainly on public resources. In Hungary's case that is mainly the National Film Institute.

Primary public funding sources include the National Film Institute support system and the tax rebate program, which reimburses 30% of Hungarian production costs. Smaller grants are available from Filmjus and the Hungarian Academy of Arts. These contributions, however, cover only a fraction of a documentary's budget, making the current system unsustainable despite international success.

Documentary projects face dual challenges if they don't receive funding at home: domestically-oriented films often lack international relevance and thereby cannot secure international funding, while films aimed at international distribution require domestic support to contract with foreign co-producers. This largely single-window funding system limits opportunities and increases vulnerability for filmmakers.

## I. General Recommendations for the New System

These are general recommendations for how public funding can most effectively support documentary filmmaking. The goal is to optimize the use of available resources and ensure the creation of valuable Hungarian documentaries that enrich national culture long-term.

The public body that provides direct support to the film industry, according to the Film Act, is obliged to support socially and culturally valuable documentaries that represent lasting value for the Hungarian community. It is inherently understood that the assessment of funding should not depend solely on the subjective judgment of current decision-makers but should reflect an objective, shared cultural interest.

We recommend that a dedicated section with a defined annual budget be created within the state film support system **specifically** for documentary films. This section would ensure that documentaries receive adequate professional attention and that funding reflects the diversity of the genre.

Defining the "creative documentary" genre is challenging. International fund descriptions provide guidance: Sundance defines a "creative documentary" as a work that not only informs or investigates facts but presents reality through artistic language, original approaches, and

a unique perspective—even if done in hybrid, experimental, or personal ways. The IDFA Bertha Fund defines it as an author-driven, formally innovative, visually strong, and socially relevant non-fiction film in which the director reveals real stories through their own artistic vision.

**Categories of documentary films to be funded include:** feature-length documentary (over 70 minutes), short and medium-length documentary (30–70 minutes), short documentary (under 30 minutes), documentary series, animated documentary (all lengths), dramatized documentary (all lengths), and educational films (all lengths).

It is important that domestic television companies become more actively involved in documentary production again. We recommend creating a specific television grant fund for documentaries. For public service broadcasters, we recommend mandating the production and broadcast of a fixed number of documentaries annually (as a prime-time quota). For commercial broadcasters, a co-production contribution requirement for a certain percentage of documentary projects is recommended. These steps would provide new funding sources while promoting professional diversity, broader audience reach, and stronger social integration of documentaries.

We further propose that support for documentary filmmaking be organized according to internationally accepted standards, divided into the phases of **pre-production, production, and post-production**. This ensures that filmmakers receive transparent and predictable support throughout the entire production process, and that resources are flexibly allocated to accommodate different types of documentaries. By the end of each support phase, the materials to be submitted and delivered by the filmmaker must be clearly specified to allow the project to move forward to the next phase. In addition, a mandatory consultation with the creators should be held at the end of each phase, during which the current status of the film's production is reviewed, feedback on submitted materials is provided, and expectations for the next phase are discussed. This practice ensures that the support process is transparent, predictable, and professionally grounded, while filmmakers continuously receive guidance and assistance for their work.

**Flexibility in the documentary funding system:**

The documentary film funding system should allow greater flexibility than that of feature films. Due to the nature of documentary filmmaking, shooting conditions, the development of the story, the production timeline often changes because of unpredictable factors. Therefore, it would be advisable to allow the originally submitted budget to be adjusted within defined limits. Furthermore, considering the functioning of the European funding system, the possibility of involving a co-producer should not end with the first day of shooting but should extend until the picture lock phase. Such a system would not only facilitate the production of films but also ensure that state funding is spent on the most justified and necessary expenses.

**Proposal to reinstate a multi-window film financing system:**

Reintroducing a multi-window financing model—as seen positively in many European countries—would help ensure that different forms of support effectively serve the diverse genres and thematic directions of film production, including historical, natural, or regional works. A system of separate funding channels would allow for more flexible allocation of resources, contributing to the enrichment of domestic film output, the restoration of cultural diversity, and the strengthening of international collaborations and co-productions.

The strengthening of individual regions could be further supported by establishing **regional film funds**, which would encourage creative activity outside the capital by involving local professional communities, stimulate regional economies, and contribute to a more balanced development of the national film industry.

## II. Structural Recommendations for the Grant System

### II/a. Suggested Film Funding Phases for all documentary genres

#### 1. Development Grant

The goal of the development phase is for the documentary film idea to take on a concrete form — for the project’s concept, script, and budget to be completed, and for a strong, well-functioning producer–director team to be established. In this phase, it will also be determined whether the film is worth producing, and whether the project should move toward theatrical distribution or television production.

**Application materials:** Documentary synopsis, project description

**Eligible applicants:** Director, producer, screenwriter, film production company

**Eligible for contracting:** Producer and director/writer with references

During the development phase, the research forming the foundation of the project is conducted — this research establishes the film’s content and direction. The script or treatment is completed, along with the film’s concept (what story it tells) and its visual style. During the selection of participants and pre-shoot research, materials relevant to the production are gathered.

This phase also includes the preparation of the film’s budget and financial plan, which serve as the basis for further financing and production planning.

At the end of the development phase, the creators must submit clearly defined materials that allow for an evaluation of the project’s potential to move forward. These include the film’s **logline, synopsis, treatment, financial plan, budget, and production plan.**

Additionally, a mandatory part of the development phase is the creation of a **funding trailer or teaser**, which visually presents the project’s concept and style.

By the end of the development phase, the creators are also required to consult with film professionals and prepare a sustainability plan and distribution strategy, which clearly defines the target audience and how the film will reach them — i.e., through which channels, platforms, or events the intended viewers will be engaged.

At the end of the development phase, a mandatory consultation must be held between the Film Institute and the project’s

creators (producer and director), during which the Film Institute's documentary expert provides feedback on the project and recommends whether it should proceed toward cinema or television production, apply for production funding, or — in justified cases — the project should be closed and rejected.

After the conclusion of the development phase, the creators have 18 months to submit a production application to the funding body. Following that, they may only submit a post-production Application.

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## 2. Production and Post-Production Grant

The production and post-production phase is when the actual **creation** of the documentary film takes place — based on the earlier stages, it is produced either for theatrical distribution or as a television co-production. This phase includes the shooting of the main material, editing, and the entire post-production process, including sound and image post-production, animation, color grading, music composition, and subtitling — all implemented in a sustainable manner (in line with international ESG principles, i.e., environmental, social, and governance considerations).

**Application materials:** Logline, synopsis, script/treatment, director's concept, filming agreement, financial plan, supporting financial documents, budget, production plan, and the financing trailer/teaser (prepared during the Development phase)

**Eligible applicants:** Producer and director/writer with references

**Eligible for contracting:** Producer and director/writer with references

Before the final delivery of the film, a **rough cut consultation** is mandatory during the production and post-production phase. At this stage, the presented version of the film must already have a visible dramatic structure, typically with a maximum running time of two hours, so that the film's narrative arc and structure are clearly perceptible.

The purpose of the consultation is for the **Film Institute** to provide professional feedback on the film's progress, make suggestions for dramaturgical, visual, or technical refinements, and support the successful completion of the project.

This is followed by the **picture lock** presentation, when the film's visual and editing structure is finalized, and finally by the submission of the **final master copy**, which represents the fully completed film — finalized in every respect and ready for distribution and public screening.

If the production obtains **co-production funding or any other financial source** during production, the funding body must be informed immediately, although no prior approval is required.

At the end of the production and post-production phase, following the submission of the final master copy, all films produced in Hungary are required to be archived in the Hungarian National Film Archive, in accordance with contemporary archiving standards. This ensures the film's long-term preservation, its integration into cultural heritage, and its future accessibility for research and public screenings.

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## 2.B Post-Production

In this phase, a producer–director team may apply **specifically for post-production support**, for example, if they are joining an already filmed project and contributing to its completion, including in the case of co-production collaborations.

The post-production phase includes editing, sound and image post-production, animation, color grading, subtitling, and music composition.

**Application materials:** Logline, synopsis, script/treatment, director's concept, filming agreement, financial plan, supporting financial documents, budget, post-production plan, and a **financing trailer/teaser** or a **selection of scenes (max. 25 minutes)**.

**Eligible applicants:** Producer and/or director/writer with references

**Eligible for contracting:** Producer and director/writer with references

During the post-production phase, before the final delivery of the film, a **rough cut consultation** is mandatory. At this stage, the presented version of the film must already have a clear dramatic structure, typically with a maximum running time of two hours, allowing the narrative arc and structure of the film to be clearly perceived.

The purpose of the consultation is for the Film Institute to provide professional feedback on the film's progress, make recommendations for dramaturgical, visual, or technical refinements, and support the successful completion of the project.

This is followed by the picture lock presentation, when the film's visual and editing structure is finalized, and finally by the submission of the final master copy, which represents the fully completed film — finalized in every respect and ready for distribution and public screening.

At the end of the Post-Production phase, following the submission of the final master copy, all films produced in Hungary must be archived in the Hungarian National Film Archive, in accordance with contemporary archiving standards. This ensures the film's long-term preservation, its inclusion as part of the national cultural heritage, and its availability for future research and screenings.

## II/b. Additional Grant Opportunities

### 1. Social Impact Campaign Grant

The social impact campaign often begins simultaneously with the production process, especially in the case of documentary films that deal with topics of strong social relevance. The purpose of the campaign is to maximize the documentary's social, cultural, or educational impact and to ensure that the project reaches its target audience as effectively as possible.

In this phase, the applicant's task is to define the target group, develop the communication strategy of the film's message, and create a plan detailing through which channels, platforms, or events the audience will be reached.

A social impact campaign may include, for example:

- organizing school screenings,
- collaborating with NGOs and civil organizations,
- running online communication or social media campaigns,
- hosting roundtable discussions or community events.

This phase ensures that the documentary film creates added value for the audience, functioning not only as a work of art but also as a tool for social dialogue.

**Application materials:** Synopsis, impact campaign plan

**Applicants:** Producing producer and Impact producer

**Required upon completion:** Professional report, finalized impact campaign plan, financial report

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### 2. Distribution and Marketing Grant

The goal of the distribution and marketing phase is to ensure that the documentary film effectively reaches its target audience—whether through festivals, cinemas, television, or digital platforms.

In this phase, the applicant is responsible for planning and executing the film's distribution strategy, as well as coordinating marketing and PR activities, such as:

- press relations,
- social media campaigns,
- promotional materials,
- screenings or roundtable events,
- and festival submissions.

The aim is to reach the widest possible audience and to ensure that the film's artistic, social, and cultural value is fully realized.

**Application materials:** Final master copy, marketing plan, distribution plan

**Eligible applicants:** Production company or distributor

**Eligible for contracting:** Production company or distributor

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### 3. Ad Hoc Support Grant

The ad hoc support grant is an additional funding opportunity that can be used to capture sudden or unexpected events. Its purpose is to allow the applicant to respond immediately to new and unforeseen filming opportunities, such as current events, extraordinary situations, or breaking news.

The funding covers the costs of **immediate shooting**, and the decision is made **within one week**, allowing the production to start quickly.

Afterward, the project must be submitted to a Development Grant, even if another grant process is already underway, to establish the film's full concept, financing plan, and target audience.

**Application materials:** Idea, creative concept, shooting plan

**Applicants:** Producing producer and/or director

**Required upon completion:** Synopsis, selected scenes, financial report

#### 4. Research Grant (one-time, lump-sum support)

The research grant aims to enable directors to begin exploring the documentary's subject matter before the development phase. Based on this grant, the director may request support for initial research related to an idea, topic, or specific subject.

The support allows the applicant to gather necessary background information, identify interview subjects, create preliminary footage, and prepare the film's concept and materials for further development.

The application must detail how the support will be used—for example, for research trips, organizing interviews, locating archival materials, or developing the concept.

**Application materials:** Idea, creative concept, shooting plan, personal interview

**Applicants:** Director or writer

**Required upon completion:** Synopsis, financial report, research materials, and any visual materials (photos, videos, mood boards)

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#### 5. Additional Financing Grant

The Additional Financing grant is an optional form of support available to cover unexpected and justified costs that arise during development, production, or post-production.

Due to the nature of documentary filmmaking, the script and production plan cannot always be fully predetermined. Thus, unforeseen expenses may occur—such as additional filming, new locations, extra interviews, or technical expansions.

This grant enables the project to respond flexibly to such circumstances, ensuring that the film is realized at full artistic and professional quality.

Applications for additional financing must include a detailed justification explaining the need for the extra funds.

**Application materials:** Director's concept, detailed producer's justification, revised shooting plan

**Applicants:** Director and producer

**Required upon completion:** Synopsis, financial report

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## 6. Participation in International Training Events in the Field of Film

We wish to continue offering the grant for participation in international film industry training events established by the NFI, as it represents an exceptionally important and valuable professional opportunity that contributes to the strengthening of international connections and the professional development of participants.

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## 7. Incubator Grant

We also wish to maintain the Incubator Grant program for first-time filmmakers, while providing greater opportunities for documentary projects within this scheme.

# III. Recommendations for the Grant System and Jury Structure

In the documentary film section, we recommend **five experts** with documentary filmmaking backgrounds participate in each funding window and consultation. The experts work on a **rotational basis**: during a three-month term, they are not eligible to apply in that genre, and they receive an honorarium for their work.

Before the final committee makes decisions, a **pre-selection committee** assists with preliminary evaluation. Members of the pre-selection committee are also documentary film professionals (with practical experience and/or academic qualifications in the field) and ensure that the final committee makes decisions based on comprehensive, well-prepared materials. During the consultation held at the end of the development phase, a designated member of the final committee participates, guiding each project throughout the production process and helping ensure that the film progresses appropriately and that funding phases are adhered to.

Final committee members must have at least 10 years of directing or producing experience, and a film that has been distributed in Hungary or screened at an international festival. For television projects, members must also have experience in TV production. This structure ensures professional, objective decision-making and prevents conflicts of interest or overlap in project evaluations.

We also recommend that after each funding decision, the final committee provides a written assessment using a point system, covering the project's artistic value, content and production aspects, feasibility, distribution potential, and social relevance. This ensures transparency and provides applicants with professional feedback.

## IV. Recommendations for Film Law and Related Regulations

### **Proposal to Reinstate the Normative Support System**

We recommend reinstating the normative point system in Hungary's documentary film funding scheme, which allows applicants to earn points based on their previous films' festival participation, awards, television broadcasts, or audience numbers. This system promotes transparency and objective evaluation of applications while encouraging the creation of works with high artistic and professional standards.

The previous point system awarded points based on factors such as domestic and international festival participation and awards, television broadcasts, and audience numbers in cinemas, on TV, or streaming platforms. These objective indicators allowed applicants to demonstrate their professional competence and recognition through the success of their earlier works, thereby strengthening the professionalism and fairness of funding decisions.

Reinstating the normative point system would not only increase transparency but also support the creation of high-quality documentary films in the long term.

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### **Proposal for the Application Period System**

We propose that Hungarian documentary film funding calls be issued **quarterly** (excluding ad hoc and supplementary funding calls), so that development, production, post-production, and other applications can be submitted every quarter. This system provides flexibility for creators, allowing them to apply in line with their project's current status, and it accelerates decision-making, reducing project waiting times.

Quarterly cycles also offer a more transparent and predictable process for the documentary filmmaking community, as each application phase and type of funding can be linked to a well-defined timeline. This structure supports continuous project development and ensures that funding is always aligned with the projects' most current needs.

## **Proposals for Amendments to the Film Act and Related Regulations**

### **Expansion of Non-Eligible Costs:**

We propose allowing foreign travel costs to be eligible even if the production does not involve Hungary, with particular attention to local travel (from the airport to shooting locations, travel between locations), as well as travel by crew members living abroad to foreign shooting locations.

### **Eligibility of Costs Related to Production Closure:**

We propose making costs related to the completion of production and administrative obligations after the master copy phase eligible, including archiving, escrow account fees, cost audit fees, bank charges, accounting, and producer fees.

### **Proportional Adjustment of Producer Fees:**

We propose reviewing and increasing the current 4% cap on producer fees, taking into account the specific characteristics of documentary film productions, in a way that proportionally reflects the producer's long-term, multi-year work and responsibilities.

## **V. About the Authors – MADOKE Background**

### **Improving the Social and Professional Standing of Documentary Films**

In April of 2018, documentary filmmakers in Hungary organized themselves into a group called CineDOKU to improve the social and professional perception of documentary films. This group later evolved into Hungary's largest film organization, the Hungarian Documentary Filmmakers Association (HDA/MADOKE), which now has over 180 members.

The platform's original goal was to bring general audiences back to cinemas for feature-length documentaries and to develop clear, accessible terms for these works that audiences could relate to, while reflecting the high quality of the films.

One of MADOKE's key tasks was to develop a documentary film funding reform plan based on European standards. In this vein, MADOKE now presents this proposal aimed at ensuring sustainable and transparent support for Hungarian documentary films.

Since its founding, the association's board has maintained continuous dialogue with representatives of the National Film Institute. As a result, the Hungarian Motion Picture Festival created a separate category for feature documentaries. Since 2021, MADOKE has co-organized the Doku Rough Cut Boutique, and in 2023 it participated for the first time in the second round of dok.incubator. In this framework, alongside the international program, a Hungarian regional workshop was held, developing four

domestic film projects. For the first time in dok.incubator history, the Visegrad Co-production Forum was organized in Budapest, featuring representatives from prestigious festivals such as Sundance, Berlinale, HotDocs, and DocsBarcelona.

In 2025, continuing its previous collaborations, MADOKE organized its first joint pitch forum with the Verzió International Film Festival, specifically for Hungarian films, along with a dedicated professional day.

The board also maintains ongoing relationships with European documentary film organizations, including CPH:DOX, the Sarajevo International Film Festival, and IDF (East Doc Platform, Jihlava). In 2021, the association successfully applied for participation in FIPADOC with support from the NFI, giving a Hungarian delegation the opportunity to present to an international professional audience.

MADOKE's goal is to represent the high artistic value of documentary films and ensure that the genre receives appropriate support and recognition both in Hungary and internationally.

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