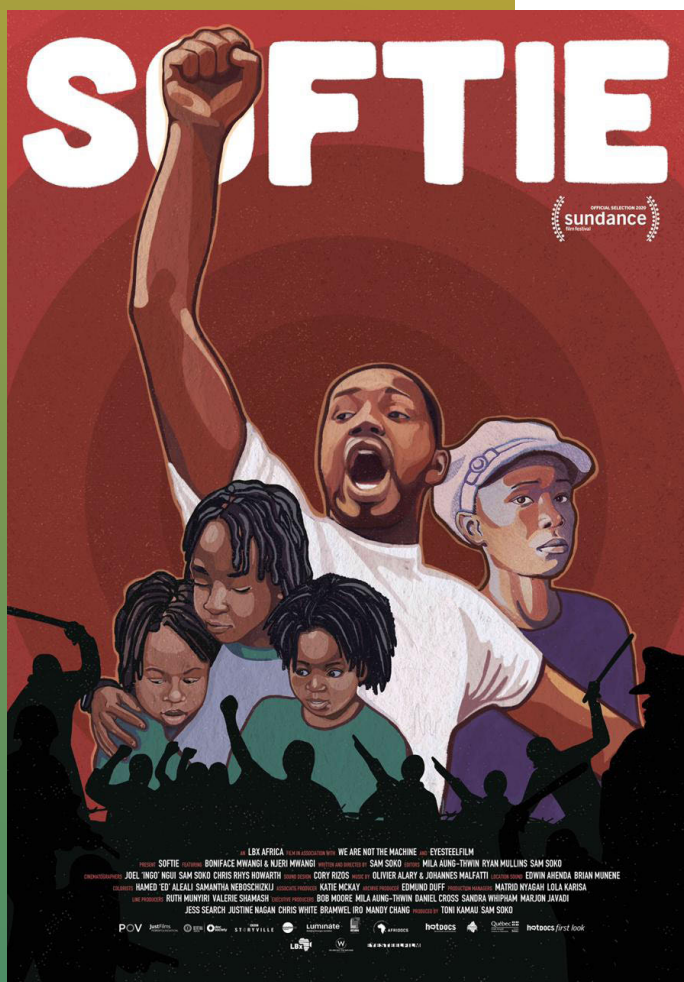


AN INITIATIVE OF



DOCUMENTARY POWER  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# MAKING SOCIAL CHANGE WITH DOCUMENTARIES: What Works, Why and How?: A Case Study



# SOFTIE

Overcoming Censorship Pressures  
to Reach New Audiences and  
Create Spaces for  
Important Conversations

SPRING 2024

“[In Kenya] we have this perception that people aren’t as interested in documentary, which this film has helped to bust.

Miriam Ayoo  
Impact Producer  
Softie



PERSPECTIVE  
FUND

# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

As both an outcome and a set of activities, making social impact through documentary storytelling has changed enormously over the past decade. It isn't an understatement to say that the entire environment in which filmmakers and impact producers create has seen fundamental change over the last few years, due to major disruptions made by rising social movements and the arrival of new funding powers, distributors, and engagement platforms. At such a juncture, an initiative from the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) raises the following key questions: What does social impact in documentary entail today? What are the current challenges? What lessons and models of the past are being brought forward and which ones are being overlooked? What does success look like in this work and how do we define it?

This case study centers this pursuit by engaging with the film *Softie*, selected by an advisory committee of eight leading filmmakers and impact producers, as providing a useful perspective into the features, lessons, and experiences of impact work with documentary film today. This case study is based on multiple conversations with a key member of the impact campaign team around their experiences working on this impact campaign.

This report is one of five case studies published by the Documentary Power Research Institute at the Center for Media & Social Impact. For more information on other case studies, resources and reports being produced by this research please visit:

<https://cmsimpact.org/program/documentary-power-research-institute/>

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\* Following several successful existing working groups across the documentary ecology, this study began by establishing a collaborative working group of eight people. This group was created to help shape the design of its core questions; provide insights and valuable guidance in designing the study (including in identifying selection criteria and recommendations for the interview population); inform the analysis process (including in the identification of the most meaningful and significant findings for the field); and support in socializing and leading the broader campaign for adoption and understanding yielded by this work. As part of the larger documentary study in which this research sits, this group met at core junctures in the research program to shape the design and implementation of this work and to select this case study. More information on this advisory group can be found here: <https://cmsimpact.org/documentary-power-research-institute-team/>



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# THE FILM



## The Film: *Softie* (film website)

Boniface “Softie” Mwangi has long fought injustices in his country as a political activist. Now he’s taking the next step by running for office in a regional Kenyan election. From the moment Boniface decides to run, telling his wife, Njeri, in passing with a hesitant laugh, he responds to each challenge with optimism. But running a clean campaign against corrupt opponents becomes increasingly harder to combat with idealism alone. And Boniface soon finds that challenging strong political dynasties is putting his family at risk. Should country really come before family, as he’s always believed?

## The Film: *Softie* (impact report)

*Softie* is a personal and emotionally riveting documentary that captures what is a generally accepted norm of doing politics in East Africa. It uses the complex life of photo journalist turned activist Boniface Mwangi to tell a larger story about belonging, politics and what it means to be Kenyan. The film also follows Boniface’s family who exist as a parallel to the campaign and represent the personal cost of activism. *Softie* uncovers cyclical patterns over 10 years of elections and explores why we repeat them.



# THE IMPACT CAMPAIGN

## Organizing key messages of film that informed design of impact campaign

- 1 Being an active citizen is how we express our love for our country.
- 2 We cannot separate the personal from the political.
- 3 We know that systemic problems exist, but we have more power than we think. We can catalyze change within our communities.

## Overall Mission of Impact Work:

To inspire, provoke conversation, and provide clear pathways to action to embolden Kenyans to take back power and challenge the status quo.



### Change Minds

- Change perceptions of what it means to be an active citizen in Kenya from that of cynicism to optimism
- Reckon with the pain and gravity of past in order to move forward



### Change Behavior

- Provide clear pathways of action to enable radical citizen engagement
- Demonstrate how public policies affect day to day lives and how active citizenship yields results



### Build Communities

- Re-energize and build a sustainable space for activism and conversation

As stated in the early impact campaign design document: “This is primarily a changing minds and behaviors impact project that seeks to use the film as a tool to raise awareness, expose the detrimental effects of apathy and corruption, forge nuanced understanding and support of community/political organizing and its importance, and trigger a social reckoning on how unchecked leadership, lack of accountability and lack of transparency negatively impacts on all levels of society, from government, to the community, all the way down to the family unit.

## Primary Outcome Goal:

To enable an environment for increased active citizen participation and progressive leadership.

## Target Audience:

The primary target audience for this impact campaign was the Kenyan public (local and abroad), with special attention to the “movable middle” – this cross-cutting segment of people (across class, gender, ethnicity, geographic locality) are considered to have some degree of interest and desire to do something, but just don’t know how or don’t necessarily have the will-power yet to do so.

The impact campaign – through channels and activities specially designed for each audience – also worked to specially target **activists, young people, middle class Kenyans and Kenyan diaspora audiences.**





## Key Achievements and Phases/Timeline of Impact Campaign:

The impact activities were designed to take place across three phases of work, as outlined in its early impact design guide as follows:

- **2019 to early 2020 (Phase One)** — the impact team conducted focus groups and civil society brain trusts, using baseline surveys to test key messages of the film and how they were received by different audiences and contexts. The feedback from these sessions were used to help develop an interactive 'Citizen's Handbook' that provides resources and guidance on taking action on an issue of importance in one's community. Phase 1 culminated with a coordinated and highly publicized Nairobi Premiere of the film, with weeklong activities leading up to it.

### *Key activities of Phase 1 included:*

- Research and Development through focus groups and civil society braintrust discussions
- Development of key/strategic content and resources, including:
  - Impact Screening Kit
  - Interactive Citizen's Handbook
- Social Media Campaign kick-off
- Kenyan National Premiere of film

- **Mid/Late 2020 to Late 2022 (Phase 2)** – the impact work focused on raising awareness and getting the film to as many target audiences as possible. This included impact screenings and facilitated dialogue using discussion guides to key audiences in Kenya, and a number of other countries (especially in cities with large Kenyan diasporas).

### *Key activities of Phase 2 included:*

- Impact screenings among target audiences across Kenya and internationally
- Community screenings across six counties in Kenya took place between June and December of 2022

- **December – 2021** – film aired on National Broadcast television in Kenya

- **Mid 2022 to Early 2023 (Phase 3)** – All activities were designed with a clear M&E framework to ensure impact. The impact team also worked closely with existing civil society organizations in Kenya during the impact and audience engagement phase to include the film as a useful tool in ongoing civic engagement activities.

### *Key activities of Phase 3 included:*

- Citizen's Handbook – one week before the election, the impact and film team released a Citizens Handbook with important information around the different roles of elected representatives, from President to members of Parliament, to members of County Assembly, to help people understand what they were voting for and the importance of those different positions. The resource was made – and remains – available online
- More localized community engagement efforts



## Key Players/Advisors on The Impact Team:

**Sam Soko**  
*Director/Producer*

**Toni Kamau**  
*Producer*

**Miriam Ayoo**  
*Impact Producer*

**Lucky Mwachi**  
*Social Media  
Administrator*

**Chloe Genga**  
*Impact Coordinator*

## Key Funders of the Work:







## Key Anticipated Risks and Challenges of Impact Campaign

The two biggest risks that the impact team anticipated in response to this campaign were:

- 1 Government Retaliation:** As stated in its early impact design document the impact team held concern that “given the political themes of the film, and the fact that it portrays elements of corruption within the electoral system, we anticipate a negative reaction from the government. The extent of this reaction we are not sure of, whether it will be enforcing a strict classification rating to reduce the amount of people who can see the film in theaters or tv, or trying to completely ban the film, as was the case in films like Rafiki. Given that the film’s subject is a well known public figure, other possible retaliation could be using social media and hiring trolls to disparage and discredit the film, create false narratives around the film, or place it as political or electoral propaganda. Given that the film’s protagonist is someone who has faced government retaliation and repression before, we have a lot of strategies in place to mitigate, including being open and transparent about any threats received. We also have a strong legal team in place and are establishing partnerships with organizations that deal in repression of film, in case a movement to ban the film arises. Our key aim would be to fight to ensure the film is given the chance to be seen.”
- 2 COVID-19 Pandemic:** In response to this challenge, faced by many films that were released between 2021 and 2023, the impact team identified the following strategies:
  - Refit our impact screenings, focus groups/braintrust, and activist workshop pilot to digital platforms.
  - Leverage any streaming or television distributions plans to direct digital impact screenings, Zoom panels, and handbook to those audiences,
  - Enable our target audience who does not have access to data to engage with these digital activities, (particularly youth and those in informal settlements) by finding ways to partner with internet services in order to stream for free or send data to those wanting to watch.





# GOING BEYOND THE COMMUNITY SCREENING

Designing and Doing the Impact Work: Learnings and process of how it was implemented

## Key Imperatives in Impact Campaign Design

1

Partnering with participant protagonists in impact efforts can help raise the likelihood of audiences engaging and identifying with key messages of film

2

Screening events can be revealing events of dialogue – and even healing – if key participants are consulted early-on in the planning process

3

Government influence can come indirectly through broadcaster advertisements – understanding the nuances of this influence, and being prepared for it (not surprised by it), is important in order for any film to overcome it

4

Pursuing larger viewership isn't just about reach, it's about access

5

Overcoming censorship by commercial social media platforms is part of a new reality in documentary film – especially for films which focus on important, controversial issues. But community partnerships can help improve the likelihood of getting around harmful commercial censorship

6

"R" ratings can be used to limit audience reach, but documentaries have successfully fought for lower ratings before and can be a helpful model/ precedent for films that face similar challenges

7

Marketing strategies can be valuable tools in re-branding perceptions and building new interest in documentaries

8

Identify the messages and channels that will most resonate with your target audiences

9

National premiere events to bring the right partners in the room

10

There is value in concentrating effort on strategic partnerships



## Partnering with participant protagonists in impact efforts can help raise the likelihood of audiences engaging and identifying with key messages of film

The impact team knew that the film **Softie** had a unique ability to connect with diverse audiences and to inspire civic action and political engagement all on its own, and so they also knew that just being able to put the film in as many Kenyan homes as possible would result in positive change. But the relationship that viewers developed with the main protagonists of the film – especially between women-identifying audiences and a participant protagonist named Njeri – was galvanized into even greater levels of engagement, Miriam Ayoo said, when screening events were able to include discussions with key protagonists themselves (especially with Boniface's wife Njeri Mwangi). Miriam worked as an impact producer for the film **Softie** from its earliest stages and witnessed communities engage in transformational conversations with the film's main protagonists first hand.

“After a lot of people come out of watching **Softie**, they're like, “Man, Boniface and Njeri, wow. I can't believe how much you've sacrificed and it just makes me feel like I should be doing more. I should have been doing more.” So it was important for us to get as many eyeballs as we could, because we feel like the film does that work. As long as we can get people to watch it kind of in turn does that work in terms of getting people to reflect and kind of provoking that conversation... but I think another big thing has been for the protagonist, especially Njeri... **People really love her storyline within the film. And whenever we have grassroots screenings, whenever we have anything and she's part of it, we see engagement reach new levels. I feel like she's provided a space for women and representation for women, especially here in Kenya, where we're still trying to build up leadership and representation of women in all these different spaces. So I think that was an unintended successful objective, the role that Njeri's character was able to play as a tool for representation and leadership** (Original interview, Miriam, 25 April 2022).

The central role that Njeri played in the community screenings was not part of the original impact plan. But when the film and impact team saw such a positive early community response to the screenings that she attended, and when Njeri shared an interest in attending some screenings, the entire impact strategy adapted to make more space for her engagement.

## Screening events can be revealing events of dialogue – and even healing – if key participants are consulted early-on in the planning process

While the participation of Njeri in the film's screening events turned out to be one of the most meaningful and transformative impacts of the campaign, it could have easily turned out to be one of its greatest failures. This is because, the film team noted, participant wellness is an important – though overlooked – area of documentary film. The potential for recreating trauma by involving film participants in screenings that re-live difficult times or bring new audiences into difficult conversations can be harmful to any participant who is asked to join if they are joining as an individual – or if they are joining a space – that isn't prepared for the types of difficult conversations that can take place. This is why maintaining an early – and sustained – partnership with open communication was critical for the film team and their relationship with the participant protagonists in the film.

Miriam said that community screenings can be very demanding for participant protagonists, and this is one of the reasons why one of the film's main people (Boniface 'Softie' Mwangi) didn't go to as many screenings as his wife, Njeri.



**The film is still traumatizing for him. It was a traumatizing period that was documented. So I think he's more into wanting to move forward. And I think for Njeri, it's traumatizing for her as well, but I think she processes it differently.**

**I think she is being able to speak with people after each screening and being able to share and commune, especially with a lot of women who come up to her afterwards, which we love because during the screenings and main Q and A's, a lot of women don't ask questions. But when it's over, you just see this flock of women going to her and asking her questions one to one.**

**So I think that's been something really impactful. And so I think it's important for [protagonists] to be part of the planning. We had meetings with Boniface and Njeri before we launched everything, sharing what we were doing, asking them if they had any ideas, how much they wanted to be involved, how little. And as things rolled out, we adapted and moved based on their feedback.**

**So it just ended up to be that they were, I would say they've been really part of this campaign, especially Boniface, especially with when we have a lot of big social media launches. He's great at building community engagement online. So he's been really impactful on that end. And then I would say Njeri has really taken the mantle in creating impact through community screenings** *(Original interview, Miriam, 25 April 2022).*





Miriam said the importance of the community screenings could not be understated. In spaces where conversations about voting and politics do not usually take place, Miriam said communities engaged with the truths of the film and started a level of dialogue that would have been unlikely to occur had the documentary not been screened in their community at a public event.



**I think going on the ground and watching the film with people who see themselves in these films is very powerful. And the discussions afterwards always lifted me up, even if the discussions were difficult. There were a lot of places we went to where people, after watching the film, were like: “I mean, this is what it is, this is how voting is in this country, this is how life is in this country. I’m not going to vote in this next election.” And there was a lot of apathy like this. And it was just really amazing to be able to still have that discussion with people to understand where they were coming from. So I think for me, it wasn’t even about getting people to a certain kind of solution or mindset, but just opening up conversations, using film, that probably wouldn’t have been opened-up in those spaces with a diverse set of audiences** *(Original interview, Miriam, 26 April 2023).*



Government influence can come indirectly through broadcaster advertisements – understanding the nuances of this influence, and being prepared for it (not surprised by it), is important in order for any film to overcome it. Pursuing larger viewership isn’t just about reach, it’s about access.

For the film and impact team, their push for larger audiences wasn’t solely motivated by financial models of monetizing larger audiences; rather, they were rooted in strategies of access, and trying to engage audiences – including in rural areas outside the country’s capital city of Nairobi – and lower income audiences who can’t afford to frequent major movie theaters. For this reason, Miriam said that it was essential that they were able to show the film on one of the country’s national television broadcast channels, despite facing some resistance due to indirect government influence.





**It was very difficult for TV stations to want to screen *Softie* because a lot of stations actually have a lot of their advertising paid by the government. So there's a lot of conflict of interest. We went to so many stations and we would go through the first few levels [of review], first we would go through negotiations and things would go well and then at the last minute there would be something that [would cause them to] cancel the whole broadcast. So it took us basically the whole year to finally get a station that would broadcast it** *(Original interview, Miriam, 25 April 2022).*



Ultimately, the film was turned down by multiple broadcasters before finally finding one that would air the film. And, even then, in the weeks leading up to the national broadcast, the film team received pressure to censor/cut parts of the film that the broadcaster worried could be too politically upsetting to powerful figures in Kenya.



**We went through at least three or four major broadcasters before we finalized with the one who we ended up broadcasting with. And even the day before the broadcast was meant to go live, they came back to us trying to ask us to censor a lot of different things and we got quite frustrated. Up until the day before, we weren't sure if they were going to still broadcast it .... they tried to have us make a lot of different changes, censor some names, censor some other things. We didn't end up bending to what they wanted, and they still ended up showing it. So I don't know what allowed them to continue. It was a good thing. It was like, "Okay." It seems that they will try to push back to make you feel scared that something's going to happen. But we were just like, "Let's push," and we didn't get bad feedback even though it was broadcasted** *(Original interview, Miriam, 26 April 2023).*



The film team ultimately resisted the pressure and the film was broadcast in its original form.

While documentaries are still not widely popular in Kenya, two ways that the film team was able to engage wider audiences in the country was through hosting dynamic community events and Youtube.



Between June and December of 2022, in the lead up to the country's election, the film and impact team embarked on a community screenings tour that crossed six counties. With the support of partner organizations in the different counties who helped screen the film and invite audiences, they were able to achieve over 40 screenings and reach a younger audience than that which typically watches the national broadcast channel. In total, the film team estimates that they engaged about 4,000 more people through the community events, mostly between the ages of 13 to 40.

The team did face pushback in some communities, especially where there were political candidates who weren't favorably portrayed and who were associated with the upcoming election, and they had to cancel a few screenings because of the pressure. For instance, one venue was affiliated with one of the candidates depicted in the film, and once they learned that the film didn't portray them in the best possible light they ordered the event canceled. And in another instance, a screening at a University was canceled when a chancellor learned that one of his friends wasn't depicted favorably in the film. But ultimately, the majority of the community events were held successfully, and as planned, with less pushback than the team had anticipated.



**We took the perspective of, this [pushback] is to be expected, especially in this highly charged time. And we were quite actually surprised that it was just that few, honestly, there were maybe five or less that that kind of situation happened, so we were actually quite happy that we didn't get as much pushback as we expected. And we just took it in stride and just said, "It's okay, we'll continue with the other screenings that were happening," planned for that week or that month. So, I think we didn't dwell on it too much because it's something that we were knowing that would probably be something that would come up, and we're kind of used to that**  
*(Original interview, Miriam, 26 April 2023).*



Overcoming censorship by commercial social media platforms is part of a new reality in documentary film – especially for films which focus on important, controversial issues. But community partnerships can help improve the likelihood of getting around harmful commercial censorship.

When the film team tried to share sponsored posts on the film and its Citizen's Handbook – which didn't favor any particular party but sought to educate voters on the responsibilities and roles of the people they vote for – through Facebook and Instagram, the two social media platforms did not allow the posts to be boosted. The suspected reason for this was because the platforms felt that anything related to the election shouldn't be promoted in Kenya, and so the handbook did not receive as much engagement as the team had hoped. But that didn't stop the film team from continuing to spread word of the film through any platform they could. And Miriam said the efforts of social media platforms to censor the Citizen's Handbook didn't mean that partner organizations would stop promoting it. One benefit of the fact that the film and impact team had developed relationships with partner organizations is that these organizations could be helpful in circulating the education guide and helping to get around barriers.





At the same time, their experience speaks to the reality that many documentaries which touch on important controversial issues that are also receiving censorship pressure from commercial organizations – not just government-related organizations.

## R ratings can be used to limit audience reach, but documentaries have successfully fought for lower ratings before and can be a helpful model/precedent for films that face similar challenges

One censorship-related strategy can be the use of “R” ratings to limit the audience reach of documentaries. But interview participants said that there is a history of filmmakers who have successfully battled for these ratings to be reduced, and so filmmakers should not be surprised or discouraged if this happens. For instance, Miriam Ayoo and her team were able to overcome an effort meant to suppress the reach of their film, by lowering the rating for their film, **Softie**, from a “R” rating (which meant that only people over 18 could watch the film) to “PG-13” in Kenya.

The “R” rating would have had a dramatic silencing effect on the team’s impact strategy, which included high-school events and multi-generational screenings. At the theatrical level, it would have also meant that the film could have only been viewed at limited times in the evening. But more than the inconvenience, the film team felt that an “R” rating was unjustifiable since the film purposefully did not include content that would have resulted in such a rating.

**Initially, that was their way of trying to suppress the film’s reach, giving us the R rating because what’s in the film is not anything crazier than what we watch on the news every day here in Kenya. So there wasn’t any reason for them to give us the ‘R’ rating** *(Original interview, Miriam, 25 April 2022).*

Ultimately, the film team followed an appeal process that allowed their rating to be reduced to a PG-13 rating, and they recommend other film teams to follow their precedent if faced with a similar challenge.

Marketing strategies can be valuable tools in re-branding perceptions and building new interest in documentaries. Identify the messages and channels that will most resonate with your target audiences.

One challenge that the **Softie** team faced was a long-standing perception – held by some broadcasters, theaters, and other platforms and organizations – that Kenyans are not really interested in documentaries.

Rather than ignoring this context, the film team understood the nuances of it and worked to strategically promote and market the film as a family film, rather than a political documentary. Since the dynamic of the protagonist's family was a central part of the film, the film and impact team decided that they could interest a wider audience if they emphasized that family element as its driving theme and spirit – this was also their way of overcoming any perception that the film was solely about (or in support of) one political candidate.



**[In Kenya] we have this perception that people aren't as interested in documentary, which this film has helped to bust that. ... And I feel like it worked because we created the narrative that this is a family film. The elections piece and the politics piece are undercurrents that are embedded, but we don't market it and share it as a film about elections and a film about Kenyan history and all that. We marketed it as a family film, a film about a husband and wife and how they pushed through life with their children and challenging circumstances. That's how, even so in our PR when we did our releases, all of that, we made it a family film. And I think that allowed audiences to relate to it a bit more** *(Original interview, Miriam, 25 April 2022).*



Their push to place the film on broadcast television – which holds larger audiences in Kenya than Netflix or other internet streaming platforms – was important in reaching the most number of people, said Miriam Ayoo, but their targeted community and partner-oriented screenings were vital in ensuring they were contributing to starting productive conversations with the right groups of people.

And, ultimately, Miriam said that they “busted” the myth that Kenyans weren't interested in documentaries through the film **Softie** – reaching audiences at scales few could have imagined. During each of three early screenings (in 2021) on Kenyan national broadcast television, the film averaged about 800,000 viewers per screening. Then, a YouTube screening of the film that the film team organized with relatively little advertisement – and which only lasted three days – received 100,000 views and more than 5,000 comments.



## National premiere events to bring the right partners in the room

While community screenings resulted in some of the most observable instances of impact and engagement, the film team also emphasized the resounding influence of hosting a national premiere event that strategically targeted key individuals and organizations.

For me, one of the biggest highlights of the campaign was the premiere that we had in Kenya. ***Because for that premiere, we were very specific in terms of who we invited, including the stakeholders that came, who represented a lot of different organizations that had to do with grassroots organizing around civic engagement, around youth and peace and conflict.***

***We took a long time to plan that premiere and make sure that we had the right people in the room. And I feel like that premiere was the launch that got a lot of people's attention and made the film get into people's ears – so they could say "Oh, I've heard about *Softie*." I go around the city all the time and if I mention *Softie*, if someone hasn't watched it, they're like, "Oh, I've heard of this." And I feel [this recognition] started at that premiere and how we were able to really make a big buzz around it that I think worked out in our favor (Original interview, Miriam, 25 April 2022).***

## There is value in concentrating effort on strategic partnerships

Initially, the impact team sought partnerships with any organization interested in working with them. In the end, about half of their partners were groups that reached out to the film team and the other half were organizations that they strategically reached out to through social media, newsletters, word of mouth, and callouts through their wider networks about the communities where they were hoping to bring the film.

So we had a lot of people reach out to us and say, "We would love to bring it here," etc. And then half of it was us doing research on organizations who are working on civic engagement and democracy, and sending outreach emails to say, "We feel like this film would add to whatever programming or work you're doing, would you be interested in doing a screening?"  
(Original interview, Miriam, 26 April 2023).

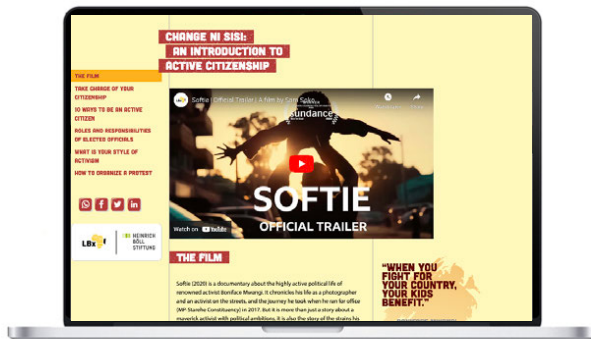




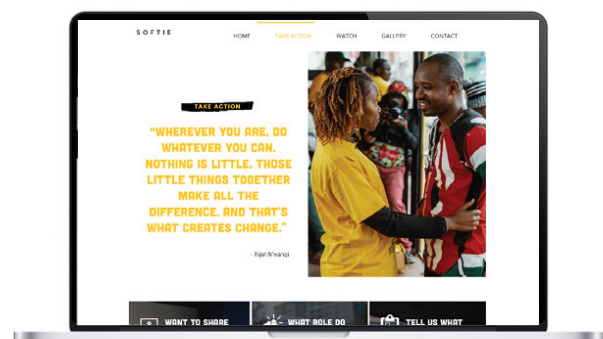
One of the most important lessons that Miriam said she learned from her time supporting the **Softie** impact campaign is the importance of developing strategic partnerships with a select number of organizations that hold a vision that goes beyond any one event.

I think one of the biggest takeaways I realized for future impact campaigns that I'll work on is really developing deep partnerships with a few organizations as opposed to just screening partnerships with a lot of organizations. If you have deep partnerships with organizations who say, "Okay, we want to continue to take this film and use it in this way," then it can have a longer life (*Original interview, Miriam, 26 April 2023*).

## KEY RESOURCES FOR SHARING



[The Citizen's Handbook](#)



[Softie Take Action Page](#)



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