

'We need to fix the funding issue in the creative sector'

Edgar R. Batte picks the mind of **Ian Wabwire**, a lawyer who seems to have found his calling in the creative pulse, with KQ Hub Africa—a media arts and culture organisation and creative studio—his beating heart.

Mr Ian Wabwire studied law. He did the pre-entry exams, stood at the threshold of what several Ugandan families would consider a respectable, predictable future. And then he stepped away.

It was not because he failed or could not practise. But because, somewhere between lecture halls and long conversations with friends from the School of Industrial Art, he realised his imagination belonged elsewhere.

"While at law school, I used to gravitate towards the School of Industrial Art. Most of my friends were actually from there," Mr Wabwire says.

"Because of my interaction with them, I started adapting their ways in terms of how they think... how they would want to use imagination or their creativity to be part of the solution of development in this country."

Today, Mr Wabwire is the creative director at KQ Hub Africa, an arts writer, an impact investor in the creative industry, and, as he casually adds, "also a farmer."

He describes himself as a cultural worker—someone who leverages the power of arts and culture to promote social and civic change.

It is a title that fits. He is clear about one thing: he does not regret not practising law.

"I actually do not regret not practising law," he says. "Working in the creative industry has allowed me the privilege to have sort of like free form in my life... When you're working with artists, these are not people that you can box."

A different skill set

In that freedom, Mr Wabwire found his calling. He quickly understood that while he might not be the musician, filmmaker, or painter in the room, his strengths are legal training, writing, project development, management and critical thinking were desperately needed in a sector struggling with structure and sustainability.

So he founded KQ Hub Africa, a media arts and culture organisation and creative studio. The idea was simple but radical: use his knowledge to develop proposals, secure funding, and channel those resources directly into the creative ecosystem so young artists could imagine, experiment, and build.

"We commission them. We create exchanges. We enable them to do residencies... to imagine," he says.

Imagination, for him, is not a luxury. It is infrastructure. One of Mr Wabwire's proudest achievements is Creative Talks Africa—a dialogue platform that began five years ago when he realised there were few dedicated spaces for artists to gather, network, and think together.

He says: "I pride myself and my team in delivering a series of talks monthly. Bringing together creators, be it from performance or visual arts."

Before then, artists often worked in isolation. The ecosystem was

fragmented. Creative Talks Africa became a meeting ground for photographers like Oscar Kibuka, visual artists like Pamela Enyoma, festival producers such as Faisal Kiwewa, and theatre practitioners including Humura Theatre.

Beyond dialogue, there was incubation. Mr Wabwire recalls platforming underground DJs who were barely known at the time, some of whom now perform at major festivals in Europe.

He speaks of residencies in partnership with Okere City in northern Uganda, where a poet, musician and theatre practitioner spent a month reimagining civic futures through art.

He references research projects examining how creativity was impacted by Covid-19, developed alongside partners including Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Over and over, his work circles back to one theme of art as civic engagement.

Funding deficits

Ask Mr Wabwire what the creative sector needs most, and he answers without hesitation. "Funding," he says. "We need to fix the funding issue in the creative industry."

He is critical of over-reliance on foreign development funding with restrictive conditions. Instead, he advocates for deliberate government investment—a creative fund or cultural council dedicated to supporting Ugandan artists through research grants, commissions, exchanges and residencies.

In countries with mature creative economies, he notes, artists are recognised as economic contributors and given space to experiment. That space is essential.

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No regrets

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cies exist, he says, but implementation is weak. Without enforcement, creators lose value from their own work.

And then there is the mindset. "In this country, we need to change, shift mindsets about how people think about artists and how people think about creativity."

Festivals like Nyege Nyege and Bayimba inject millions into the economy. Film industries like Nollywood demonstrate the sector's potential.

Yet, at family gatherings, he laughs, creativity still struggles for legitimacy.

"Up to date, they don't know what I do," he says of his family.

His wish list

On Mr Wabwire's wish list is something bigger than personal success. He wants collaboration over silos, decentralisation and wants rural access to culture. Through the Culture and Art Community Impact Fund—an initiative he and colleagues have begun—he envisions investment in research, cultural infrastructure and exchanges.

"If I'm in Busia, Gulu, and in Mubende, I can be able to interact with art without necessarily having to come to the capital," he says, adding that there needs to be more community museums, theatre spaces and exhibitions cascading beyond Kampala. He wants artists to travel, even modest grants enabling them to showcase work in Nairobi or Kigali could transform careers. They are, he says, cultural ambassadors. Currently, Mr Wabwire is deeply engaged with theatre as a tool of civic education.

Mr Wabwire's team is developing projects that use participatory theatre to raise young people's consciousness about their civic responsibilities.

FUNDING AND COPYRIGHT ISSUES FOR CREATIVES

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He has worked with partners, including the University of Manchester, on exploring mural and visual arts as tools for civic engagement.

He is also part of a fellowship contributing literary reflections on sustaining civic futures in East Africa. There is a clear thread: creativity is not ornamental. It is political, social and developmental.

Mr Wabwire identifies as Samia from Busia, a border town shaped by colonial boundary lines.

"Busia is a border country," he says. "So you could say I am a global citizen."

He resists being boxed geographically, just as he resists being boxed professionally.

His soundtrack reflects that ethos. Reggae, particularly Lucky Dube, fills his playlist, its themes of resistance and decolonial consciousness aligning with his thinking.

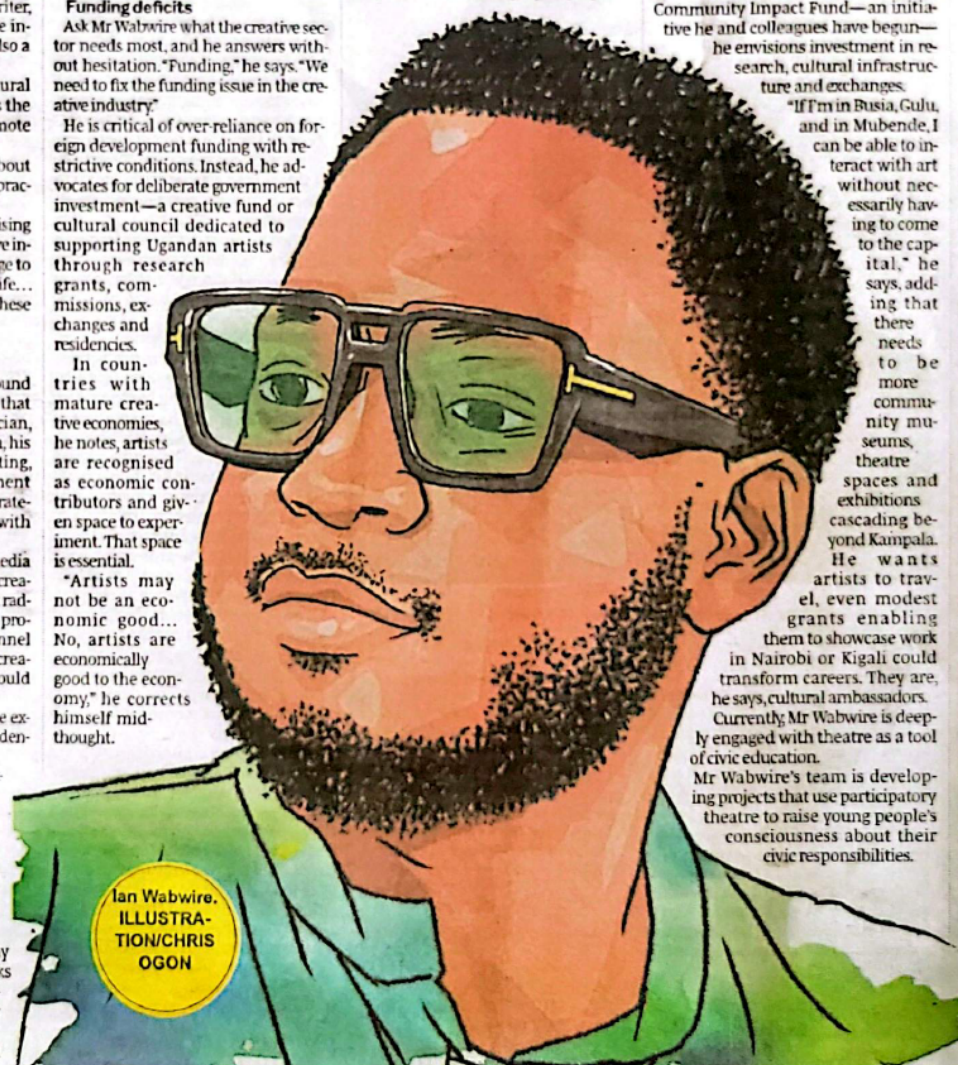
He also listens to Ugandan artists like Afrie and DJs, who experiment boldly with sound.

Music, like theatre and murals, becomes a site of contestation—a way to rethink power, governance and identity.

Mr Wabwire's journey is not just about one lawyer who changed course but what happens when someone recognises that systems need architects, not just performers.

He stands at the intersection of law and art, policy and poetry, funding models and imagination. His argument is simple: if Uganda and East Africa are serious about development, then creativity cannot remain peripheral.

It must be funded, protected, respected and decentralised. And above all, allowed to imagine. Because, as Mr Wabwire's own life demonstrates, sometimes the most powerful departures are not from failure, but from listening to where your imagination feels most alive.



Ian Wabwire, ILLUSTRATION/CHRIS OGON