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# The Missing Foundation

**Culture's Place Within and  
Beyond the UN Sustainable  
Development Goals**

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2023

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This report was commissioned by the British Council.

Contracted entity: edge and story (edgeandstory OÜ)

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The interpretations offered in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the British Council, its officers, or those individuals who contributed to the research.

Brennert, K., Gesuri, D.I., Giliberto, F., Hodgkinson, K. and Ivo Franco, P.A. (2023). The Missing Foundation: Culture's Place Within and Beyond the UN Sustainable Development Goals. British Council. DOI:10.57884/455w-7623

# Foreword

British Council promotes peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust. Much of its Arts and Culture work in recent years has been funded with Official Development Assistance from the UK Government, and through that work there has been a strategic commitment to advocate for the value of arts and culture in sustainable development.

In 2020, we published 'The Missing Pillar Culture's Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals', including an overview of the political and cultural landscape, case studies of our programmes, and recommendations to take forward. As the name suggests, the report presented culture as an overlooked and under-valued element of sustainable development at home and abroad, that should be considered as an equal pillar alongside economic, social and environmental aspects. The report also sought to explore wider questions around 'culture' and 'development' such as how we nurture and preserve culture whilst ensuring social and economic progress? and how we ensure a close connection between collective action aimed at a better environment and a more sustainable planet?

'The Missing Pillar' aimed to bridge the gap between policy and practice, by encouraging connections between cultural and community-led activity to the thematic priorities of the SDGs. The report recommended finding better ways to measure and share the impact of participation in cultural life, as well as involve communities and local actors to understand cross-cutting needs and ecosystems. The report also recognised the importance of digital technologies and the climate emergency as emerging priorities to respond to. It was an exciting and impactful piece of work that prompted a series of 'Missing Pillar Talks'. It was also the focus for British Council-led debates on platforms such as Mondiacult 2022, the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development.

The response to that original 'Missing Pillar' report and its resonance for a range of organisations prompted us to commission this follow up piece of research, 'The Missing Foundation: Culture's Place Within and Beyond the UN Sustainable Development Goals'. As a report, we

think it is as significant, as forward-thinking and as well-timed as the original. It encourages arts and cultural organisations to consider not just their contribution to sustainable development, but the opportunity for culture to be more of an engine for long-lasting change. It is an imaginative and forward-thinking piece that challenges understandings of 'development' as a concept. It suggests a re-appraisal of the way programmes are designed and evaluated, and a re-think of the narrative and the framing of cultural programmes. It is timely, as we assess progress towards the UN 2030 Agenda with calls from the UN to "Act Now for a World Working Together". It also comes at a time of post-Covid reassessment of what we care about and what we understand will bring value to our lives in the future.

This report is not only a dynamic follow up to The Missing Pillar report, it brings a cultural perspective to the debates about development initiated by World Development report 2015 'Mind, Society and Behaviour'. The report challenges us as an organisation to think deeply about how we align our work to global priorities and frameworks. It prompts a look at how we design and structure programmes and to what degree they are responding to culture as a 'global public good', as recognised by UNESCO. It also calls for a re-assessment of development paradigms and of whether a sustainable, inclusive and equitable future needs to be understood as a cultural rather than a political, diplomatic or economic undertaking. Culture could be seen as the foundation that then stimulates policy-makers to consider aspects of inclusivity, equality and sustainability.

As a cultural relations organisation, we believe in the value of building relations based on mutuality, we celebrate cultural diversity and engagement, and recognise this as a force for good. In that spirit, we welcome the debate that this report opens up about how we understand development and the call for new frameworks to support collective action for a more sustainable world. We are committed to culture being a foundation for those shared endeavours, through cultural relations and engagement worldwide.

**Mark Stephens CMG**  
**Director Cultural Engagement, British Council**

# Foreword

One year has passed since the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022, where countries unanimously endorsed the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration. Together, they carved a roadmap on areas of policy engagement for the future to harness culture for sustainable development. Acknowledging its transformative role across all aspects of sustainable development – from social inclusion and equity, education and learning, to health and well-being, climate action and resilience, as well as peacebuilding – the Declaration firmly positions culture as a global public good, calling explicitly for its integration as a specific goal in the development framework beyond 2030.

One year on from this landmark ministerial commitment, culture has gained ground in the global conversation on public policies and sustainable development. Culture-related commitments have been prominently featured in Heads of States or ministerial declarations endorsed throughout 2023 by the G20, the G77, the BRICS and the Ibero-American Summits, among others. Likewise, regional organizations, from the African Union and the Pacific Community to ASEAN, SEGIB or CECC-SICA, have stepped up their commitments on delivering on the UN Sustainable Development Goals through culture by achieving policy landmarks.

Culture also has a rising profile within the United Nations system. The recent Political Declaration of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development held in September 2023 further recognised the role of culture as an enabler of sustainable development by filling in the implementation gaps of the global 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, in a jointly coordinated effort, eighteen UN agencies are making tangible progress on this matter through the Inter-Agency Platform on Culture for Sustainable Development, while a policy brief on culture as a global public good is being prepared by UNESCO in order to inform the shaping of the post 2030 development agenda.

In the same vein, countries are gradually moving forward to implement commitments made in Mexico. Encouragingly, the UN Secretary-General Report on Culture and Sustainable Development published last month highlighted tangible progress at country level across several areas of action outlined by the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, such as enforcing cultural rights, harnessing culture for climate action and peacebuilding, supporting the cultural and creative economy, or enhancing the linkages between culture and education policies.

In a fragmented global policy landscape, marked by multifaceted crisis, culture has the power to help reshape public policy and development models. In multicultural societies, a robust commitment to advance cultural rights and sustain pluralism is needed, together with more inclusive governance models and robust investment in knowledge building and data. In that perspective, UNESCO welcomes the British Council's long-standing commitment towards advocating for culture and sustainable development but also engaging in policy analysis, data collection and evidence-based research on the multidimensional impact of culture across public policies, building on country level projects and programmes around the world.

Looking forward, we must advocate for culture as a foundation of human development, as called for in the present report, with a view to shift the lines of the global conversation on sustainable development, notably towards the upcoming Summit of the Future in 2024. Likewise, a more systemic alliance with the development community, including bilateral and multilateral development agencies, is equally crucial. This commitment to knowledge and evidence building is critical to work collectively towards highlighting the transformative power of culture for a more sustainable future, leaving no one behind.

**Ernesto Ottono R.**  
Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO



Full-page Image from motherEarth International Indonesia, one of the British Council Creative Commissions for Climate Action.

Photo © Sito Adi Anom & Ariyanto Nugroho

# Executive Summary

**This report highlights the foundational role of culture in driving sustainable development, within and beyond the parameters set by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It provides insights tailored for policymakers and practitioners operating at the intersection of cultural and developmental spheres.**

**Insight 1:** Globally, the cultural sector recognises the intrinsic connection between culture and sustainable development. However, this crucial nexus often remains overlooked in broader conversations surrounding sustainable development and the specific goals outlined in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda.

**Insight 2:** While culture is acknowledged globally as a force in development, consensus within the cultural sector regarding its precise role within the SDGs framework remains limited. While some advocate for designating culture as a fourth pillar or a standalone SDG goal, others perceive it as a powerful cross-cutting tool for advancing development objectives.

**Insight 3:** The intrinsic role of culture in development, though resonating deeply with individual cultural stakeholders, is frequently overlooked in current literature. Many practitioners view the SDGs as a pragmatic means of securing funding rather than a guiding framework for their work. However, challenges persist in articulating SDG impact due to a lack of comprehensive frameworks explaining the explicit connections between culture and development.

**Insight 4:** The United Nations' 2030 Agenda and its associated SDGs provide a critical global roadmap for the cultural sector. Rigorous measurement and verification of cultural contributions to these targets are imperative for informed policymaking within this framework. Although British Council cultural programmes yield valuable insights into contributions to the SDGs, opportunities to showcase and articulate these contributions are often missed.

**Insight 5:** Cultural programmes do not always align perfectly with SDG targets and indicators. Instead, they establish conditions that enable meaningful contributions towards the SDGs. An honest and rigorous approach to programme design, evaluation, and data collection is indispensable for the cultural sector to be a meaningful contributor to the SDGs.

**Insight 6:** Cultural programmes reach beyond the confines of the SDGs, impacting on community development, intercultural dialogue, and cultural rights. These contributions must be safeguarded. Adhering rigidly to the United Nations' 2030 agenda could potentially limit the transformative potential of the culture. Recognising culture as a foundation for sustainable development, extending beyond the SDGs, is essential. This broader perspective acknowledges the multifaceted and intrinsic role of culture in shaping a sustainable future for all.

**Insight 7:** Cultural practitioners find alignment with the SDGs beneficial, yet they emphasise the need for a localised, process-focused approach to drive incremental change in complex, interconnected systems. As standard-bearers of local perspectives in sustainable development, the cultural sector has the potential to redefine our relationship with the world around us. Cross-sectoral collaboration, underpinned by a pragmatic approach of 'hybridity', offers promise in navigating these complex challenges.

**Culture**'s contribution to the **UN SDGs** → SDGs ≠ sustainable development

# The Missing Pillar?

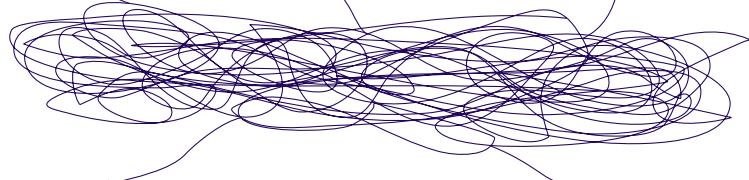
**cultural sector** says:  
*missing? absolutely!*  
*pillar? maybe.*

**non-cultural sector**  
often does not talk about  
culture in the SDGs

**MISSING PILLAR**  
culture *in* development

**TRANSVERSAL ROLE**  
culture *for* development

**CULTURE AS A METHOD**  
culture *as* development



**little demonstrated  
SDG impact**, few development  
actors take culture seriously

**no consolidated voice**,  
few development actors  
listen

let's zoom in

10 EXAMPLES →

**BRITISH COUNCIL  
PROGRAMMES**

**DESIGN**

SDG alignment but few SDG-relevant change logics / theories

**IMPLEMENTATION**

focused on impact on their own programme objectives, but not SDGs

**EVALUATION**

little SDG-relevant evaluation, hardly mention of targets or indicators

**mostly rhetoric alignment to SDGs, but little direct activity or evidence**

hurts

cultural sector's  
credibility

rigorous  
SDG  
monitoring

**fair enough.**

but maybe that is an SDGs problem,  
not a culture problem?

a critique

a little pragmatism

an exploration

**SDGs**

neoliberal system  
symptoms  
projects & outcomes  
synergies & trade-offs  
control & accountability

**CULTURE COULD BE**

fragmented and  
instrumentalised  
reduced to only  
a few indicators  
enabling solutions  
to symptoms only

**Systems Change**

care  
root causes  
process  
systemic approach  
learning

**CULTURE COULD**

rebuild interdependent  
relationships we have  
with ourselves, each  
other, and the planet  
build capacity for  
systems change

**Alternative  
Development Models**

Doughnut  
Economics

A Boring  
Revolution

Inner  
Development  
Goals

...and more

**PLAYING THE GAME**

use SDGs in cultural  
project design,  
implementation, and  
evaluation – but properly

seek collaboration  
across sectors

set up integrated  
monitoring mechanisms

communicate openly and  
honestly about progress

use insights to identify  
areas for systems change

**CHANGING THE RULES**

define impact logics and  
areas relevant to your  
project and context

use culture's full potential

use culture to grow  
systems change capacity

demonstrate and  
communicate how your  
impact is shifting the  
relationship we have with  
ourselves, each other,  
and the planet

advocate for decentralising  
global development logics

**Culture is the Missing Foundation**

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**Above** An artist in the Crafting Futures programme in Vietnam. Crafting Futures brings together craft practitioners, designers and organisations internationally to support crafts around the world.

Photo © Nic Shonfeld



# The Missing Pillar or the Missing Foundation?

In its Strategy 2025, the British Council has committed to advocating for the value of arts and culture in sustainable development for a more connected, understanding and trusting world. It will be taking the SDGs as a framework for its global arts programmes, basing them on the contexts in which the British Council operates, the people it engages with, and their shared values. In the 2020 publication “The Missing Pillar - Culture’s Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals”, the British Council underlined this commitment by seeking to present relevant evidence of their programmes’ impact and positioning culture indeed as a missing pillar in the wider debate of culture’s role in processes of sustainable development.

As crises intensify, culture becomes more self-aware of its potential to be a force for good. The 2022 UNESCO Mondiacult conference classified culture as a global public good, further anchoring culture in the global development discourse that is expected to grow in the coming years as we are approaching the end of the UN’s 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals Framework. There are multiple proposals discussing what role culture can or should play in the global sustainable development rationale, and more tangibly in the post-2030 agenda.

This report is a contribution to that conversation, sitting in between observation, provocation, and imagination. We are grateful for the opportunity to publish a piece that openly questions, and hopefully also contributes to, the British Council’s strategic direction.

As a result of our research, combined lived experiences, and conversations with artists, activists, academics, and policymakers, we feel it is time not necessarily to re-think culture’s contribution to sustainable development and the UN SDGs specifically, but to rethink how culture fits into these global development frameworks in the

first place. In this report, we interrogate whether these paradigms might even restrict culture to fully realise its many potentials.

The first section of the report will look at more recent conversations in the culture and SDG field, trying to find out who talks – and who doesn’t – about culture in sustainable development, what ideas are being favoured, and what rationales tend to dominate the conversations.

The second part is an in-depth analysis of 10 British Council culture programmes and how they relate to the UN SDGs throughout their programme cycles, from design all the way to evaluation. The evidence will help us understand culture’s actual contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The third part questions whether the SDGs are the best framework for culture to align itself to, situates culture in various other development logics, and presents an alternative hybrid concept for cultural actors to consider when working in relation to sustainable development.

We want to stimulate thinking outside the confines of frameworks and concepts that appear to be monolithic. Rather than defining culture in the context of sustainable development, we want to define what sustainable development can mean for culture.

This begs the ultimate question for strategic positioning in the upcoming post-2030 agenda negotiations: Is culture really the missing pillar in the global sustainable development debate, or is it perhaps the missing foundation?

**Kai Brennert, Dian Ika Gesuri, Francesca Giliberto, Katie Hodgkinson, Pedro Affonso Ivo Franco**

**For edge and story**

# Method

## Listening, Examining, Imagining

The narrative in this report derives from an iterative three-phase process of data analysis to unpack current discourse and practice in culture and sustainable development and imagine new approaches to this relationship in the post-2030 Agenda.

The **first phase** of the research undertook an updated analysis on current understandings of the contribution of culture to the SDGs and progress towards the Missing Pillar recommendations. A literature review of 31 documents that examine the relationship between culture and development was conducted, including research outputs, programme documentations and governmental policies. These documents were selected in conversation with the British Council. We also examined a few key documents around the SDGs that did not discuss culture, to include alternative perspectives (these latter documents were not analysed in reference to the Missing Pillar recommendations).

The **second phase** of the research reviewed current practice in aligning cultural programmes to the SDGs and generating evidence to demonstrate culture's contribution to sustainable development. A systematic in-depth analysis was conducted into 10 British Council programmes, including public-facing and internal programme reports and evaluations. Based on the findings from the literature review, the programmes were analysed to assess their alignment with the SDGs in their design, implementation, and evaluation stages.

The **final phase** of the research was designed with insights from phases one and two that demonstrated both a lack of purposeful alignment between cultural programmes and the SDGs, and that the SDG framework was insufficient at capturing the full range of contributions that culture can make to addressing key global development challenges. In an online roundtable, we discussed the SDGs as a framework in relation

to culture's potential in global development politics. In another roundtable with cultural practitioners, we learned about the SDG framework's lack of harmony with the working realities of cultural practitioners in integrating culture to sustainable development. Opening our eyes to development models offering alternatives to the current SDG framework, this final phase also highlighted the leverage area for culture to be better integrated in sustainable development post-2030. This aspiration informed a number of propositions for the cultural sector to not only practically respond to the current SDG framework, but also to move culture closer to its profound and transformational role in achieving sustainable human and planetary well-being.

At the end of each section is a summary page collecting key **insights**.

A recurring theme throughout this research has been a struggle with the definition of culture. Those working in the 'cultural sector' (itself a contested field) take very different approaches to defining the term: from a narrow focus on the arts, to UNESCO's broad and all-encompassing definition of culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs" (UNESCO 2001). We have taken different approaches to this definitional challenge. Section one examines literature that self-describes as referring to "culture", and therefore encompasses documents that span the narrow and wider definition, in addition to development literature not mentioning culture at all. Section two specifically examines British Council programmes, and thus those that use the British Council's understanding of culture. Section three unpacks the challenges of defining culture and seeks a way forward that might bridge differing understandings of the field.

# Conversations of the Present

In this section we examine a selection of voices from academia, practice and policy to better understand current conversations on the role that culture can play in sustainable development. This follows the British Council's 2020 The Missing Pillar report, which highlighted the importance of culture to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition to illustrating culture's potential in each SDG, the report put forward nine recommendations for capturing the contribution of culture to sustainable development more effectively. In this section, we use these recommendations to examine how the conversation is progressing.

The documents selected for analysis in this section directly inform the work of the British Council and the global conversations on culture and sustainable development. The documents were selected jointly with the British Council. They were analysed according to their notion of culture, their position towards culture in the context of sustainable development and the SDGs, whether they make concrete recommendations for the post-2030 agenda, and how they respond to the Missing Pillar Report's recommendations. The analysis highlights a number of existing trends in the literature which will be presented here, namely:

- the continued calls to recognise the centrality of culture to development,
- the need to conceptualise culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development, and
- the instrumental value of culture for development.

It also highlights aspects that continue to be absent in the literature, but that are particularly significant to fully capture and assess culture's contribution to sustainable development.

**Below** Sudanese artist Sarra Saed performing her song at the European Development Days 2018 in Brussels.

Photo © EDD18



## Talking about Culture and Sustainable Development

Prior to the launch of the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, culture's significance for development and its potential contribution to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) had already received attention. Then, UNESCO (2012) advocated for the post-2015 Agenda to incorporate valuable lessons on how culture promotes sustainable development, both as a driver and as an enabler.

As a driver, culture's role in sustainable development is seen through the contributions of the cultural sector to the economy and poverty reduction. Creative industries, cultural tourism, and the cultural economy not only generate revenue but also provide non-monetary benefits, such as enhanced social inclusiveness, cultural rootedness, resilience, innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Additionally, culture can drive lifestyle changes and serve as a tool to address ecological challenges by leveraging local and indigenous knowledge.

As an enabler, a culturally-sensitive approach in development is recognised for its transformative power. It can address both the economic and human rights dimensions of poverty, offer innovative solutions to complex development issues through a multi-sectoral approach, and enhance their relevance and effectiveness based on people's needs. Moreover, recognising and promoting respect for cultural diversity can create optimal conditions for achieving development goals through facilitation of intercultural dialogue, conflict prevention, and the protection of the rights of marginalised groups.

However, our research has revealed a notable absence of theories, concepts, or models for critically analysing culture's contribution to sustainable development. While UNESCO's 2012 report advocated for two ways of integrating culture into sustainable development, it primarily focused on its instrumental role. Dessein et al.'s (2015) proposal to categorise culture into three distinct roles related to sustainable development offers a framework to expand culture's role beyond its instrumental role. For reasons of familiarity in the sector and broad theorisation of culture, we will make use of their distinction in our analysis:

- **Culture in sustainable development**

The supportive and self-promoting role of culture that sees culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development alongside the social, economic, and ecological. Demonstrating the role of culture in supporting sustainability.

- **Culture as sustainable development**

Culture as "the essential foundation and structure for achieving the aims of sustainable development" through its "evolutionary, holistic, and transformative role". Demonstrating the role of culture in creating sustainability.

- **Culture for sustainable development**

The role of culture in driving sustainable development and to frame, contextualise, and mediate the economic, social, and ecological needs of development. Demonstrating the role of culture in connecting sustainability.

## Culture *in* Sustainable Development

The literature examined mainly reflects the first of these roles: the role of culture in sustainable development. This role acknowledges culture's supporting act in sustainability as an independent and autonomous dimension alongside the social, ecological, and economic aspects of sustainable development. Culture, as a qualitative concept that is often understood narrowly as the arts and creative-cultural sector, is conceived as having two complementary roles in this respect: it is both a process and an end goal for development (Singh 2019). In a reciprocal relationship culture can support progress towards the SDGs whilst progress towards the SDGs can enable culture to flourish (Yildirim et al. 2021). Indeed, Zheng et al. (2021)

conducted a quantitative analysis of the SDGs, finding evidence that culture influences the achievement of 79% of the 169 SDG targets.

Cultural actors, therefore, continue to call for culture to be considered as a fourth pillar of sustainable development (see, for example, Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; Canadian Commission for UNESCO and UK National Commission for UNESCO 2022), with some also calling for a stand-alone cultural goal in the SDGs (see, for example, Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; UNESCO 2022). Indeed, the Welsh Government's "Well-being of Future Generations Act" (Welsh Government 2015) expressly includes culture as a fourth pillar,

legally binding national and local governments and public bodies into an approach that works towards the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of the country.

Despite the recognition of the integral role that culture and heritage play in the SDGs, authors argue that culture continues to be underrepresented and undervalued in sustainable development discourses (see Labadi et al. 2021). The European Commission, for example, has highlighted that there is an implicit hierarchy in the SDGs, and that culture-related issues are at the bottom of that hierarchy (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2022). Similarly, the Canadian Commission for UNESCO (2022) states that “the potential to engage culture for sustainable development remains largely untapped in national strategies to implement the SDGs”.

## Culture as Sustainable Development

Another point in Dessein et al.'s (2015) typology is the role of culture as sustainable development. This role understands culture as the foundation for creating and achieving sustainability. It moves beyond the instrumental to the profound and transformational role of culture in sustainable development processes. This understanding views culture, which constitutes human values and ways of life, as the core issue to transition towards a sustainable society. While on the one hand the 2030 Agenda overlooks the importance of culture as an enabler and a driver to sustainable development (Labadi et al. 2021), on the other hand it recognises the intrinsic contribution of the world's cultural and natural heritage for the SDGs, stating that efforts should be strengthened to support their protection and safeguarding over time (Target 11.4). However, this role continues to be overlooked in literature on culture, despite the Mondiacult declaration expressly recognising “culture as a global public good with an intrinsic value” (UNESCO 2022).

## Culture for Sustainable Development

This role acknowledges the significance of culture in connecting and mediating other dimensions of sustainable development. Here, culture is understood in its broader definition, which includes human values, subjective meanings, expressions and ways of life, extending beyond the arts and creative-cultural industries domain. The notion of culture for development can be divided into two areas:

- **Culture as a tool for development**  
Representing the instrumental role that culture can play in enabling the realisation of global development goals and easing development interventions;
- **Culture as a driver of development**  
Demonstrating the role that culture can play in mediating, driving, and connecting different dimensions of sustainability (social, ecological, and economic), by providing guidance to navigate pressures and demands of these dimensions, which originate from human cultural aspiration and actions.

Within the literature, the first of these roles is heavily represented. As well as being a goal in itself, culture is also considered to be a vector to achieve other aspects of sustainable development (Marcus et al. 2021). It is seen as both a driver and enabler of sustainable development (Zheng et al. 2021; Lamonica 2021). Culture is therefore seen to play an instrumental role in sustainable development. The table on the next page represents the many ways that culture is presented as a tool for development in the literature reviewed.

The second of these roles, culture as a driver of development, receives less attention in the literature. The work of Zheng et al. (2021) paid the greatest attention to this role of development, highlighting how cultural practices can drive both sustainable and unsustainable development. The authors argue that culture can play a role in sustaining and reinforcing poverty by influencing a person or community's ability to produce wealth, and by affecting the acceptance and effectiveness of economic policies. Whilst culture can promote gender equality, it can also serve to negatively impact women's access to resources, entrench harmful behaviours towards women, and can influence how a society responds to reducing inequalities and discrimination (Zheng et al. 2021). Similarly, whilst culture can be a tool for promoting positive climate action, it often also engrains unsustainable production and consumption patterns and entrenches human-nature relations that result in environmental damage. The negative roles that culture can play in development highlight precisely the need to better understand and enhance the role of culture as a positive force for development (Zheng et al. 2021).

## A Typology of Culture for Sustainable Development

Our literature review demonstrated the multiple ways that culture is conceived as a tool, playing an instrumental role in sustainable development. This is laid out in the table below and constitutes a non-exhaustive list.

<p><b>Culture for health and well-being</b></p> <p>Enhancing the well-being of community members</p> <p>Providing sources of entertainment</p> <p>Facilitating (or hindering) the prevention, detection, and treatment of disease, the perception and acceptance of health intervention, and people's interpretations and responses to emotion and the availability of social support</p> <p>Promoting individual, community, and national well-being</p> <p>Supporting positive outcomes for children and young people</p> <p>Benefiting mental health and wider well-being through cultural and artistic expression</p> <p>Enabling the emotional and psychological recovery of people affected, for example, by the COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<p><b>Culture for community development</b></p> <p>Cultivating a sense of community, solidarity, and mutual respect</p> <p>Strengthening cooperation and mutual care</p> <p>Enhancing community identity, pride, and ownership</p> <p>Developing appreciation of cultural diversity</p> <p>Promoting social inclusion and tolerance</p> <p>Promoting cultural rights</p> <p><b>Economic value of culture</b></p> <p>Selling of (traditionally made) items to earn cash income</p> <p>Attracting (sustainable) tourism</p> <p>Generating employment</p> <p>Developing technical skills</p> <p>Transforming economies</p> <p>Contributing to economic growth</p> <p>Integrating states into the 'global economy'</p> <p><b>Culture for gender justice</b></p> <p>Improving women's leadership</p> <p>Integrating women into formal economies</p> <p>Promoting mutual respect, solidarity, and empathy</p>	<p><b>Learning, education, and culture</b></p> <p>Developing and integrating new pedagogical practices</p> <p>Improving learners' capacity and skills, including non-cognitive skills and learning and skills for sustainable development</p> <p>Improving school attendance and academic performance</p> <p>Increasing motivation for learning</p> <p>Improving learner participation</p> <p>Improving critical thinking</p> <p>Promoting global citizenship</p> <p>Fostering inclusion</p> <p><b>Climate action and culture</b></p> <p>Enabling new imaginaries of the future</p> <p>Fostering the exchange of lived experiences of climate change</p> <p>Promoting cross-cultural cooperation for climate awareness</p> <p>Changing the way that risks and consequences of climate change are perceived</p> <p>Contributing to disaster reduction</p> <p>Making lifestyles more environmentally friendly</p> <p>Empowering and mobilising civil society towards environmental sustainability</p>
<p><b>Culture for peace</b></p> <p>Promoting intercultural understanding and peaceful coexistence</p> <p>Reducing violence – including violence in schools and gender-based violence</p> <p>Countering violent extremism</p> <p>Promoting dialogue</p> <p>Promoting human rights</p> <p>Enabling citizen participation</p>		

## Progress Toward the Missing Pillar

The British Council's initial 2020 Missing Pillar report made nine recommendations how the cultural sector can improve its engagement with the SDGs. Recommendations range from simply using the language of the SDGs to setting up elaborate evaluation frameworks and collecting baseline data.

In an analysis of 22 recent practice and policy documents and reports dealing broadly with culture and sustainable development (not all reviewed documents were included due to relevance, see page 44), we found limited progress towards these recommendations. Adopting the language of the SDGs, arguably the least transformative of the

recommendations, was met most often. Applying people-centred approaches by working directly with community members and partners in all aspects of programme design, delivery, and evaluation also ranked high but it was often unclear how these efforts were put into practice. Recommendations that were rarely mentioned include any form of digital engagement.

As possibly two of the most important recommendations to increase visibility for and credibility of culture within the SDG framework, selecting key targets and indicators and addressing climate change as a cross-cutting theme feature in the plans and policies of only a few stakeholders.

### Adopt the language of the SDGs



The majority of the literature adopted the language of the SDGs – or at least that of sustainable development. However, this adoption remains superficial; specific work towards SDG indicators or in-depth interrogations of the role of culture is largely missing.

### Develop training programmes that highlight the role of arts and culture in the SDGs



Some documents identify the need for training programmes or knowledge-sharing events to enable cultural workers to recognise and harness the role of culture for sustainable development. However, implementation of this training is less apparent.

### Work with community members and partners in developing, delivering, and evaluating cultural initiatives



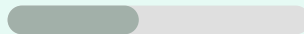
Working with multiple and diverse stakeholders was key to many of the texts analysed. Dialogue between stakeholders was seen as being a central component to integrating, and understanding the role of, culture in sustainable development.

### Advocate for specific outcomes that respond to individual SDGs through arts and culture



Several reports and articles explicitly examined the role of culture, and the particular programmes studied, in achieving specific goals.

### Select key targets and indicators to mainstream throughout projects



Links to specific targets and indicators was less common and often tokenistic.

### Collect baseline data to better monitor impact and recognise the need for longitudinal evaluations



Baseline data and studies that would contribute to an evidence base on the role of culture in development remains limited.

### Develop a clear and consistent approach to monitor stakeholder, media, and digital engagement



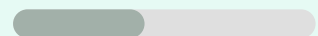
There was no evidence through the documents analysed of consistent approaches to monitor stakeholder, media, and digital engagement.

### Leverage digital technologies to increase engagement with the SDGs



The use of digital technologies to increase engagement with the SDGs continues to be limited, with only implicit or narrow references to harnessing digital technologies.

### Address climate change as a cross-cutting theme



A significant proportion of the literature addressed climate change. There are developing understandings of how climate change can affect heritage and culture, and the role of culture in contributing to, addressing, and mitigating effects of, climate change.

# Inter-governmental and Supranational Cultural Policies

## Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

### Policy Spotlight



The **ASEAN Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025** boldly affirms culture's role in the pursuit of inclusive and sustainable development. ASEAN's understanding of culture is rich and multi-layered as it encapsulates not just arts, traditions, and creative industries but also identity, heritage, histories, and values. This wide definition reflects the Association's strive for diversity and peaceful coexistence. In relation to sustainable development, culture is positioned as a catalyst, a supporter, a link, a contribution, as well as a pillar

of sustainable development itself. The 2022 Siem Reap Declaration on Promoting a Creative and Adaptive ASEAN Community to Support the Cultural and Creative Economy has narrowed its definition of the role of culture and the arts toward promoting various aspects of sustainable development, including social, economic, and environmental dimensions. In short, ASEAN employs a broad and rich but fundamentally blurry stance toward culture and its role in sustainable development.



## African Union (AU)

### Policy Spotlight

The **AU Agenda 2063** centres cultural identity, common heritage, and shared values and ethics as an aspiration for Africa, ushering in the 2021 AU Year of the Arts, Culture And Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want. The agenda's focus is on growth and transformation on the one hand,

and on restoration and preservation of heritage on the other. The AU positions culture as a vehicle for promoting and contributing to sustainable development, all while defining culture as broadly as possible, ranging from social behaviours to creative arts to cultural and creative industries.



## Global Voices

### Who does and who doesn't talk about culture in the sustainable development context?

Whilst the cultural sector discusses the links between culture and sustainable development, these connections are often missing in wider conversations on sustainable development broadly and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda specifically. Indeed, the role and position of culture is noticeably missing in key texts on sustainable development.

The European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews, which provides "a consolidated method and examples of indicators that European local and regional governments can use to monitor the achievement of the SDGs" (Siragusa et al. 2022) has no mention of culture in its indicators. With the exception of mentioning creative industries as a vector for trade, UNDESA's (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) 2022 SDG good practices guide contains no explicit reference to culture, either.

Despite the vocal presence of many cultural actors, such as the Climate Heritage Network and CultureCOP, at the 2022 UN Climate Change Conference (COP27), the Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan adopted at the end of COP27 refers only to cultural heritage as something worth protecting in the context of loss and damage due to climate change, as well as a vague reference to the interrelated connection between culture and nature for some communities.

Nevertheless, in recent years there have also been a number of key international events, initiatives, and publications on sustainable development in which culture plays a central role, most notably:

- A Zerodraft for a potential future culture goal in the post-2030 agenda was launched in 2022 by the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, a coalition of civil society organisations. The suggested goal is called "Ensure cultural sustainability for the wellbeing of all" and includes eight targets and two sub-targets.
- Mondiacult 2022 - The UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development led to 150 states adopting the Declaration for Culture. The Mondiacult declaration affirms culture as a "global public good" and "outlines a forward-looking agenda that fully harnesses the transformative impact of culture for sustainable development" (UNESCO 2022).
- 2021 was the UN International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, with activities highlighting the power of creative economies for resilience, innovation, and inclusive economic growth.
- In 2021, the UNESCO Inter-Agency Platform on Culture for Sustainable Development was founded, seeking to "federate efforts, strengthen collaboration, and maximise coherence of related UN-wide action on harnessing culture's contribution for sustainable development across the UN System".
- In 2021, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) published "Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Guidance for Heritage and Development Actors" (Labadi et al. 2021). This policy document aims to engage development actors and raise awareness of the potential contribution of heritage practices to sustainable development processes as well as guide ICOMOS members and heritage professionals at large in adopting a sustainable development perspective in their heritage practices and aligning them to the SDGs.
- 2019 saw the launch of the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators, designed for "strengthening the transversal visibility of culture in the 2030 Agenda". The measurement framework includes 22 indicators across four thematic dimensions, all of which are broadly linked to the SDGs.

## British Voices

Within the UK, there seems to be increased attention to, and understanding of, the role of culture in/for/as sustainable development. In “Agenda 2030: The UK government’s approach to delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development”, published in 2017, the role of culture is noticeably absent (DFID 2017). Even information on Goal 11, the only goal explicitly mentioning heritage, solely refers to public transport, air quality, and housing in the UK, and sustainable urbanisation globally. Yet in the UK’s National Voluntary Review of Progress towards the SDGs, published in 2019, culture is threaded more consistently throughout, with different cultural policies or programmes spotlighted to demonstrate progress towards different goals (HM Government 2019). For example:

- **Goal 1: No Poverty**  
The report highlights the Welsh programme Fusion, which supports economically disadvantaged communities, including through engagement with heritage sites, theatres, museums and archives.
- **Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth**  
The report briefly references that culture and art is contributing to economic growth in Northern Ireland.
- **Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities**  
The National Community Lottery Fund is spotlighted, for its role in funding “projects and activities that transform communities, protect heritage, and enrich lives through arts, sports and culture”.

Incorporating the development goals into policy and planning frameworks is the responsibility of the UK parliament and the UK’s devolved assemblies. The Welsh Government has enshrined its commitment to sustainable development through the Wales’ Well-being for Future Generations Act, which, as highlighted above embeds culture as the fourth pillar of development, and legally binds public bodies to work towards the Act’s

seven goals, which includes “A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language”. The indicators to meet this goal vary substantially (and overlap with other goals), from healthy lifestyles, income poverty, and child development to people participating in arts, culture, or heritage activities. However, specific plans include ensuring sustainable pathways to successful cultural professions, developing cultural partnerships, and ensuring that cultural work is addressing the climate emergency (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2022).

Scotland’s National Performance Framework implements and monitors development within the country. Amongst other things, it lists its purposes as ensuring people “are creative and their vibrant and diverse cultures are expressed and enjoyed widely”. A National Outcome of the framework is centred on culture: “We are creative and our vibrant and diverse cultures are expressed and enjoyed widely”. This outcome is measured by indicators including attendance at cultural events or places of culture, participation in cultural activities, growth in the cultural economy, and people working in arts and culture (Scottish Government [online]).

Culture is therefore being incorporated into national development policies in the UK. However, the UK is still failing to implement culture in its international contribution to the SDG debate: The UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, for example, did not mention culture or the arts in the 2022 UK Government’s Strategy for International Development. Furthermore, in their analysis of the UK’s contribution to the SDGs, Bond (2022), a UK network of over 4,000 civil society organisations working in international development, does not mention culture beyond its appearance in SDG 11, Target 11.4, which refers to the need to “strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage”.



**Our work encourages connection between cultural operators and community-led activity, bridging the gap between policy and practice as we seek a closer alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. We recognise the need to find clearer and better ways to measure and share the impact of participation in cultural life, as well as involve communities and local actors to understand cross-cutting needs and ecosystems.**

**Stephen Stenning OBE**  
Director Culture in Action, British Council

**Our fundamental belief in and promotion of cultural diversity and its concrete expressions in the mobility of cultural workers and more equitable distribution of cultural goods and services are stifled by the security and economic interests of the Global North, and by political considerations such as electorates leaning towards greater nationalism and whiteness.**

**Mike van Graan**  
Playwright, South Africa



Mike van Graan believes that we are spending too much time trying to explicitly include culture in the SDGs, whilst forgetting that the Global South has historically not been adequately represented in the process of building this agenda. There is an urgent need for a more central and honest inclusion of civil society – not just the privileged representatives – and a move away from declarations and intentions toward summarising, simplifying, and implementing cultural policies that

are already circulating to respond to the most urgent contemporary crises. The central questions should be how we can support cultural policymakers and administrators, build strong, independent civil society networks, effectively work outside of sector silos, and establish a tangible understanding of culture as a transversal phenomenon to the SDGs, and the policy, strategic and practical implications of this understanding.

**Culture as a method means that the starting point is not only to appreciate diversity but to make diversity the basis of our thinking. So, when a Development becomes a plural project, it means that we have to prepare ourselves to design it with all its variations.**

**Hilmar Farid**  
Director General of Culture, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology,  
Republic of Indonesia



Hilmar Farid asserts that culture can no longer be viewed only as a sector. Rather, culture must also be understood as a method in sustainable development, centring the specificities required by diversity. Especially in a country like Indonesia, the greatest challenge in achieving sustainable

development lies in how the nation addresses extreme diversity, resulting in a heightened level of complexity. Success in sustainable development can only be effectively measured when taking this complexity into account.

## What is Missing?

First and foremost, it is still only the cultural sector at large that sees itself as central to the SDGs and the post-2030 agenda. Despite big moments such as Mondiacult, there is a lack of recognition of culture outside of the sector and especially in the development world. Time will tell if Mondiacult had any impact on perceptions in this area. This lack of recognition may partly be due to fragmentation within the cultural sector as to the role of culture within the SDGs, as well as the specific definitions of 'culture' continuing to be difficult to express to those outside of the sector. The theorisation presented in this section of culture in/for/as development, for example, provides a useful typology, but also has the potential to open culture to an all-encompassing area, which renders it so unspecific that engaging outside actors is challenging.

Within the cultural sector, the literature highlights the integral and reciprocal role that culture plays in development. However, theories and frameworks that explain and evidence the connection between culture and development are often absent. Where existing frameworks do exist, these are largely quantitative and yet – authors themselves argue – lack consistency and a theoretical basis, making it difficult to know how they

should be best applied, and difficult to capture the complexity of impact (Zheng et al. 2021; Giliberto and Labadi 2021). Therefore, the explicit link between culture and development continues to be underdeveloped and underanalysed, and there is a lack of evidence and argumentation that sustains the claims made about how culture can, or does, contribute to specific indices. This means the practicalities of implementing developmental goals relating to culture and heritage can remain challenging (Labadi et al. 2021). Merkel et al. (2022), are amongst those arguing for investment in measuring, monitoring, evaluating and assessing the impact of cultural programmes specifically from the perspective of understanding the cultural dimension of sustainability. Giliberto (2021) highlights that interdisciplinarity will help to develop this link; bringing in different disciplines and methodologies to develop innovative research and unpack the complex interdependencies of culture and development. Finally, there is a limited focus on the post-2030 agenda, with many in the sector continuing to look (back) at how culture should be positioned within the 2030 Agenda and less forward-facing work on how culture should be embedded as new development goals are set.

### **Culture is more than transversal or a tool. It is a pillar for social cohesion, without which achieving sustainability is impossible.**

**Mariana Soares**

Project Manager for Cultural Cooperation Projects and  
Director SOMA Cidadania Criativa, Brazil and Portugal

Mariana Soares argues that the SDG framework necessarily guides programmes, policies and funding around the world. Governments, institutions, and civil society are guided by the narrative of the SDGs and the inclusion of culture could be very symbolic. Even if culture was included in such global frameworks, it is crucial to go beyond a market-oriented approach and value its intangible and subjective representation.

There is a need for a more horizontal and dynamic perspective to development based on the well-being parameters of communities, and their understanding of 'the good life'. To achieve this, it is necessary to deny the validity of aspects of the current development model. Culture is a natural tool to think about what the post-2030 agenda might look like because:

- The Cultural sector is a vanguard sector;
- Culture can inspire, project and dream;
- Culture problematises, envisions and projects;
- Culture feeds the capacity of people to dream and shapes the future;
- Culture can be a source of ideas.

These intangible notions are as valuable as – and sometimes even more valuable than – job creation and economic growth. They need to develop a certain kind of concreteness within affirmative guidelines like the SDGs and the post-2030 agenda, such as cultural democracy as a driver of social well-being and improved quality of life, which are essential parameters for sustainable development.



# Confusion in the Echo Chamber

Looking into present conversations around the role of culture in, as, and for sustainable development reveals a few key insights.

On a global level, the cultural sector discusses the links between culture and sustainable development, yet these connections are often missing in wider conversations on sustainable development broadly and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda specifically.

Within the UK, the role of culture for local and national development is being increasingly recognised, but is still largely absent from the UK's international development strategy.

Within the cultural sector globally, culture is understood as playing a role in development. There is no one coherent understanding of or line of argument for culture's exact role in the UN SDGs, however. While there is a strong movement calling for culture to be included as a fourth pillar and/or as a standalone SDG goal, culture is also regularly discussed as playing the role of an instrumental tool for development.

The intrinsic role of culture as development is often lacking in current literature, but resonates strongly with several individual cultural practitioners, activists, policymakers, and intermediaries.

While not always openly discussed but shared in cultural spaces, many practitioners see the SDGs as a pragmatic tool to access more funding rather than as a useful framework to guide their work.

The cultural sector finds it hard to adequately formulate their SDG impact, partly due to the lack of theories and frameworks explaining and evidencing the explicit connections between culture and sustainable development, and the lack of actual evidence and argumentation that sustains claims made on the role of culture in/as/for sustainable development.

This contributes to a lack of visibility and understanding beyond the cultural sector on the role culture can play in/as/for sustainable development.

**Right** Right Street art mural in South Africa by Cheeky Observer, part of a British Council Creative Commission for Climate Action. Stepping inside the virtual Museum of Plastic 2121 you enter a future where plastic only exists in museums.

Photo © Baz-Art and GreenPop



# Culture, Sustainable Development, and the British Council

To analyse evidence of culture's contribution to the SDGs, a selection of 10 British Council cultural programmes were assessed specifically with regard to their SDG alignment. Evidence from these 10 programmes provides insights into the current state of culture's engagement with the SDGs, how deep, objective, and rigorous the engagement currently is, and whether this matches the current conversations held on a global level.

Three main dimensions were used to assess the programmes' alignment with the SDGs and their effectiveness in contributing to sustainable development. They were identified based on literature review findings and the recommendations from the Missing Pillar report, and include:

**Design** – Programme's alignment with the SDGs (conception phase) to understand the extent to which the programme's initial design aligns thematically with the UN 2030 Agenda and incorporates specific SDGs into its core concepts and objectives.

**Implementation** – Culture's contribution to sustainable development and the SDGs (delivery phase) to explore the distinctive role played by arts, culture, and heritage in driving the SDGs and sustainable development outcomes more broadly.

**Evaluation** – Programme's evaluation in relation to the SDGs (evaluation phase) to assess how the programmes' goals in relation to the SDGs are being met through adequate evaluation strategies.

## British Council Programmes Reviewed

Artivism in the Horn of Africa

Crafting Futures

Creative Commissions for Climate Action

Creative Hubs for Good

Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth (CH4IG)

Cultural Protection Fund (CPF)

Developing Inclusive and Creative Economies (DICE)

SEAA Fellowship (*co-designed with Mekong Cultural Hub*)

Tfanen – Tunisie Créative

Women of the World (WOW)

**Right** Pakistani singer Shae Gill performs at the opening of the Women of the World (WOW) festival in Karachi in March 2023.

Photo © British Council



## SDG Alignment of British Council Cultural Programmes by SDG

Our analysis uncovers varying degrees of SDG alignment within the programmes. This variability arises from the British Council's absence of a formal mandate for SDG alignment in programme design, implementation or evaluation. As a result, the programmes' alignment with the SDGs was contingent on the understanding of the UN 2030 Agenda by their teams, their ability to translate this policy to practice, and the relevance of their work to this overarching framework.

Programmes: n = 10

Scale (brightest → darkest shade): 1 → 4

- 1 = no connection with SDGs, but with sustainable development
- 2 = implicit SDG connection
- 3 = explicit SDG connection, without targets/indicators
- 4 = explicit SDG connection, with targets/indicators

D = Design  
I = Implementation  
E = Evaluation

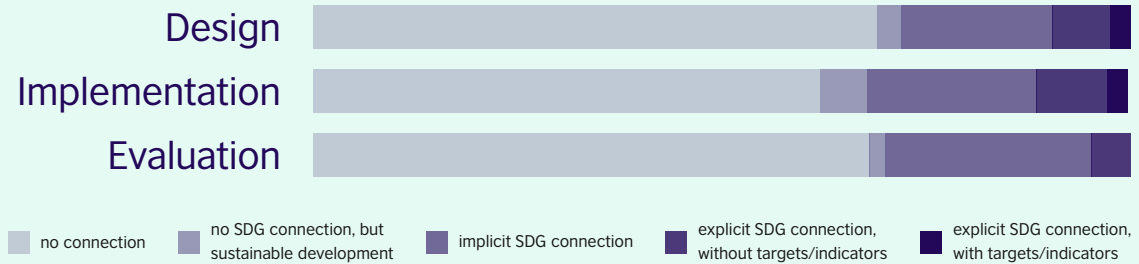
The below graph shows how often and to what extent programmes aligned with each individual SDG.



### Overall SDG Alignment of British Council Cultural Programmes

Each programme was assessed on a scale from 0 (no connection to SDGs or sustainable development) to 4 (explicit SDG connection, including SDG targets and indicators), rating each British Council culture programmes’ alignment to the UN SDGs at each stage of the programme cycle.

n = 10 programmes



### Programme Design

As specified in the recommendations of The Missing Pillar report, adopting the language of, and aligning to, the SDGs is a crucial first step for cultural organisations to effectively contribute to global discourses and practices centred around sustainable development. However, our review reveals that many cultural organisations tend to superficially adopt the language of the SDGs, focusing on broad thematic levels and neglecting specific targets and indicators associated with the SDG framework. While the assessment of the cultural programmes highlights the British Council’s strong commitment and actions towards sustainable development, our analysis also uncovers missed opportunities in understanding and articulating how these programmes directly contribute to the UN 2030 Agenda.

Within the British Council portfolio, all cultural programmes demonstrate either direct or indirect connections with the SDGs during their conception phase. Some programmes explicitly mention the SDG framework in their descriptions, scope, and objectives, while others align thematically without direct reference. For instance, the theory of change of Crafting Futures centres around sustainable development without explicitly referencing the SDGs. These programmes always engage with multiple SDGs, addressing multiple

sustainability issues and showcasing culture’s transversal contribution to the goals.

Through analysing the programme descriptions and objectives, we have identified SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) as the most frequently addressed goals, both explicitly and implicitly, aligning with the central mission of the British Council and its cultural relations approach. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) also feature prominently. It is important to note that the identification of the implicit connections between the programmes and the SDGs is based on our interpretation of how the programmes align thematically with the SDGs.

While most programmes align themselves with the SDGs, they rarely extend their alignment to associated targets and never to indicators. This inconsistent approach results in a broad focus on thematic goals, which can appear as superficial rhetoric alignment and SDG-signalling, ultimately undermining the cultural sector’s credibility and ambition to be recognised as a vital pillar of sustainable development on the global stage.



## Programme Implementation

The documentation analysed from the selected British Council cultural programmes suggests that they may have contributed to sustainable development and addressed various UN SDGs. This has been achieved through their collaborative, people-centred, and culturally sensitive approaches. However, a lack of adequate evaluation of the programmes makes it challenging to determine how effective these contributions have been. There is a strong risk that delivery outcomes remain aspirational claims rather than evidenced contributions. At the same time, the analysis revealed not only specific programme peculiarities, but it has indeed identified key themes of the potentially invaluable role of arts, culture and heritage in driving sustainable development.



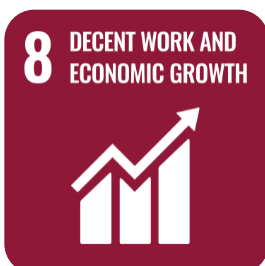
### Quality Education (SDG 4)

The programmes claim to have significantly contributed to improved learning and education through comprehensive training initiatives and other cultural endeavours that enhance learners' capacity and skills, foster inclusivity, and promote innovative art-based educational practices. By actively promoting dialogue, respect, and understanding of cultural diversity, as well as offering activities that intersect with various aspects of sustainable development, these programmes have primarily addressed Target 4.7, which seeks to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. However, they have also contributed to Target 4.3 (ensure equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education), and Target 4.4 (substantially increase the number of youth and adults with relevant skills for employment and entrepreneurship).



### Gender Equality (SDG 5)

Most programmes stated to have also contributed to gender justice by promoting greater access to opportunities for women. They have increased women's participation in training programmes, raising awareness of career prospects and providing networking opportunities within the arts, culture and heritage sector. These initiatives have facilitated interactions among diverse groups, enhanced understanding of gender inequalities, and equipped women and girls with practical knowledge and skills. Moreover, they have increased empowerment and ownership, raised awareness of women's challenges, boosted women's confidence and challenged gender norms. As a result, they might have contributed to Target 4.5, which aims to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to education and vocational training for vulnerable groups.



### Inclusive Economic Growth (SDG 8)

Several programmes demonstrate the power of arts, culture and heritage in generating economic benefits for communities. They have focused on various avenues, including the development of technical skills, job creation, tourism promotion, and the sale of traditional crafts for income generation. These initiatives might have contributed to advancing Target 8.5, which aims to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, and Target 8.6, which seeks to reduce the proportion of young people who are not in employment, education, or training. Some programmes have also harnessed the potential of cultural relations and creativity to support the empowerment of disfranchised and marginalised communities, increasing the agency of their voice to connect with the global economy, possibly in alignment with SDG 1 (No Poverty).



### Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10)

The programmes have demonstrated a commitment to reducing inequalities by going beyond expanding access to culture. They claim to have fostered the inclusion of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, including women, youth, and refugees. By creating opportunities for these groups to engage in programme activities, these initiatives have sought to promote social change and reduce disparities. In this way, the programmes might have aligned with Target 10.2, which seeks to empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all individuals, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.



### Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11)

A couple of programmes claim to have supported actions to safeguard cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, through restoration and capacity building to generate broader societal and socio-economic benefits. With this scope, they might have contributed to Target 11.4, which calls for enhanced efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage, and Target 11.a, enhancing positive economic, social, and environmental ties between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. They might have also contributed to urban regeneration, well-being and green spaces in underutilised urban areas. These actions indirectly align with SDG 11.7, striving for universal, inclusive access to safe green and public spaces, with emphasis on women, children, older persons, and individuals with disabilities.



### Climate Action (SDG 13)

Some programmes assert their contribution to climate action through a range of strategies: empowering civil society for environmental sustainability, promoting eco-friendly lifestyles, envisioning sustainable futures, fostering cross-cultural cooperation for climate awareness, exchanging lived experiences of climate change, and reshaping perceptions of its risks. These efforts primarily align with Target 13.3, which aims to enhance education, awareness, and capacity-building for climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning. Additionally, by highlighting the potential of art and culture in addressing climate-related challenges, these programmes might indirectly support Target 13.2, which aims to integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies, and planning.



### Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17)


Through their cultural relations mandate, global presence, and collaborative approach, several programmes claim to have contributed to SDG 17, especially Target 17.16, enhancing the global partnership for sustainable development, promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships that facilitate the mobilisation and sharing of knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources. Furthermore, they have pursued Target 17.17, encouraging effective partnerships between the public, private, and civil society sectors. These partnerships have been crucial in addressing the collaborative nature of the SDGs and driving sustainable development worldwide.

## Cultural Impacts Beyond the SDG Framework

Whilst we have identified the possible impact of the programmes on several SDGs, it was notable that the impact of the programmes on sustainable development extends beyond the scope of the goals. In particular, the programmes have expanded access to culture, contributed to community development, provided new spaces and opportunities for expression and dialogue, and promoted social cohesion.

Specifically, most programmes might have contributed to community development and cohesion through: strengthening cooperation and mutual care; cultivating a sense of community, solidarity and mutual respect; promoting social inclusion and tolerance; enhancing community identity, pride, and ownership; developing appreciation of cultural diversity; and promoting cultural rights. Thus, these programmes demonstrated their alignment with the British Council's remit, which prioritises fostering positive cultural relations and promoting sustainable development through cultural exchange and cooperation.

Furthermore, many programmes demonstrate the possible role of culture in promoting peace and non-violence, through mutual dialogue and intercultural understanding, specifically through: promoting dialogue; promoting intercultural understanding and peaceful coexistence; enabling citizen participation; reducing violence – including violence in schools and gender-based violence; promoting human rights; and countering violent extremism. These ideas are inadequately reflected in the most relevant goal and targets of the SDGs (SDG16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

A photograph showing two women from behind, wearing vibrant red traditional-style robes. They are standing on a rocky beach, holding a long wooden pole horizontally across their shoulders. The background features a calm blue sea meeting a light sky at the horizon. The image is framed by a large, light-colored triangular graphic element.

**Left** Image from motherEarth international, one of the British Council Creative Commissions for Climate Action.

Photo © Lin Chunyung

# Tfanen – Tunisie Créative

Case Spotlight (2016 - 2021)



## Background

Tfanen – Tunisie Créative was a €9.7 million programme, funded by the European Union and implemented by the British Council on behalf of the EU National Institutes for Culture, in collaboration with the Tunisian Ministry of Cultural Affairs. It was designed to strengthen the Tunisian cultural sector and leverage culture for social cohesion and economic prosperity at local, regional and national levels. This was delivered through an array of financial and technical support mechanisms, including but not limited to grantmaking for cultural diversity projects, employability training for cultural professionals, policy reform process support, and local authority capacity building.

Tfanen was selected for the SDG Good Practices Online Database of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

## SDGs in Programme Evaluation

The programme selected six SDGs (namely 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, and 17) that were mapped against the programme objectives. However, rather than adhering strictly to the original SDG targets and indicators, the programme established its own intended outcomes and indicators for each mapped SDG. This approach allowed the programme to demonstrate significant contributions to the overall mission of the SDGs without compromising its more immediate and locally responsive monitoring and evaluation framework, which was supported by a comprehensive PowerBI dashboard.

Although some of the outcomes closely mirrored certain SDG targets, direct contributions to associated indicators could not be verified due to the formulation of the indicators.



# Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth

Case Spotlight (2018 - 2020)

## Background

Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth (CH4IG) was a £3 million two-year pilot programme in the UK, Kenya, Colombia, and Vietnam. The programme was developed by the British Council as a proof of concept based on its 2018 Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth report. The pilot explored the notion that cultural heritage could contribute to inclusive and sustainable growth, as well as ways in which culture could improve the lives of individuals locally and around the world. Cultural heritage was interpreted in its widest sense to be as inclusive and responsive to communities as possible.

## SDGs in Programme Design

CH4IG was deliberately designed to leverage cultural heritage as a direct contributor to inclusive growth, responding to SDGs 1, 8, 10, and 17.

Prior to the programme's commencement, extensive research was carried out by the global network of the British Council, complemented by consultations with the UK sector. The objective was to thoroughly understand how cultural heritage (as a sector itself, physical spaces, and intangible practices) can contribute to promoting inclusive and sustainable growth when approached from a people-centric perspective.

The findings from this research not only served as the foundation for designing the programme but also provided insights that shaped the programme's implementation approach. In the end, the programme also recognised contributions to other SDGs, namely SDGs 4, 5, 9, 11, and 12.

## Programme Evaluation

While all selected British Council cultural programmes were evaluated, there are significant disparities in the approach and rigour of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks employed, including their alignment with the SDGs. One programme adhered to the British Council's Global Results Framework (GRF) and its Results and Evidence Framework (REF2), others responded to different programme-wide but cross-sectoral theories of change, and some others operated outside any streamlined frameworks. The approaches used in the evaluations ranged from an academic theoretical reflection and outcome harvesting techniques to the application of the evaluation principles of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development - Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC).

However, most programmes lacked a tiered evaluation framework that combines SDG targets with programme-specific local goals. Among the assessed cultural programmes, only two explicitly mention the SDGs in their evaluations, and only one includes specific SDG targets. The evaluations of all other programmes only implicitly assess their contribution to the SDGs and none of the projects directly address explicit SDG indicators. This inconsistent approach highlights the existing division between the various programme phases at an organisational level, the evolution of frameworks and priorities that may impact each phase differently, and the fact the evaluations are grounded in the subjective perspectives of the programme teams.

Overall, this approach reflects the prevailing attitude in the cultural sector, which often views the SDGs as broad themes or global challenges to be addressed for

sustainable development, but lacks a clear framework on how to measure concrete progress towards the achievement of specific SDG targets. Implementing such a tiered framework would enable a more effective evaluation of the impacts of cultural programmes and provide a comprehensive understanding of their contribution to broader sustainable development goals.

Furthermore, our analysis reveals that evaluators consistently highlight the need for more and higher quality data to conduct more thorough evaluations. Only half of the programmes had effective monitoring systems in place, which complicated accurate evaluation efforts. The cultural sector faces pervasive challenges in systematically collecting data beyond the strategic alignment of SDG goals, targets, and indicators in programme design. Internal technical capacity, time constraints, limited human and budgetary resources, and reliance on external partners and beneficiaries for data collection pose significant obstacles. Additionally, measuring the impacts of cultural interventions, particularly those implemented for second-degree beneficiaries, can be complex due to the delayed or indirect visibility of their effects, which are often challenging to measure in the short term. Finally, the qualitative impacts generated by these projects are often the most difficult to measure due to the intangible nature of the outcomes and the lack of clear frameworks and monitoring strategies to capture them.

**Right** Training in traditional heritage skills to repair conflict-affected heritage buildings as part of Syrian Stonemasonry, a World Monuments Fund project funded by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund.

Photo © World Monuments Fund



# SWOT Analysis of SDG Alignment in British Council Culture Programming

## Strengths

- All programmes had at least some connection to the SDGs (explicitly or implicitly), while some programmes were specifically designed to address SDGs and their targets, indicating a clear intention to contribute to the UN SDGs.
- Programmes generally engaged with more than one SDG, potentially addressing transversal sustainability issues. Overall, British Council cultural programmes have addressed 13 out of 17 SDGs, (both implicitly and explicitly) demonstrating culture's impact potential across sustainable development issue areas.
- Programmes often addressed sustainable development issues beyond the SDG framework, excelling in aspects such as community development and cohesion, capacity building, intercultural dialogue and promoting cultural rights.
- All programmes were evaluated, indicating a commitment to learn and improve. Multiple evaluation approaches were used to be responsive in the assessment of each programme's unique contributions to their set objectives.

- The SDGs are a well-established global framework with support from many people and institutions. Therefore, aligning cultural programmes to the SDGs is politically smart for access to visibility, resources, and partnerships. Especially, cross-sectoral collaboration can be leveraged to better integrate culture in SDG contributions.
- Some indicator frameworks have started systematically linking cultural outcomes to the SDGs, attempting to bridge the impact-indicator gap, for example UNESCO's Culture|2030 Indicators.
- A robust, tiered evaluation and monitoring framework that focuses on programmes' contributions to the SDGs as well as programme-specific, locally responsive goals might be a viable option if properly designed and integrated from the very beginning of a programme.
- The global consensus on the SDG framework opens opportunities to tap into existing global data collection efforts, including infrastructure, methodology, and training.

## Weaknesses

- The connection between programmes and the SDGs was often superficial, lacking a deeper interpretation of the SDGs and their relevance to the programmes' goals. Furthermore, understanding of the SDG framework by programme designers, implementers, and evaluators seems to have varied, leading to inconsistencies.
- Limited consideration was given to SDG targets and indicators, demonstrating a gap between programme intentions and concrete measurable outcomes in relation to the SDGs.
- Evaluations varied greatly in approach and rigour, making it difficult to understand how programme outcomes were connected to wider goals and the SDGs. This was amplified by the lack of granular data on programmes' actual contributions to the SDGs. Only half of all programmes had effective monitoring systems in place.
- Whilst of strategic importance to the British Council as a cross-cutting theme, SDG 13 on Climate Action was directly addressed only by one programme.

- The SDG framework does not include key cultural aspects related to sustainable development. Depending on programme goals, it might not actually be the best framework to align cultural programmes to, especially in cases of mostly intangible outcomes.
- The impact level of most SDG targets and indicators is often only at national level, and thus too far removed from small cultural programmes to make sense of its own contribution toward them.
- Culture risks its credibility as a sustainable development actor if it does not properly align with specific SDG targets and indicators, and cannot produce sound evidence. Over-reporting culture's contribution to the SDGs, especially without such evidence, might also hurt the SDG framework's function as a rigorous monitoring instrument.
- The SDGs encourage funding systems that may limit programmes' ability for providing long-term impact and its systematic tracking of evidence. This concern is reinforced by the UN's admission (2023) to struggle measuring impact due to inadequate monitoring and data consistency.
- Ignoring the potential negative impacts of culture in the context of sustainable development and the SDGs may lead to unintended consequences.

## Opportunities

## Threats

# Rhetoric Alignment Hurts Culture and the SDGs

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the SDGs, serves as a critical global advocacy tool and roadmap for shaping the future of humanity and the planet. However, the targets and indicators associated with the SDGs are not just symbolic aspirations; they represent a global consensus to measure collective progress towards this desired future.

Therefore, any efforts to contribute to these targets must be rigorously measured and verified to provide a robust scientific foundation for global policymaking. Culture must be subjected to the same rigorous data protocols and peer review as any other area of research, policy and practice if wanting to be taken seriously in the SDG arena.

Insights from this sample of British Council programmes highlight the significant contributions of cultural programmes to the SDGs. However, opportunities to understand, evidence, and articulate these contributions are often missed, particularly in explicitly linking programmes to the SDGs throughout different project phases.

Cultural programmes may not always be ideally positioned to meet SDG-relevant targets and indicators. In fact, intended programme outcomes are rarely formulated to directly respond to SDG targets and indicators, but rather create conditions that have the potential to enable contributions to the SDGs. This is an important function of cultural programmes in the context of sustainable development, but it is also crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the way culture is mobilised in this framework.

For the cultural sector to make a meaningful contribution to the SDGs, cultural actors must adopt a rigorous approach to programme design, evaluation processes, and data collection beyond mere rhetoric alignment and SDG-signalling.

It is time for the cultural sector to self-reflect on the limitations of current approaches. Continuing to give the impression that everyone is 'doing enough' to contribute to the SDGs, without robust data to support it, may distort perceptions. To genuinely contribute to the SDGs, cultural actors must engage in an unbiased way that recognises culture's potential, both within and beyond the SDG framework, while remaining realistic about its limitations.

It is crucial to emphasise that cultural programmes also contribute to sustainable development beyond the SDGs through avenues such as community development, intercultural dialogue, and the promotion of cultural rights. These contributions must be preserved, and rigid adherence to the SDG agenda, which may be somewhat detached from cultural programmes, could limit the transformative role of the cultural sector.

Moving forward, it is crucial to recognise culture as the foundation for sustainable development that extends beyond the SDGs. This broader perspective highlights the multifaceted and intrinsic role of culture in shaping a sustainable future for all.

# Conversations for the Future

Previous sections of this report have demonstrated the ways that culture can contribute to the SDGs, as well as highlighted the fact that culture makes contributions to sustainable development in ways that are not recognised through the SDG framework. In this section, we want to expand our perspective and explore how culture can have an even more significant role to play in sustainable development due to its potential to address what Otto Scharmer (2016) referred to as the “Three Divides” – the ecological divide, the social divide, and the spiritual divide. These divides represent fundamental and pathological causes of complex global challenges. Culture can help to bridge these divides by redefining and nurturing people’s relationships with themselves, each other, and the planet, as well as cultivating an awareness of society’s shared responsibility for development that is truly sustainable.

The SDG framework outlines interdependent goals for sustainable development. However, this framework operates within systemic constraints, causing progress in one area to impact others, leading to synergies and trade-offs. Pradhan et al. (2017) highlight tensions in balancing climate action, environmental sustainability, and economic development to achieve the SDGs. They argue that leveraging synergies and making fundamental strategy changes are necessary to attain these goals. This perspective aligns with the United Nations’ Global Sustainable Development Report (2019), which stated that the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda does not lie in the pursuit of individual goals or targets. Brundtland’s remarks in that same report emphasise the urgency of using a systemic approach to identify and manage trade-offs while maximising synergies for the 2030 Agenda’s transformative potential. Clearly, systemic and transformative change is vital for sustainable development.

Culture’s influence in sustainable development can play a critical role here. Environmental, social, and economic issues often stem from human actions informed by their cultural beliefs and values, and effective solutions are likely to be culturally-based. Given that culture shapes values and patterns, impacting perceptions,

interactions, and the coherence of individual actions (Systems Innovation 2020), the modification of systems necessitates a transformation in the fundamental cultural beliefs that underpin them. This is where culture has the transformational power to make or break development processes: by being both part of the problem and also the key to solutions. By harnessing the power of culture, meaningful progress and positive change can be achieved on a global scale.

This section is not only inspired by reflection on personal trajectories as cultural and development workers but insights were guided by the lived experiences of cultural practitioners who participated in two roundtables organised as part of this research, as well as feedback received from participants at the British Council’s “What Works in Cultural Heritage Protection Learning Gathering”. These cultural practitioners are actively involved in addressing issues related to sustainable development and face challenges when trying to apply or adapt to the SDG framework. Through these discussions, we gained insights into alternative notions of development, experienced broad understandings of culture, and admired their rootedness in the community. This led us to reflect on the relevance of the SDGs as a framework for culture, sparked our curiosity about other development logics, and inspired us to explore how culture can be more holistically integrated into processes of sustainable development when a systemic approach is applied.



**Full-page** Local workers building traditional Syrian dome houses, preserving and raising awareness of this Syrian cultural heritage practice. The project by arcenciel is funded by the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund.

Photo © arcenciel



Environmental, social, and economic issues often stem from human actions informed by their cultural beliefs and values, and effective solutions are likely to be culturally-based. This is where culture has the transformational power to make or break development processes: by being both part of the problem and also the key to solutions.

## Questioning the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Culture does have a very legitimate interest to be recognised within the current SDG and a post-2030 framework alike. A global commitment to earmark a portion of national and international development funding for culture seems very attractive. And it is true that a global commitment of such proportion is probably worth getting behind for lack of other initiatives of that scale. It attracts the most diverse of actors and is, therefore, a useful platform to negotiate cross-sectoral cooperation. And yet, these positive aspects do not actually address the core of the framework, the goals themselves.

Our research has shown that deep and rigorous engagement with the SDGs in cultural programmes is rare. Practitioners find it hard to relate their work to the SDGs as these are too far removed from their working realities, either in the form of top-level indicators or due to the underlying logic of the SDGs that is at odds with their core understanding of sustainable development.

Perhaps, the UN Sustainable Development Goals are not the best framework for the cultural sector to align itself to. After all, it is just one framework among many, and we need to ask whether it is the right one to capture the full impact of culture. Below we provide a few provocations on why the SDGs might not be the ideal framework to understand sustainable development challenges.

### UN Sustainable Development Goals

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Address symptoms, not root causes

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Application tends to focus on outcomes, not processes

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Issues sometimes face trade-offs, not systemic approaches

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Monitoring for control and accountability, not learning

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Many indicators designed for national-level data, not local knowledge

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Operate in a largely neoliberal system, not one of care

The SDG framework was designed to account for interdependencies. However, superficial engagement with this interdependency poses a risk of prioritising one goal over another, potentially leading to trade-offs that see negative impacts in one area as a direct result of positive impacts in another.

Furthermore, and equally as important, the SDGs fundamentally address mostly symptoms. The whole logic of solving these challenges is a focus on outputs and outcomes when, arguably, it is the systems and processes that have enabled these worsening issues in the first place that we should be thinking about.

If culture were to be subjected to this logic in the form of a stand-alone culture goal in the post-2030 agenda, there are also risks of reducing culture to a very narrow understanding of impact, shaped by overall shortcomings of the framework.

The cultural sector already struggles to agree on and articulate why it is important in the context of sustainable development. SDG targets and indicators might end up reducing it to a fixed set of public arts education, creative industries growth, and national heritage expenditure, or cultural diversity legislation, built cultural infrastructure density, and the number of formalised craft micro-enterprises. Target 11.4 on national heritage expenditure has already shown how overly simplified indicators can turn out. In any case, these would be the guiding stars for development plans and all the nuanced impact and central questions of *why* are likely to get lost in chasing these indicators.

### Culture in the post-2030 Agenda following the SDG Framework

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- Might be fragmented and subject to trade-offs

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- Might be reduced to only a few, simplified indicators

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- Might enable solutions to symptoms only

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+ Might generate large-scale funding

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+ Might benefit from global political attention

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+ Might open doors for cross-sectoral cooperation

Where a goal like *Zero Hunger* seems universal and intuitive, a potential new goal of *Access to Culture* or *Flourishing Cultural Life* appears much less straightforward. This is partly because culture does not follow the logic of outcomes. Culture operates in diverse and intricate ways beyond simple cause-and-effect relationships. In fact, the variety of understandings of culture and the necessity to protect and promote not just cultural diversity but the very sovereignty of people to define what culture means to them would make such an endeavour even harder.

If recognised in an SDG-like framework, the agency of culture would risk to being severely restricted. Culture has a profound impact on our lives and well-being that goes beyond merely treating the symptoms of global problems. It plays a crucial role in guiding the process of sustainable development, and should be recognised as such. This would be difficult within a post-2030 framework following a logic similar to the SDGs.

## Options for Culture in the Post-2030 Agenda

As we approach the negotiations for the sustainable development framework succeeding the SDGs, we must familiarise ourselves with the possible scenarios the cultural sector can advocate for. Below are some of the options available, three of which assume that the current SDG logic will be continued and only slightly adapted and expanded. There is always the opportunity for a framework to emerge that does not follow in the footsteps of the SDG framework and instead acknowledges the need for systems change.

STATUS QUO

### Inconsequential Transversal Role

At present, culture occupies a transversal role in the SDGs, as driver and enabler. With the exception of Target 11.4, this leaves cultures often out of sustainable development discussions, funding and programming. The cultural sector is overwhelmingly unhappy with this current positioning. A continuation of this rhetoric inclusion of culture in the post-2030 agenda would likely be inconsequential for the cultural sector.

### Consequential Transversal Role

A transversal role for culture with tangible consequences could be realised through the inclusion of one culture-related target under each goal, including a corresponding indicator. This approach could help anchor culture in development approaches and make it visible. However, selecting one culture target per goal might also risk a stark simplification of what culture could potentially achieve if considered holistically.

### Stand-alone Goal

The most visible campaign for culture's inclusion in the post-2030 agenda at present is a call for a stand-alone goal with its own targets and corresponding indicators. While it might benefit from political attention and earmarked funding, it also risks over-simplification and fragmentation when deciding on a handful of targets and indicators. Furthermore, there is a risk of culture suffering from trade-offs with other goals.

### Culture as Foundation

If culture were to form the foundation of sustainable development by creating the right conditions for it to happen, a corresponding framework would need to embrace culture in all its breadth and depth. Such a framework would need to recognise the experimental and explorative function of culture, specifically the processes rather than the outcomes of how culture contributes to strengthened capacity for necessary systems change.

## Culture as a Goal or a Culture Goal?

*How might we ensure that the focus of culture is not purely economic and industry-led, but that locally-led perspectives of culture are included?*

*How might we ensure that a culture goal retains its transversal quality, whilst not reducing its scope of action to its own targets and indicators?*

*How might we design a culture goal that highlights the importance of culture to reimagine and reshape our futures?*

*How might we design a goal that has clear targets and indicators that can be easily understood and put into practice by governments and civil society equally?*

## Exploring Development Alternatives

### Why Look Beyond the SDGs?

If the SDGs might not be ideal for culture to fully align itself to, despite its contribution within and beyond the SDGs, what other development logics might be better suited to accommodate what culture can effectively do in processes of sustainable development? What works for governments does not necessarily work for cultural practitioners working in, with and for communities. What might initially seem good for humanity, might not automatically be the best approach for the planet.

In this section, we explore notions of development that may have a stronger relationships-focused approach, and greater potential to promote fundamental and systemic change. We understand economy as something that is more than prosperity and livelihoods; it is about how we engage with each other and the planet around us. We need to interrogate the logics behind our economic and political systems and the development logics that grew out of them, and what role culture plays in them.

### A Local Approach

As part of our research, we convened a roundtable with cultural practitioners to learn more about how they connect with sustainable development through their socially and environmentally engaged artistic works. Discussions around getting closer to local needs and promoting development locally emerged.

The Local Development Approach positions the human being as the main facilitator of the development process, as a target, operator, catalyst as well as a multiplier of it. From this perspective, the approach advocates for a participatory way of negotiating and conducting development interventions (Schoburgh 2011). In practice, this means that the people, local communities, civil society, and organisations in the context of a particular city or neighbourhood, especially in marginalised areas, should define the development they want locally.

For the cultural practitioners who participated in our roundtable, responsiveness to immediate local issues, co-design with community members, and a holistic

approach are paramount to their cultural works. If the problem was violence, this would likely be the target of their intervention; if the issue was rising sea levels, this would be the theme of the next local cultural centre exhibition.

Recognising that development should start from the local level, driven by local communities, each local initiative is distinct, with each locality striving to achieve unique goals through its own path. While common needs and pathways may emerge across different locales, the solutions required to meet those local needs will be specific to each context, drawing from its unique experiences (Max-Neef 1991; Montoya 1998). Cultural and artistic practice are uniquely positioned to facilitate these discussions and experiments and to appreciate local cultural diversity and heritage.

The idea of local development also explores process-focused social interdependencies such as the creation of social bonds and cooperation within the community. Ownership and agency are again key to decide what kind of development impact people want to have in the place where they are living. Creating community ties and engaging them in the decision making process in their communities resonated strongly with the cultural practitioners.

# Alternative Development Frameworks

## Inner Development Goals (IDG)

Ekskäret Foundation, The New Division, and 29k Foundation

Development Framework Spotlight



### What Is Different About the Inner Development Goals?

Established in 2020, The Inner Development Goals (IDG) initiative collaborates with researchers, experts, and practitioners in leadership and sustainability. Its initiators argue that we often focus extensively on proposing solutions for global issues, while comparatively neglecting the discourse on how to enhance the proficiency of the key actors who possess the potential to actualise these visions. Motivated by this gap, the first IDGs (2021) report was published, explaining the background, methodology, and framework that encompass 23 transformational skills and qualities required by individuals, groups, and organisations in the advancement of sustainable development. These skills and qualities can be categorised into five dimensions: 1) Being: Relationship to Self; 2) Thinking: Cognitive Skills; 3) Relating: Caring for Others and the World; 4) Collaborating: Social Skills; and 5) Acting: Enabling Change. This framework provides an initial reference for exploring individual and collective skills and qualities, and how culture, organisations, and institutions can foster their development.

### How Does Culture Fit In?

IDG recognises the role of culture in nurturing the skills and qualities required to advance systemic change in sustainable development. According to Walmsley (2016), engaging in artistic and cultural activities can enable individuals to express themselves, boost confidence, develop self-identity, establish deeper connections with self and others, enhance social relationships and networks, foster a sense of belonging, and acquire valuable employability skills—all of which are encompassed among those IDG's 23 transformational skills and qualities. Notably, participation in arts activities offers a platform for individuals to explore their existence through diverse perspectives and mediums, which helps enhance cognitive skills essential for wise decision-making, such as evaluating information from various viewpoints and understanding the interconnected nature of the world.

# Doughnut Economics

Kate Raworth

Development Framework Spotlight



## What Is Different About Doughnut Economics?

Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics (2017) decouples development and economic growth. Instead, it focuses on developing a safe and socially just space for humanity through a regenerative and distributive economy, away from today's degenerative society. Whilst taking a more integrated perspective, the concept is still fundamentally human-centric, however.

The image of the doughnut introduces a safe and just space for humanity delineated by a social foundation and an ecological ceiling. If social necessities such as food, water, equity or political voice are not provided, the social foundation is wobbly. If air pollution, ocean acidification, land conversion or biodiversity loss are too high, the ecological ceiling becomes porous.

A central aspect of the doughnut concept is interdependence. One issue is never less or more important than another and can never be addressed in isolation.

## How Does Culture Fit In?

Culture is not foreseen in the Doughnut Economics concept. While culture, especially in its manifestation in arts and heritage, could be seen as yet another contributor to the doughnut's social foundation, a wider understanding of culture might suggest another role: the frying fat.

The doughnut argues that economics are not linear and mechanical, but complex and dynamic. The systems that govern our lives, therefore, must constantly be redesigned to work toward a regenerative and distributive society. Culture would be the starting point to re-evaluate these values.



# A Boring Revolution

Dark Matter Labs

Development Framework Spotlight

## What Is Different About A Boring Revolution?

Dark Matter Labs' A Boring Revolution (2022) looks at the role of bureaucracy and the relationships we have with ourselves, with each other, and with the planet in addressing the root causes of the many problems we face today. The concept sees the many crises of our times, such as climate change, as symptoms of the harmful systems we have built over time, and the *deep codes* that have enabled them, for example our relationship to ownership.

Bureaucracies are the focus of A Boring Revolution as they are responsible for a lot of institutionalised systems that have become increasingly siloed when complexity and uncertainty are what we are

increasingly facing. A Boring Revolution seeks to build capacity for systems change and distributed agency in societies.

## How Does Culture Fit In?

Culture is recognised as *deep code* in A Boring Revolution, a root determinant of how we understand, value, and organise the relationship we have with the world around us.

Culture, therefore, can help to recognise a society's own systemic flaws, reflect upon the relationships we have with the world around us, imagine better futures, and help people realise their agency in systems change to be prepared to bring about this change. Culture can be the door to centre care as the operating mechanism.

## A Hybrid Approach to Culture and Sustainable Development

### Culture and Sustainable Development post-2030

The emergence of innovative alternative development frameworks, such as Doughnut Economics, Dark Matter Labs' A Boring Revolution, and the Inner Development Goals (IDG), presents promising alternatives to the 2030 Agenda and its SDG approach. What sets these new models apart is their recognition of the importance of cultivating healthy, interdependent relationships with ourselves, others, and the planet. This emphasis on healthy relationships is key to achieving a more profound and systematic change, prioritising a shift toward sustainable well-being for both humans and the planet, where economic growth is seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Envisioning a more desirable future economy, these models aim to achieve optimal human well-being within environmental limits.

All of these alternative models and initiatives appear to work towards nurturing holistic human and planetary well-being, which encompasses more intangible non-marketed natural and social capital assets. If this significant shift of focus in sustainable development post-2030 were realised, it would grant culture, in its broader definition, the space it deserves to thrive for its intrinsic transformational power to take effect. Unlike its current role within the SDG framework, which is mostly limited to its instrumentalised form and often overlooks its enshrined role to actively enable and drive sustainable development, a new sustainable development framework that places the importance of healthy relationships with ourselves, others, and the planet as a key for human and planetary well-being would enable culture to fulfil its foundational role. As suggested by Farid (2022), culture becomes 'the basis of our thinking' in creating and achieving sustainability. It does so by integrating, coordinating, and guiding all aspects of sustainable actions, which are mutually intertwined across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This perspective aligns with Dessein et al.'s (2015) notion of culture as development. Meanwhile, cultural relations connect the local to the global and unite people in their diversity.

This shift towards holistic human and planetary well-being also implies a demand for shared responsibility in addressing global challenges, which stem from the culmination of diverse cultures and shared histories that humanity has fostered over time. It urges us to be intentional in our way of living, by deliberately shaping our culture towards a more sustainable, even regenerative way of existing, acting, and impacting the world. This involves a profound reorientation of the current values that drive our understanding of development and progress.

### Defining Culture: A Conundrum

The role of culture within the SDGs and also sustainable development in general is currently being undermined, partly due to the challenge of conveying the multifaceted definition of 'culture' to those outside the cultural sector. With how our current development model operates, this challenge is inevitable, yet redeemable, and might be attributed to several reasons:

1. Growth still dominates general understanding of progress in many countries (Macekura 2020);
2. Approaching issues from a systemic and interdependent perspective remains a significant challenge, even though discussions surrounding this approach have gained considerable traction (Jensen et al. 2023). Systems thinking links individual parts to a broader system, revealing systemic loops responsible for persistent issues and identifying root causes and obstacles beyond sectoral silos;
3. Establishing mutual understanding between the cultural sector and entities outside of it becomes challenging, due to a limiting perception of the cultural sector as a conventional concept on the one hand, and apprehension about diminishing its aesthetic and social value through excessive engagement with market forces, government influence, or non-state authorities on the other hand. This situation is made even more challenging due to the lack of a clear definition within (and indeed, of) the cultural sector regarding the meaning of culture.

UNESCO's (2001) notion of culture is all-encompassing. Its definition is so unspecific that it may inhibit cross-sectoral engagement. In both research and policy discussions, there are two distinct higher-level

classifications of culture (Dessein et al. 2015): i) a 'broad, lifestyle-oriented notion encompassing all aspects of human existence' including values and belief systems, resembling 'way of life' interpretation with an anthropological-archaeological angle; and ii) a 'narrow, art-focused culture that relates to the general development of intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic dimensions and its tangible outcomes', and its manifestation as an industry. Although many governments rhetorically assert a broad anthropological interpretation of culture, for valid reasons, few of their culture-related ministries or departments actually address anything beyond a specific realm of arts, heritage, and creative industries.

*"We cannot create an organisation that deals with the whole way of life. It's impossible and unnecessary. But then we ultimately chose to stick with Arts and Heritage as a symbolic representation of that way of life. We may not deal with the people's whole way of life, such as how they grow rice, but all rituals related to the importance of food are part of the realm of culture. When we broaden our understanding of culture like that, obviously the connection with the SDGs becomes much clearer."*

– **Hilmar Farid**, Director General of Culture, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, Republic of Indonesia

Experts engaged in one of our roundtable discussions also suggested that applying the broader definition of culture in conversations about development inherently highlights its intricate connection to the developmental process. For instance, when striving for gender equality, it becomes essential to confront patriarchal elements deeply embedded within our cultural framework.

Perhaps it would be more productive to embrace both the broad and narrow definitions of culture, rather than viewing them as conflicting concepts. Whether culture is expressed through art or embodied in everyday life, both are interconnected and should be regarded as such. What requires more attention is the awareness that each expression has its own way, scale, and timing, in influencing the process of sustainable development, both directly and indirectly. Implementing policies aligned with a narrow definition of culture does not necessarily diminish the broad one. On the contrary, policies and investments targeting narrower aspects of culture have the potential to reshape our existing values and beliefs that guide us towards sustainable development. This potential unfolds as long as we intentionally harness the narrower cultural concept to create broader values, by adopting a comprehensive, whole-system perspective. This approach is crucial for instigating the necessary systemic change toward global flourishing of people and planet.



**Left** Talk with Glorious Pain documentary film crew as part of Heritage of Future Past, Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth project in Vietnam.

Photo © Đoàn trường vinh hoa

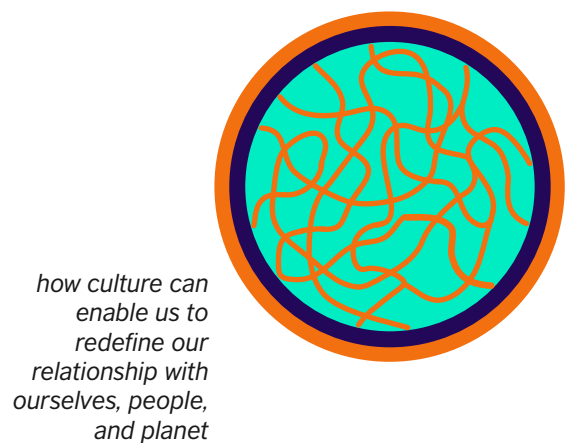
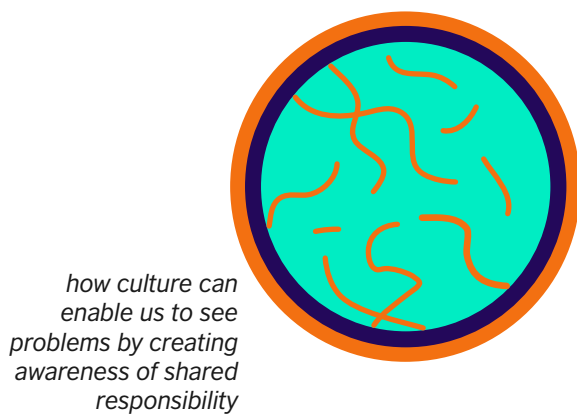
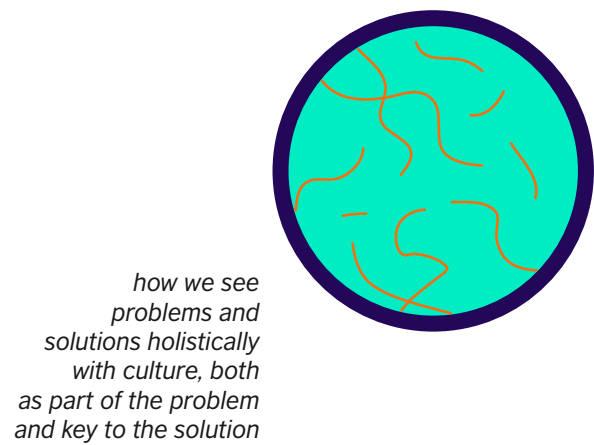
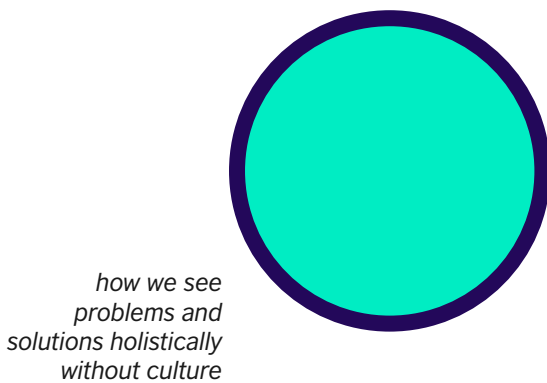
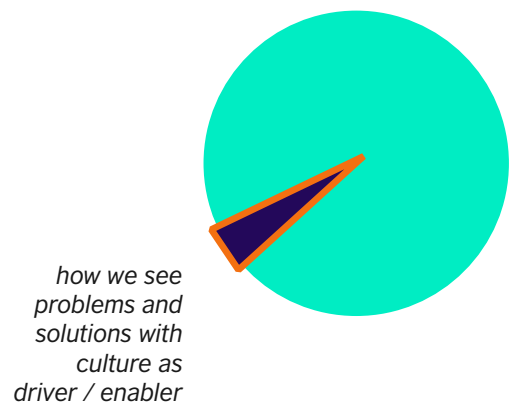
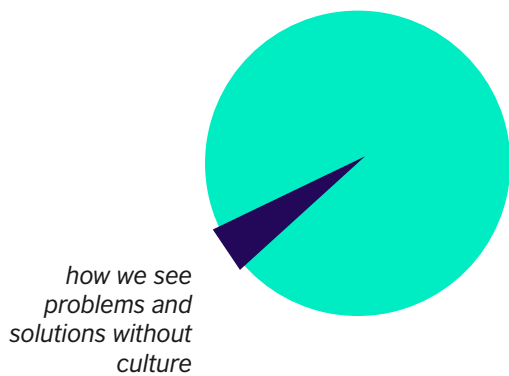


## Systems Thinking, Complexity and Interdependence

Systems thinking (Senge 1997) recognises that individual components or events are part of larger, interconnected systems. It focuses on understanding the relationships, patterns, and feedback loops that shape the behaviour of these systems, and it helps people see beyond isolated events to grasp the underlying structures and dynamics that contribute to complex issues. Applying systems thinking in sustainable development allows us to envision a holistic, sustainable human society, moving beyond 'end-of-pipe' solutions to address the underlying structures and

mental models that fuel un-sustainability, fostering the conditions for sustainability to flourish (Hynes et al. 2020, Voulvoulis et al. 2022). Culture can play a strong role in creating, sustaining and breaking these structures and should therefore be first point of intervention if wanting to change these.

- complex problem
- perceived problem and solution
- culture



## Culture as the Key for Systemic Change

As we come together to confront global challenges, culture possesses the capacity to influence change systematically. In order to optimise the potential of culture as a catalyst for systemic change, the cultural sector should intentionally operate at the intersection of culture and the sustainable development process by adopting systems thinking, aiding in the revelation and cultivation of interdependent relationships with ourselves, others, and our planet. Arts and cultural practices can help bring our attention to and engage with the connections and disconnections in these relationships, which often give clues to underlying value systems and beliefs that perpetuate root causes and systemic barriers contributing to ongoing societal challenges, extending beyond the specific areas addressed by the SDGs.

While the outcomes of arts and cultural practices are diverse, dialogic, involving investigative processes, and cannot be predicted or predetermined as some common development agency programmes might desire, their value lies precisely in their exploratory nature. This exploratory nature helps reveal blind spots in systems and stimulates unforeseen ways of approaching specific issues. By introducing discussions and speculations into existing situations, arts and culture humanise and encourage people to undertake unexpected actions.

Even in seemingly straightforward contributors to the economy, such as the creative industries, their genuine contributions do not solely stem from their economic impact. Instead, their significance lies in their capacity to coordinate and catalyse new ideas or technologies that drive the process of cultural change (Potts and Cunningham 2008). This example illustrates the real transformational power of culture, which can only be fully appreciated as an integral part of the development process when we understand humans, their cultural and belief systems, and their capacities as an integral part of larger systems.

However, it is important to acknowledge that a single artist, work, or cultural programme alone may not possess the ability to redirect an entire societal trajectory. Instead, the collective influence of artistic expressions and participation, and the diverse array of

creative manifestations, whether intentional or experimental, generates a cumulative impact. They create an inclusive environment for people to recognise harmful systems, renegotiate relationships, and envision desirable futures for themselves and the planet. Still, some artists and cultural practitioners who intentionally employ the power of the arts and arts-based processes to directly confront social issues may provoke immediate and expanded awareness.

## Proposition for the Cultural Sector: Being Practical and Transformational

Efforts by nations, corporations, and various other entities to include the cultural sector in implementing the SDGs primarily concentrate on incremental progress within current systems. Although this approach appears practical and logical in the short run, it does not propel humanity substantially nearer to sustainability, especially given the urgent timeframe required to prevent systemic breakdown and severe upheaval. These initiatives underscore the commendable efforts centred on the SDGs, which merit substantial expansion. However, to truly achieve sustainability and genuine human and planetary well-being, it is essential to simultaneously undertake a parallel or complementary effort focused on systemic change.

On the following page are two proposals that can be practically implemented within the cultural sector in their programmes, running in parallel with the effort to harness culture's potential for systemic change.

## Practical Recommendations to the Cultural Sector for Systems Change

### a. Process-focused Design, Implementation and Evaluation Approach

In cultural programmes that engage directly with communities, rather than treating culture solely as an instrumental solution to symptomatic problems (i.e. adopting an outcome-based approach), programmes should align their objectives with relevant SDGs and explore how culture can catalyse transformations in the beliefs, values, and capacities of communities (i.e. adopting a process-focused approach) to address the root causes of the issues faced by these communities. Arts-based processes can be employed within this framework.

What this might look like in the case of British Council cultural programmes and those of other cultural relations actors: instead of aiming for the programme to contribute to job creation in a certain community, focus can be shifted to how the programme is providing space and processes for community-driven experimentation that allows them to identify their needs and desires, recognise their agency, cultivate their connections to themselves, to other members of the communities, as well as to their immediate environment. The process also helps them to recognise the collective value and belief systems that perpetuate root causes and systemic barriers contributing to the ongoing issue of job creation.

In this framework, cultural programmes and relations place greater emphasis on the process of experimentation and exploration as an outcome in itself, which would help to create preconditions in job creation. Thus, the evaluation questions should not be focused on how many new jobs were created, but what kind of processes the programme would create that serve as a safe and supportive container for the community or people involved in it to recognise their personal and collective values and belief systems, as well as to stimulate certain attitudes, skills, and qualities they feel they need to enhance in achieving the condition they aspire to (i.e. self- and complexity awareness, openness and a learning mindset, empathy, co-creation skills, agency to drive change). By doing this, the programme can help to cultivate people's ability to drive long-term systemic change.

### b. Leveraging Culture's Transformational Power in Sustainable Development Through Cross-sectoral Partnerships

The persistent issue of the underrepresentation of culture in the SDGs already hinders other sectors' comprehension of how culture relates to sustainable development processes. Consequently, the transformative role of culture in sustainable development might continue to be overlooked. A common practice involves engaging culture and other sectors in a merely functional manner, reducing culture's capacity to a purely instrumental role. Cultural practitioners may superficially align with the SDGs, viewing sustainable development as merely another backdrop for framing narratives about specific community issues, in order to attract funding and visibility.

On the other hand, practitioners involved in sustainable development might perceive arts and culture primarily as tools for communication or as simple vehicles to deliver other development solutions. Nonetheless, categorising culture versus non-culture sectors in terms of varying levels of creativity is counterproductive as it undermines the deep interconnection between culture and sustainable development.

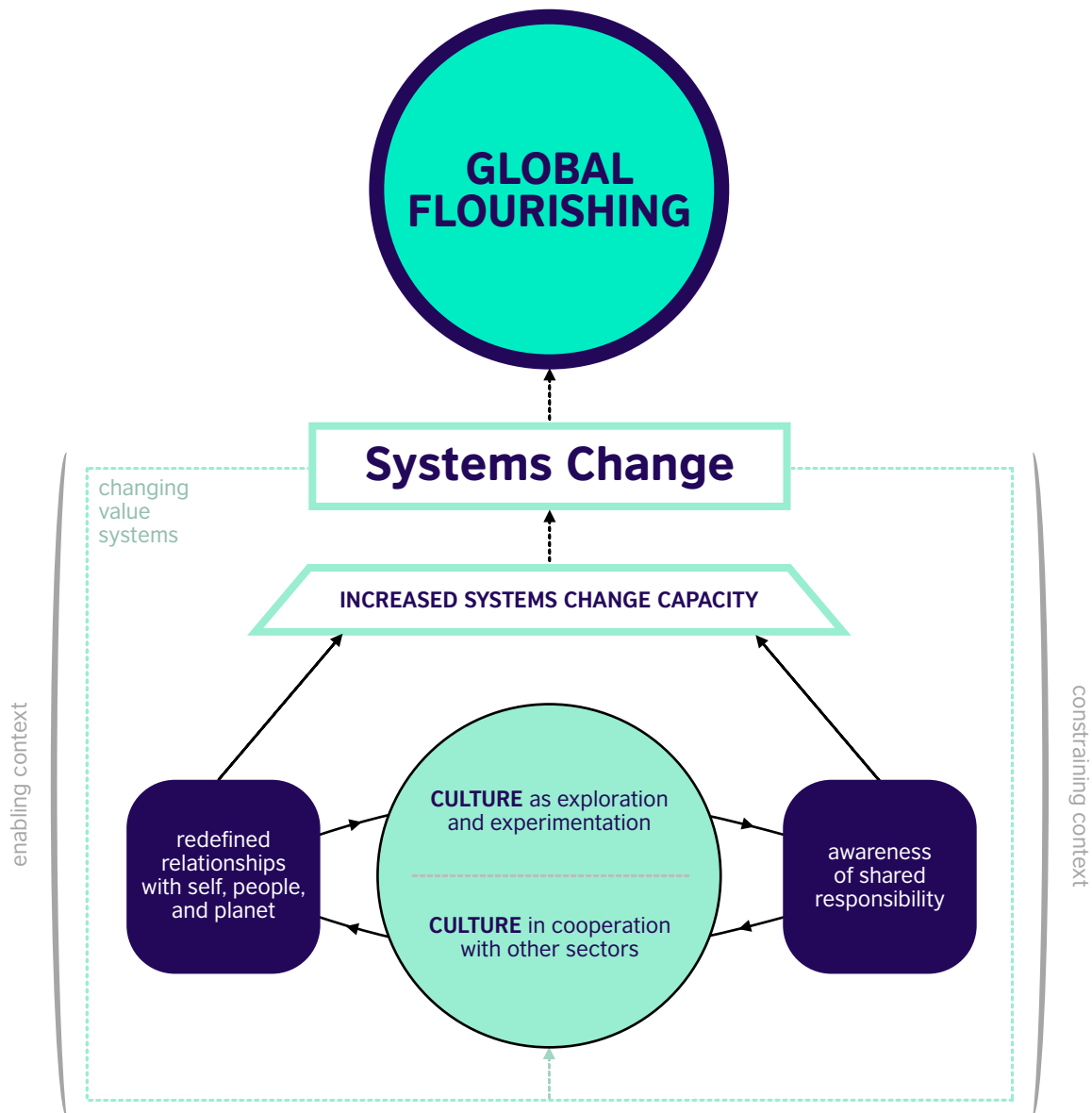
To bridge this gap of understanding, the cultural sector needs to proactively form alliances and establish partnerships with entities that do not necessarily identify as cultural actors throughout the whole process of designing, implementing, and evaluating programmes aimed at addressing global challenges. For culture to have a transformational impact, the cultural sector must establish a shared understanding with other sectors regarding culture's foundational role in shaping change, transcending its instrumental roles. This can only be achieved effectively if cultural practitioners are capable of thinking and communicating at a systemic level. Such an approach would facilitate the resolution of the 'language' barrier between the cultural sector and external entities.

# Culture is the Missing Foundation

*If we look at culture beyond the SDGs, could there be an alternative framework to connect culture to?*

*To what extent does the cultural sector worldwide need a framework to prove its importance, fundraise, and demonstrate its capacity to make this world more sustainable?*

*How do we recognise and communicate that our cultural values and expressions can also be harmful and unsustainable?*



enabling context = cultural turn in development, post-2030 agenda discussions, 'global public good'  
 constraining context = various understandings of culture, conflicts over values and heritage, disciplinary borders

# Playing the Game Whilst Changing the Rules

The UN SDGs are a useful framework for culture in terms of accessing funding, visibility, and attracting cross-sectoral collaborators. The global commitment to the SDGs is too large and important for the cultural sector to disregard.

An SDG-like development framework might, however, limit the transformative power of culture in its full agency. The present transversal role of culture is clearly not enough and a stand-alone goal might reduce culture to very few indicators.

Cultural practitioners in particular find it hard to relate to the SDGs as their understandings of both culture and development can be quite different. They see development as hyperlocal processes that can only be determined and guided by the very local communities they are embedded in.

Culture is best positioned to create the conditions for local understandings and applications of sustainable development to happen. Including through arts-based approaches, culture can help to renegotiate relationships with self, others, and the planet, ultimately increasing systems change capacity in our communities.

Recognising the complexity and interdependency of current sustainability challenges in flawed systems requires culture to break silos and strategically seek collaboration with other sectors.

For cultural practitioners, cultural intermediaries, and cultural relations actors, a pragmatic approach of hybridity might address some of these issues: engaging with the SDGs in a rigorous manner whilst applying a process-focused, localised approach to take control of incrementally changing harmful systems.

**Right** Celebration of a fashion show for upcycled genderless fashion at Lá da Favelinha cultural centre in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, supported by a DICE Collaboration grant.

Photo © Lá da Favelinha



## Acknowledgements

### Interviewees and Roundtable Participants

A Khairudin / Adin, Indonesia  
 Amy-Louise Shelver, South Africa  
 Avril Joffe, South Africa  
 Gabriel Caballero, Philippines / Singapore  
 Hilmar Farid, Indonesia  
 Johanna Kouzmine-Karavaïeff, Belgium  
 Jordi Pascual, Spain  
 Malaya del Rosario, Philippines / Switzerland  
 Mariana Soares, Brazil / Portugal  
 Mike van Graan, South Africa  
 Nadim Choucair, Canada / Germany / Lebanon  
 Razcel Jan Salvarita, Philippines  
 Suzan Monteverde Martins, Brazil  
 Wanessa Paula Conceição Quirino dos Santos, Brazil  
 Anonymous

### Feedback

Participants of the British Council “What Works in Cultural Heritage Protection Learning Gathering” in Nairobi / Kenya, July 2023

### Support

Jakob Abekhon, Germany / UK  
 David Emmanuel Moralina, Philippines

### British Council Team

Ian Thomas  
 Rosanna Lewis  
 Angelica Burrill  
 Stephen Stenning  
 Pablo Rossello  
 Nikki Locke

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## ● Phase 1 review

### ● Progress Toward the Missing Pillar analysis (p.13)



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