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# UNESCO GLOBAL REPORT ON CULTURAL POLICIES

## Culture: The missing SDG

2025

Culture:
The missing SDG

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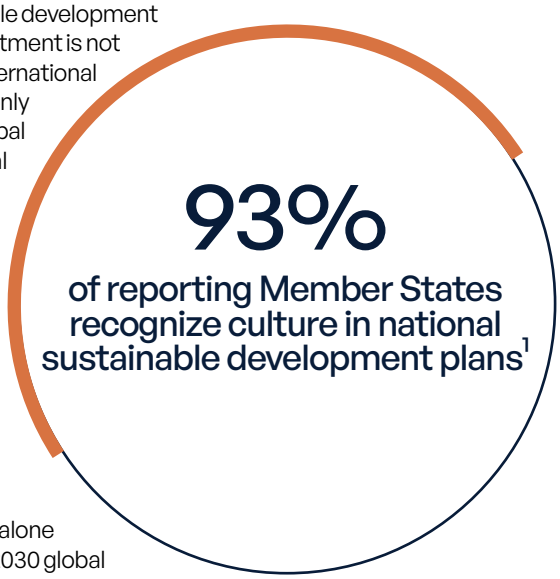
# Short Summary

## Culture for a sustainable future

For the first time, UNESCO offers the most comprehensive global snapshot of cultural policies, encompassing all regions and cultural sectors. Drawing on more than 1,200 national and local reports submitted between 2019 and 2024, the Global Report on Cultural Policies maps how countries are promoting culture through public policy, revealing both growing momentum and urgent challenges.

Recognition of culture's essential role in fostering inclusive and sustainable societies is gaining ground globally, with the majority of Member States reporting its integration into their national sustainable development plans. However, this commitment is not consistently reflected in international cooperation efforts – with only 46% of countries in the Global North and 58% in the Global South have incorporated culture into their development strategies. Although cultural and creative industries account for 3.39% of global GDP and 3.55% of global employment, substantial inequalities remain in terms of funding, access and participation.




The report calls for a stand-alone goal for culture in the post-2030 global agenda – recognizing culture not only as a means, but as an end in its own right. Such a goal would embed cultural rights, heritage and diversity within sustainable development, while providing the visibility, investment and accountability needed to ensure culture is no longer left behind.

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*'Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed.'*

[1] *This assessment was based on the quadrennial periodic reports of the 2005 Convention, submitted between 2019 and 2024, with a global total of 111 reporting Member States*

Tunisia © Taken by Greg @ Pexels.com

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# UNESCO GLOBAL REPORT ON CULTURAL POLICIES

## Culture: The missing SDG

2025

# Foreword

In Mexico City in 2022, 150 States unanimously adopted the MONDIACULT Declaration. In calling for culture to be included as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 agenda, they affirmed the potential of this global public good to drive sustainable development and realize a more just, inclusive future.

The adoption of the Pact for the Future in 2024 reaffirmed the decisive role of culture in contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Now, as we approach 2030—the culmination of fifteen years of a shared commitment to the SDGs—it is more vital than ever that we harness the full potential of culture worldwide.

This publication inaugurates the quadrennial series of Global Reports on Cultural Policies and is the first global analysis of its kind, encompassing all cultural domains. Drawing on 1,200 national and local reports and over 200 case studies, as well as implementation reports on all of UNESCO's cultural normative instruments submitted between 2019 and 2024, it offers an evidence base to inform new cultural policy agendas and to strengthen multilateral cooperation in the years ahead.

While it is essential to acknowledge the need for greater coordinated commitment to data development, the findings of this report are compelling. According to available data, cultural and creative industries represent 3.39% of global GDP and 3.55% of total employment, and cultural tourism across 250 cities generated $741.3 billion in 2023. The strategic role of culture is also gaining increased recognition in national sustainable development plans, with 93% of reporting Member States including it as a key element in their development strategies.

However, the report reveals major disparities, highlighted in terms of cultural budgets: per capita expenditure averages $418.56 in Europe and North America, representing almost thirteen times that of the rest of the world combined. Underinvestment is particularly acute in Central and Southern Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, where this figure stands at as little as $3.09 and $1.10 respectively. This also means that without a multilateral and evidence-driven approach, it is challenging to develop clear and compelling financing models for culture.

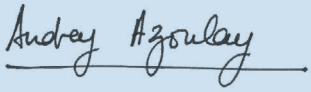
Significant gender-based disparities also persist in the culture sector. While women account for 38% of the global cultural workforce, they hold less than 30% of leadership positions in cultural organizations. This imbalance is compounded by the prevailing gender pay gap across cultural and creative sectors.

This report also highlights the need to adapt to ongoing technological shifts. For instance, the market for AI-generated audiovisual content, valued at €6 billion in 2023, is projected to surge to €48 billion by 2028. As these technologies continue to evolve, so do the associated risks—from revenue loss for creators to concerns over intellectual property and, more broadly, the potential for cultural flattening. Yet, with greater investment and attention, digital technologies hold the potential to support, rather than undermine, innovation and creative expression.

Culture is not a peripheral sector to be supported, but a central force to be mobilized—and momentum is building worldwide. I warmly thank the European Union, without whom this report would not have been possible, and I invite governments, cultural professionals and civil society to draw on this invaluable resource to reimagine cultural policy worldwide as we look ahead to MONDIACULT 2029.

Together, we can ensure that culture secures its rightful place in the post-2030 development agenda—to build the future we wish to see and the sustainable world our communities deserve.

**Audrey Azoulay**
Director-General of UNESCO



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# Results Framework

## Impacts

| | SDG TARGETS | AU 2063 GOALS |
|---|---|---|
| **1** **Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life** | | |
| **2** **Leveraging digital technologies to reduce inequalities and stimulate innovation** | | |
| **3** **Fostering culture and arts education** | | |

Visit the Global Report website to consult the full Results Framework

| Outcomes | Outputs |
|---|---|
| 1.1 Participation in cultural life is inclusive & equitable | 1.1.1 Countries and local governments implement gender responsive policies that protect & promote cultural diversity and social cohesion and ensure access to and enjoyment of tangible, intangible and natural heritage, including by promoting the return and restitution of cultural property |
| | 1.1.2 Countries and local governments implement measures, and put in place institutional structures, governing frameworks, policies & processes that support effective participatory cultural policymaking, informed by international standards |
| 1.2 Artistic freedom is safeguarded and the socio-economic rights of culture professionals upheld | 1.2.1 Countries, local governments and others ensure freedom of expression, and artists' rights to associate and engage and meet internationally |
| | 1.2.2 Countries and local governments adopt, implement and effectively enforce national laws and regulations promoting decent working conditions for artists and culture professionals, in line with fundamental principles and rights at work and ratified international labour Conventions |
| 2.1 Cultural rights, participation, diversity & inclusion are anchored in the digital realm | 2.1.1 Countries implement regulation and policies regarding the just transition to AI and the digital realm to ensure moral and labour rights, ethics, transparency & fairness in creators' remuneration |
| | 2.1.2 Countries, local governments and sector bodies implement policies and programmes that ensure inclusion and diversity of cultural expressions across the value chain in the digital realm, addressing the digital divide (including the digital gender divide) |
| 2.2 The culture sector benefits from, and contributes to increased digitalization, capacity, skills & innovation | 2.2.1 Countries, local governments sector bodies and others implement gender-responsive policies and programmes that support culture professionals and institutions to increase their digital skills and capabilities, incl. AI, through retraining and upskilling, certification, TVET systems, lifelong learning, and partnerships across education and training institutions |
| 3.1 People learn in, and through culture, to respect cultural diversity, cultural pluralism & develop the intercultural understanding and skills to shape peaceful, cohesive societies | 3.1.1 Countries, local governments, sector bodies and others promote and support cultural and educational institutions to provide contextual, quality, inclusive & equitable (life-long) learning in and through culture and arts education |
| | 3.1.2 Countries and local governments promote and support the integration of culture, in its diversity in and across formal, non-formal and informal education |
| 3.2 Culture sector institutions and the labour market are more professionalised, sustainable & equitable | 3.2.1 Countries, local governments education and TVET providers and cultural institutions implement gender responsive policies and programmes to develop creative talents & competencies and bolster employment and decent work in the cultural and creative industries |

## 4

**Enabling an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem and driving economic development**

## 5

**Tackling climate change & promoting environmental sustainability through culture**

## 6

**Protecting artists and culture at risk and bolstering resilience, peace and security**

## 7

**Integrating culture as a standalone goal for sustainable development, peace and security**

| | |
|---|---|
| 4.1 Culture makes a significant direct contribution to GDP, trade and decent jobs | 4.1.1 Countries, local governments, sector bodies, and others implement policies and programmes to support inclusive and sustainable policies promoting productive activities, decent job creation and creative entrepreneurship, business growth & local economic development, and policies that promote trade & preferential treatment of culture in trade policy, as well as transition to formalization |
| | 4.1.2 Countries, sector bodies, and others implement regulations, policies & programmes to support the promotion of gender equality and empowerment within the cultural workforce, including women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities in access to leadership positions and reducing the gender pay gap |
| 4.2 The culture sector is sustainably invested in by a diversity of sources | 4.2.1 Countries, sector bodies, private sector and others implement measures, and put in place policies & financial measures that support sustainable investment in culture |
| 5.1 The culture sector contributes to societal efforts to tackle climate change, maintain biodiversity and reduce habitat loss | 5.1.1 Countries, local governments, culture sector bodies and others implement policies and programmes that leverage culture (incl. living heritage, traditional and indigenous knowledge), for climate change mitigation, adaptation support, and public awareness raising |
| | 5.1.2 Countries, local governments, culture sector bodies, and others implement policies and programmes to support the culture sector to decarbonise and undergo a just transition to environmental sustainability |
| 5.2 Cultural and natural heritage & landscape is more resilient in the face of environmental and climate risk | 5.2.1 Countries, local governments, sector bodies, and others implement policies and programmes to protect & safeguard heritage from environmental and climate impact, drawing on local & indigenous resources |
| 6.1 Artists, culture professionals, practitioners and heritage are more resilient in the face of conflicts and emergencies | 6.1.1 Countries implement laws, policies and programmes that seek to prevent, or mitigate damage & loss of cultural heritage in crisis situations |
| | 6.1.2 Countries and local governments implement gender-responsive laws, policies and programmes that seek to protect and build the capacities of artists, culture professionals and the diversity of cultural expressions, for peacetime and in conflicts and emergencies |
| 6.2 Harms generated by illicit trafficking of cultural property are mitigated, increasing security and enabling peace-building | 6.2.1 Countries implement laws and policies, and engage in regional, national & international cooperation, to prohibit and prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural property |
| 7.1 Culture is embedded in other policy arenas, at national and local level | |
| 7.2 Culture contributes to inclusive sustainable development & peace-building | |

# Introduction

Rundu, Kavango, Namibia

## A comprehensive outlook on culture and development

The Global Report on Cultural Policies marks the inaugural edition of a new flagship series, through a collaborative initiative led by UNESCO and supported by the European Union, born out of a historic moment: the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, where ministers of culture from around the world collectively affirmed that culture is a global public good and must be recognized as a stand-alone pillar of sustainable development.

In response to this landmark consensus, UNESCO Member States called for the establishment of a comprehensive Global Report on Cultural Policies on a quadrennial basis. This call, subsequently endorsed by the UNESCO Executive Board (217 EX/Decision 10; 219 EX/Decision 11), laid the groundwork for a shared vision and coordinated framework to guide cultural governance in the decades ahead.

The Global Report presents an unprecedented global panorama of cultural policies, bringing together all regions and cultural subdomains under one comprehensive assessment. Offering in-depth insight into culture's transformative role as a cornerstone of our shared humanity, well-being and sustainable development, it examines how culture is valued and supported at global, regional, national and local level by tracking the implementation of the UNESCO Culture Conventions[2] and Recommendations[3], as well as the contributions of programmes such as the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Featuring diverse voices from across the cultural ecosystem – including artists, leading cultural experts and policymakers – the report illustrates how UNESCO's instruments and programmes have inspired policy change at the global, national and local levels. Ultimately, it provides compelling evidence that these efforts are advancing the priorities of the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, paving the way for sustainable development beyond 2030 by recognizing culture as a stand-alone goal.

The global cultural policy landscape has long remained fragmented, undervalued, siloed and often considered peripheral to economic, social and environmental priorities. This report is a turning point: a bold first step toward integrated, cross-cutting and forward-looking cultural policy worldwide.

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[2] *UNESCO Culture Conventions: Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005); Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003); Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001); Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972); Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970); Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954).*

[3] *Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (2015); Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, including a glossary of definitions (2011); Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist (1980).*

This is a pivotal moment for culture: while efforts to integrate culture into global development frameworks have intensified in recent years, its role remains insufficiently recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – addressed explicitly only in Targets 4.7[4] and 11.4.[5] Yet culture contributes across the entire spectrum of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and underpins their economic, social and environmental dimensions. From climate action and poverty reduction to gender equality, digital inclusion and post-crisis recovery, the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the promotion of dynamic creative ecosystems are essential to addressing the complex challenges of our time.

Momentum is building globally, with calls to embed culture more firmly in development now gaining strength, driven by landmark moments such as MONDIACULT 2022, and echoed in global frameworks including the G20 and G7 Declarations on Culture and the Pact for the Future.

However, despite growing international recognition of culture's cross-cutting value, the absence of a dedicated cultural goal has led to underinvestment and weak institutional coordination. As 2030 approaches, the conversation is shifting from reflection to action: *What comes next, and how do we ensure culture is no longer left behind?*

## Box 1.
## A timeline on culture for sustainable development

1982 – The first UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies (MONDIACULT) is convened, broadening the international definition of culture as 'the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group'.

1988 – The World Decade for Cultural Development is proclaimed.

1995 – The UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development, established by the United Nations and entrusted to UNESCO, outlines that development divorced from its human and cultural context is 'growth without a soul'.

1998 – UNESCO convenes the Stockholm Conference on Cultural Policies for Development to define a new global agenda of cultural policies for development, calling for the elaboration of an action plan on priorities for cultural policies federating multi-stakeholder partnerships.

1999 – UNESCO joins forces with the World Bank to analyse financing, resources and the economics of culture in sustainable development.

2001 – The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity highlights cultural diversity as 'necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature'.

2006 – The Thematic Window on Culture and Development of the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F) is established.

[4] *Target 4.7: By 2030 ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.*

[5] *Target 11.4: By 2030 strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.*

2009 – The UNESCO Culture for Development Indicator Suite (CDIS) presents an innovative approach and methodology to document the multidimensional role of culture across national development processes.

2013 – The multifaceted role of culture in achieving sustainable development goals is further refined by The Hangzhou Declaration: Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies, which advocates for the inclusion of culture in the post-2015 global development framework.

2013 - Publication of the United Nations Creative Economy Report, the first global report on the creative economy focused exclusively on the Global South, fruit of a partnership between UNESCO and UNDP through its United Nations for South-South Cooperation.

2015 – Culture is integrated into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably in SDG 4 and its target 4.7 and SDG 11 and its target 11.4, which calls for the strengthening of efforts to protect and preserve the world's cultural and natural heritage. Culture is also recognized in Voluntary National Reports (VNRs) for the implementation of Agenda 2030 as a crosscutting enabler and driver of sustainable development.

2017 – The United Nations Security Council adopts the Resolution 2347 on 'Maintenance of international peace and security: destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage by terrorist groups and in situations of armed conflict'.

2019 – UNESCO launches the Culture|2030 Indicators, providing a revised methodological framework to measure the impact of the contribution of culture in the implementation of the SDGs, and convenes the UNESCO Forum of Ministers of Culture (Paris).

2021 – The United Nations General Assembly proclaims the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development.

2022 – UNESCO holds the World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022 (Mexico City).

2023 – The UN General Assembly's Political Declaration (September 2023, High-level Political Forum under UNGA auspices) includes, for the first time, a dedicated paragraph on culture, reaffirming its role as 'an enabler of sustainable development'.

2023 – World Leaders adopt a political declaration at the SDG Summit (New York) that explicitly reaffirms culture as an enabler of sustainable development. At the same time, the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, the XV BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration and ministerial declarations on culture endorsed by countries of the G77+China, the European Union, CECC-SICA and the Andean Community affirmed the fundamental need to anchor culture in the development agenda.

2024 – The UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education is adopted at the UNESCO World Conference on Culture and Arts Education (Abu Dhabi) and the Pact for the Future is adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future (New York), placing an unprecedented emphasis on culture as a driver of sustainable development.

The leader of the elephants at the Junkanoo (Bahamas), inscribed on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List

In preparation for MONDIACULT 2025, UNESCO convened six regional consultations between November 2024 and February 2025, engaging Member States, civil society, artists, young people and other stakeholders in a wide-ranging dialogue on the evolving role of cultural policy. These consultations provided both a diagnostic lens and a forward-looking agenda, revealing a strong and growing global consensus around the centrality of culture to sustainable development. While common themes resonated across all regions – such as the demand for inclusive digital transformation, gender equality, climate action through culture, and greater investment in the creative economy – each region brought forward distinct priorities and challenges, shaped by its unique social, political, economic and environmental contexts.

Insights gathered through regional consultations in the lead-up to MONDIACULT 2025 helped inform the Global Report's analysis and enrich its understanding of the diverse cultural policy landscapes across the world. These dialogues brought forward shared aspirations, contextual challenges and emerging priorities that have been taken into consideration across the thematic chapters.

Across all regions, culture is recognized as a cornerstone of inclusive and democratic societies. A rights-based approach was reaffirmed, with cultural policies increasingly focused on civic participation, equality, youth engagement and artistic freedom. However, the nature of the challenges and priorities varies according to context: in regions with more established cultural infrastructure, such as parts of Western Europe and North America, policy discussions centred on adapting systems to address emerging issues – ranging from the ethical governance of artificial intelligence to climate resilience and misinformation. Concerns about fair remuneration for culture professionals, the gender pay gap and inclusive governance frameworks also featured prominently.

On the other hand, regions grappling with geopolitical instability or uneven infrastructure – such as Eastern Europe, Africa, and parts of the Asia-Pacific – emphasized the urgent need to safeguard cultural rights and heritage, particularly in times of crisis or displacement. While digitization is expanding access to culture, significant disparities in infrastructure, funding and digital literacy remain, especially for rural communities, minorities, and Indigenous Peoples. In these regions, there is a strong focus on improving emergency preparedness, supporting displaced artists and fostering cultural reconciliation and cohesion.

Themes of cultural justice, social equity, gender equality and the empowerment of Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant communities were particularly prominent in Latin America and the Caribbean. The culture sector is viewed as a key resource to reduce inequality and strengthen grassroots ecosystems, though challenges such as informality, underfunding and digital exclusion persist. Similarly, the Arab States and parts of the Asia-Pacific region highlighted the importance of integrating culture into broader development strategies, including education, climate adaptation, and migration policy. Legislative reform, investment in cultural education and stronger cultural data systems were identified as essential to building more resilient and inclusive ecosystems.

Across the board, there is growing recognition for the creative economy as a driver of economic transformation, particularly for increasing employment for women and youth, as demonstrated in Africa's dynamic music, fashion and film sectors. Yet constraints such as limited public investment, informality and weak infrastructure continue to hinder inclusive growth, and there is a risk that the creative economy paradigm does not tackle systemic barriers to fair and equitable cultural development. There is also a risk that it places more emphasis on economic growth than the social and intrinsic value of culture, jeopardizing its full recognition as a global public good. In many regions, digital platforms are expanding cultural access and creative innovation, while simultaneously raising concerns about data protection, platform governance and equitable access. The potential of digital tools and artificial intelligence for heritage preservation and artistic expression is gaining ground, particularly in climate-vulnerable areas like Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

These perspectives highlight an overall need for cultural policies that are both context-sensitive and globally aligned. Across regions, there is strong convergence around the call for inclusive governance, enhanced mobility for artists, reliable and disaggregated data systems (including gender disaggregated data), and stronger intersectoral integration of culture into policy areas such as education, economic development, climate action and digital transformation.

Gender equality is another recurring theme, with many Member States reporting efforts aimed at increasing women's participation in cultural decision-making and addressing gender-based discrimination in cultural practices. Over the past four years, an average of 88% of Member States reported the existence of policies or measures supporting the participation of women in cultural life, understood not only as attending or consuming cultural products, but also as having the opportunity to create, produce and shape cultural narratives and expressions. Sub-Saharan Africa, West Asia and North Africa report particularly high engagement, with 83% and 94% of reporting states respectively having implemented dedicated policies (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Accounting for 38% of total workers in the cultural and creative industries (UNCTAD, 2024), women constitute a powerful voice and a driving force for change in the cultural and creative ecosystems. However, structural inequalities in the culture sector persist, and women remain underrepresented in decision-making and leadership roles. Although 99% of the 114 reporting UNESCO Member States of the 2005 Convention declare having dedicated ministries, governmental agencies and/or parliamentary bodies specifically addressing gender equality, only 67% report that these gender-focused institutions are directly relevant for workers in the cultural and creative industries – falling to 55% in Sub-Saharan Africa (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

© Rossy de Palma

# Box 2. Equal futures: Advancing gender equality in the culture sector

## Rossy de Palma

*Humanist artist, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Cultural Diversity.*

'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you', wrote the inspiring poet and activist Maya Angelou. And indeed, the telling of our story – until now – has concealed the true place of women: millions of women who, for centuries, have made scientific discoveries, travelled to space, written, painted or woven magnificent works and led entire communities. A place erased, rendered invisible – one that we must now reclaim together, as a society.

Far from being only a matter of historical representation, millions of women around the world today continue to be denied freedom, equality, justice, education, access to healthcare, independence, and both economic and intellectual autonomy. They are denied the right to live with dignity. These deprivations extend to the cultural sphere as well – a domain where women have historically been portrayed as muses or passive figures, where our contributions remain under-recognized, where leadership roles are still scarce, and where – even today – we receive less financial compensation for our work.

My mother was an artist, a free thinker who, like so many others, was forced to diminish herself, to hide, to temper her mind and natural curiosity in order not to stand out – to avoid drawing attention. She bowed to the censorship of a society and an era that not only stifled the intellectual development of women by confining them to the domestic sphere, but also implanted in them the seed of self-censorship. And despite her legacy of freedom – which shaped who I am – I too had to rebel and free myself from that limiting inheritance. In my own case, I had no choice but to reverse the perspective and challenge the narrative – an act of boldness that shielded me from the gaze of others, so often stigmatizing and homogenizing, by resisting the pressure to conform to prescribed behaviours or one-dimensional thinking. In the midst of this process, culture and art became my greatest allies – sources of healing and resilience. Because if there is one thing women have always done, it is to rise above hardship – and even transform it into unexpected artistic revelations.

We, as women, are all artists, artisans, keepers of memory and living heritage, alchemists, masters of survival and heroines of our own lives. Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One's Own, spoke of women shifting from gazing out the window to looking into the mirror, to speaking with ourselves and with one another. The fluid and powerful movements of Martha Graham urged us to recognize and explore the energy – the vital force – within us, to express it not with judgement or comparison, but with celebration. That same energy flows through the stories we tell. Because stories matter. They can be used to dispossess and defame – but also to restore, empower, humanize and transform.

By invoking these bold artists, my wish is to underscore the urgent need to break stereotypes, support women's creativity, nurture their leadership and ensure they have space across all sectors and levels of the arts – including the right to safety. To recognize women not only as creators, but also as cultural bearers, leaders, entrepreneurs, teachers and experts – and to ensure that their work is valued and fairly compensated. Only by achieving true gender equity within and beyond the cultural sphere can culture flourish in all its richness – with all its voices, colours and textures.

Women are more awake than ever. This path back to ourselves – to discovery and self-knowledge – has been paved, step by step, by the women who came before us and who sacrificed so much, and there is no turning back.

Echoing the vision of the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, these insights have meaningfully informed the Global Report, which affirms the importance of evidence-based and partnership-driven approaches to cultural policy and governance – from the global to local level – and for cultural policy to intersect with other policy areas and respond to global priorities.[6]

Where there is effective multilateral cooperation across different ministries and departments, culture can thrive as a vector that delivers profound and transformative impact. But where the multilateral approach is not underpinned by robust evidence and sound governance and partnership, culture can quickly slide down agendas and go missing from key strategic programmes and actions. This is especially the case concerning cultural financing: without a multilateral and evidence-driven approach, it is challenging to develop clear and compelling financing models for culture. In turn, this adversely affects the status of the artist, leading to gaps in support (including financing) and infringements on diverse cultural expressions. It can also mean cultural heritage is not sufficiently protected, safeguarded and re-imagined, and that opportunities for a more diverse and inclusive creative economy are missed.

It is this fragile reality for culture which this report brings to our attention. It calls for better and stronger policy integration for culture in global, regional, national and local development agendas, leading to innovative and wide-reaching cultural financing. Moreover, each chapter recognizes that for culture to retain strategic leverage and for culture's role in sustainable development to be fully unlocked, culture needs to be fully recognized as a stand-alone development goal.

A dedicated culture goal would act as a catalyst for coordinated action at both national and international levels. It would embed cultural dimensions meaningfully across critical sectors – such as education, the environment and the economy – by fostering stronger inter-ministry alignment and sustained policy commitment. It would also enhance intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation, paving the way for shared strategies and joint investments. Importantly, such a goal would drive the systematic integration of culture into broader policy arenas, including disaster risk reduction, urban development, peacebuilding and climate adaptation – domains where culture's transformative potential remains under-recognized but urgently needed.

Far from leading to its isolation, setting culture a stand-alone goal would highlight its cross-cutting importance, providing shared objectives and indicators that strengthen intersectoral collaboration and amplify culture's contributions to other development priorities. This is not duplication – it is a strategic step toward coherence, visibility and inclusion.

A culture goal is not a symbolic aspiration – it is an actionable framework for building the sustainable and inclusive future we collectively need.

## Bridging data gaps: building an equitable evidence base

This first edition of the Global Report offers a comprehensive overview of cultural policies over the past five years, structured around six priority areas identified by Member States in the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration.

By assessing progress, ongoing challenges and emerging trends in the cultural field, the report serves as a key reference to guide the implementation of cultural policies across all regions. It also tests the viability of the performance indicators

[6] *UNESCO's work is guided by two overarching global priorities – Africa and Gender Equality – which are systematically integrated across all programmes and initiatives, including cultural policies. The Organization also pays particular attention to priority groups, notably Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and youth, ensuring that their specific needs, perspectives and knowledge systems are addressed. These priorities reflect UNESCO's commitment to advancing inclusive and equitable development, fostering cultural diversity and ensuring that no one is left behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and beyond.*

in the new Global Report's Results Framework, contributing to a more systematic assessment of the culture sector's impact at global, national and local levels.

This innovative framework spans 6 impact areas, 12 outcomes, 19 outputs and around 100 indicators – including 28 indicators on gender equality – and provides a common reference point for monitoring the evolution of cultural policies in a comprehensive and coherent manner. The data collected from the periodic reports submitted under UNESCO's normative instruments and programmes in the field of culture was consolidated, cleaned and analysed in alignment with the report's results framework with a view to mapping relevant questions to specific indicators, as detailed in the methodology section. Aligned with the revised UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics (2025), this tool is designed to be iterative and adaptable.

It is essential to acknowledge that gaps in cultural statistics – including data availability, geographic coverage, temporal consistency and the lack of consistent and comparable sex-disaggregated data linking gender equality to cultural policy outcomes – may distort regional and national trends, reinforcing the importance of strengthening cultural data systems to support evidence-based policymaking and international benchmarking. While fully recognizing these limitations, the Global Report's Results Framework provides a living structure that can evolve with continued use, stakeholder feedback and investment in national statistical capacity.

For this first edition, reports were analysed from 196 countries and 116 cities, with regional composition varying across normative instruments and programmes.[7] Ratification and submission rates also vary significantly across normative instruments and programmes, resulting in different levels of representation of cultural subdomains. Efforts have been implemented to bridge data gaps through the use of alternative data sources, including from United Nations agencies, international organizations, NGOs and INGOs, international civil society organizations and actors from the culture sector and the private sector. Although diversifying sources cannot entirely offset data availability across regions, this approach still marks a significant step forward.

By grounding the Global Report in national and city-level contributions, UNESCO seeks not only to honour the efforts of its Member States but also to transform reporting into a dynamic tool for learning, exchange and policy innovation. The Global Report has the potential to catalyze systemic change – digitizing and consolidating data, facilitating coherence across UNESCO's cultural actions and responding to longstanding requests from Member States to streamline reporting processes and enhance their relevance for national policymaking.

Furthermore, the report aims to inform and enrich the deliberations for the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT, 2025) taking place in Barcelona, Spain. Dialogue without data risks becoming symbolic; data without dialogue remains inert. The Global Report offers both: a solid empirical foundation for intergovernmental dialogue and a shared reference point for aligning national and international action. The report also makes the case for greater coordinated commitment to data development and evidence-based cultural policies that support culture as a stand-alone goal.

## A snapshot of the Global Report on Cultural Policies

This 2025 edition of the Global Report was guided by an advisory board, which has provided strategic input on key themes, findings and recommendations. Its editorial board – comprising the principal editors, authors, UNESCO Chairs and the UNESCO Global Report Coordinator – was established through an inclusive and participatory process, with a strong emphasis on diverse cultural perspectives and thematic

[7] *The number of countries includes Member States, Associate Members and States Parties. For a complete list of the countries and cities whose reports were analysed for the 2025 Global Report on Cultural Policies, please refer to Annexes - Countries and Cities included in the analysis.*

expertise. A rigorous peer review process involving leading experts, UNESCO Chairs and the advisory board was undertaken, bringing together a wide range of perspectives to validate the quality, coherence and strategic direction of the report.

Each chapter is dedicated to a specific development theme, analysing how cultural policies and measures have contributed to the advancement of individual and collective cultural rights, more inclusive access to culture and participation in cultural life, greater synergies between culture and education, enhanced protection of culture in emergency contexts, support for the creative economy, the digital transformation of the culture sector and the role of culture for climate change action.

Importantly, the report also examines what remains absent: the structural and systemic barriers to culture-led development, including from a gender perspective. This analysis takes place in the context of a complex and evolving landscape – marked by the continued recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, growing economic and social instability, escalating conflicts and the intensifying climate crisis. It also considers the disruptive potential of emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence, which is reshaping the entire cultural value chain in unpredictable ways.

At the same time, the report acknowledges the creative resurgence emerging from the Global South, particularly in fast-growing urban areas where youth in all their diversity are driving new forms of cultural expression and innovation. Yet this dynamic period also coincides with rising political instability and volatility, and declining public trust in traditional institutions. The report also comes at a time of acute global crisis – with multiple conflicts, climate emergency and widespread assaults on freedom, democracy and inclusion. Culture is at risk and under threat.

In this context, the Global Report presents a timely reflection on culture's evolving role, impact and future. It emphasizes the urgency of anchoring culture more firmly in global development agendas, particularly through the adoption of a stand-alone goal for culture in the post-2030 framework. Collectively, the chapters provide a cohesive and forward-looking perspective to guide inclusive, effective and resilient cultural policies worldwide.

**CHAPTER ONE:**
ADVANCING INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL LIFE

Provides an overview of the global state of cultural rights, highlighting persistent inequalities and emerging opportunities in the culture sector. It identifies critical gaps in policy, governance and infrastructure that hinder the full realization of cultural rights, particularly for women, Indigenous Peoples and marginalized communities. Drawing on international standards and regional experiences, the chapter offers strategic outlooks across key priority areas – from gender equality, the status of the artist and artistic freedom to technological transformation and data systems.

**CHAPTER TWO:**
LEVERAGING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES AND STIMULATE INNOVATION

Provides an overview of the impact of the digital transformation on all cultural domains, and how it brings new opportunities and challenges for culture professionals, artists and institutions. This includes an analysis of issues concerning access to culture, cultural and linguistic diversity, documentation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and innovation of creative expressions, fair remuneration, adaptation of skills, freedom of expression and intellectual property in the digital environment, with a particular focus placed on artificial intelligence. The chapter also addresses the digital exclusion that continues to hinder women's full participation in the cultural and creative industries, particularly in low- and lower-middle-income countries, where the digital divide remains pronounced.

**CHAPTER THREE:**
FOSTERING CULTURE AND ARTS EDUCATION

Explores synergies between culture and education as pillars for an inclusive future rooted in cultural diversity and human rights. It underlines the need to integrate culture and arts education across formal, non-formal and informal education to foster contextual and inclusive lifelong learning, and to ensure equal access to education and training opportunities, particularly in the digital realm. It also points to the need to promote cultural diversity and intercultural understanding for building peaceful cohesive societies, while offering insights into the implementation of the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, adopted by Member States in 2024.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**
ENABLING AN INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM AND DRIVING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Examines how the cultural and creative industries function as a key engine of inclusive and sustainable economic development, making the connection between public subsidy for arts and culture and economic growth. The chapter highlights how state support for culture provides the foundation for a mixed economy where for-profit and high-growth activities leverage the talent and content generated in a wider cultural ecosystem. The interdependence of subsidies, incentives, regulatory aspects and the market are described through a policy lens. The chapter also highlights the urgent need for structural support for cultural workers, who often operate in precarious, informal conditions, and to address gender discriminatory norms. It argues that strengthening labour protections, promoting gender equality and defending artistic freedom are fundamental to a sustainable culture sector.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**
TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE AND PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH CULTURE

Alerts us to the vital importance of culture, creativity and diverse epistemologies being further integrated into international discussions and operational action on climate change and highlights deep-set challenges in aligning policy approaches to culture, environment and socioeconomic development. It also emphasizes culture's multidimensional role in climate adaptation and mitigation and for environmental sustainability, the issue of decarbonization and environmental sustainability in the culture and creative sectors, and the need to protect and safeguard cultural heritage from climate change and environmental impacts.

**CHAPTER SIX:**
PROTECTING ARTISTS AND CULTURE AT RISK: BOLSTERING RESILIENCE, PEACE AND SECURITY

Offers extensive insight into the policies and measures developed in the most pressing and fragile of circumstances. Using examples from recent and ongoing conflicts, the chapter reflects on good practices in supporting artists, especially women artists, who are disproportionately more affected by crises and emergencies, and in safeguarding culture in moments of acute risk, as well as good practices for peace, reconciliation and reconstruction. This includes reflections on policy and practice for cultures which are lost (e.g. monuments destroyed by conflict), and for those most in need of support – such as women, and artists and culture professionals from minorities.

The conclusion of this report outlines the rationale, urgency but also the pathway for a stand-alone goal for culture, building on the findings of the report as a whole, towards integrating culture as a stand-alone goal for sustainable development, peace and security.

This report is not an endpoint but a beginning. It offers UNESCO Member States a powerful, practical tool – one rooted in their own reporting, tailored to their needs and built for collaboration. It encourages the culture sector to move forward together toward a shared goal: to ensure that culture is protected, valued and promoted for the benefit of all humanity, now and for generations to come.

**Data referencing acknowledgement**

Most of the data drawn upon and referred to within this first Global Report comes from analysis of reports submitted by national and local stakeholders to UNESCO in relation to all of their statutory instruments and major initiatives in the sphere of culture. This includes five Conventions, three Recommendations, the Culture | 2030 Indicators, the Creative Cities Network, and Surveys on the follow-up to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration (see Methodology for more detail). For ease of reading, where UNESCO sources are drawn upon, both in-text references and the sources for tables and figures within this Report simply credit which UNESCO source has been analysed (e.g. 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage). However, it should be noted that this large volume of UNESCO data and information (consisting of well over 1,200 individual reports), was processed, consolidated, cleaned, analysed and visualised in its entirety by the data and research partner, BOP Consulting.

Red Chilli, Bangladesh. © Shafiul Alam .bd / Shutterstock.com*

Chapter 1

# Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life

# Creative Voices
## *Daiara Tukano*

Visual artist, activist, and educator.

Culture is an expression of life and of our relationship with the universe around us. Guaranteeing cultural rights is the only way to also ensure the cultural diversity that exists on the planet and in all its biomes with their temperatures, mountains, valleys, deserts, rivers, seas and forests: just as the planet sows cultures, cultures then cultivate the planet, nourishing systems of world and thought where exchanges and interactions are necessary to maintain or transform systems of life.

Guaranteeing cultural rights is, even more than for humanity, an essential guarantee for the world: cultures as ways of life maintain the biodiversity of the planet and of the foods that nourish bodies, souls and spirits. We are living cultures just as our territories of existence are alive: protecting, promoting and fostering diverse cultural expressions and artistic freedom gives us the opportunity to listen more attentively to the human and non-human voices of the world. A culture that dies is a plant that dies, a food that disappears, a landscape that fades: guaranteeing the life and existence of diverse cultures is guaranteeing the preservation of life itself on the planet.

There are no people without culture, just as there are no people without memory. The cultures of Indigenous Peoples unfold rooted in the profound knowledge of our ancestors: of our relatives, and we are all relatives, just as the river is the child of the forest, the bow is the sibling of the arrow, the hunted is related to the hunter, one relative cares for another, and policies like trees in the forest only flourish with the culture of care.

This is why it is urgent for governments to collectively seek the development of cultural policies that can be built and strengthened by a human rights perspective. If cultures are alive, they also have the right to freedom of expression, equality, security and intellectual property, whether individual or collective. If cultures are alive, they should achieve the right to be recognized just the same as education, health, food and work, because they are already a home for those who live and live off culture. No culture should be discriminated against, diminished, persecuted, or criminalized – instead, crimes against culture should be recognized just as crimes against life are recognized, so that cultures can always be treated with respect and dignity.

Those who plant and cultivate culture alongside their community bear the fruits of arts and thought, value the flavour of memory contained in tangible and intangible cultural heritage, appreciate cultural diversity as they would food diversity and make cultivation a worldly practice by developing the best tools for sharing it with everyone. This is why democratic access to cultural goods, technologies and means of cultural production and dissemination are also essential for cultivation. Cultures, like life and our dignities, are rebellious, resisting silence, erasure and oblivion because culture is the art of living and staying alive.

"KahtiriEoro - Espelho da vida (Mirror of Life)", 2020 (Artist's Collection). © Daiara Tukano.

# Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life

**César Augusto Guadalupe Mendizábal**
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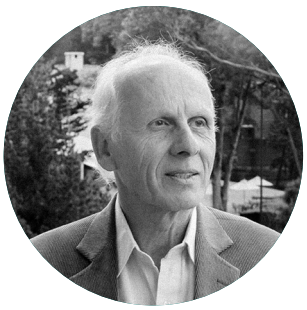


**Jamil Salmi**
Global tertiary education expert

# Overview

**01.** Despite formal recognition, there is still a serious lack of effective protection and promotion of cultural rights. This presents a critical global challenge for culture, with cultural rights under threat and the status of the artist precarious in many countries. Artists still face challenges in getting recognition and fulfilment of their socioeconomic rights, either for lack of a formal status or because the legal framework is not implemented. Even though a growing number of countries have reinforced their commitment to artistic freedom, many restrictions exist across the world including discriminatory social norms, censorship, prosecution, violence and, in the worst cases, the killing of artists.

**02.** The global trend towards strengthening the legal status of artists and other culture professionals has continued since the last global survey in 2019. Yet while cultural rights are recognized and defined in an increasingly comprehensive way in global human rights governance, existing reporting mechanisms attached to specific UN Conventions are not enough to measure progress and to make UNESCO Member States accountable for their actions in protecting and promoting cultural rights. Specific and systematic data generation efforts are required at an international level to properly monitor progress.

**03.** Language protection frameworks show progress in the recognition of cultural diversity, particularly for minority and Indigenous languages. However, effectiveness of implementation varies considerably, highlighting the need for strengthened support mechanisms.

**04.** Women and underrepresented groups such as Indigenous Peoples and cultural minorities face disproportionate barriers to cultural participation. Such groups are most at risk for exercising their cultural rights and associated socioeconomic rights. Member States that conduct gender and minority impact assessments as an integral part of their cultural policies and establish dedicated funding streams for women-led and minority-led cultural initiatives can serve as models.

**05.** Digital platforms are crucial tools for expanding cultural access and participation, though their effectiveness is limited by persistent legal, ethical, technological and socioeconomic barriers. Digital platforms can be mobilized for illicit trafficking, fraud, IP infringement, harassment, technology-facilitated gender-based violence and more. Also, while artificial intelligence poses significant economic risks to artists by reducing earnings, weakening copyright protections and increasing job insecurity, it can also help to facilitate and enhance cultural practices – for example for the protection and restoration of cultural heritage, royalty tracking and sector mapping.

# Introduction

Culture forms the very foundation of our shared human existence and collective memory. It is through culture that we forge our identities, both individual and communal, thus creating profound connections that transcend time and space. As defined in the MONDIACULT Declaration of 1982 and reaffirmed in that of 2022, culture is the 'whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs' (UNESCO, 1982). This rich tapestry of human expression nurtures our well-being through shared emotions and social bonds whilst enriching our lives with creativity, meaning and values. Many cultures deepen humanity's relationship with nature, fostering environmental awareness, sustainability and resilience. As a pillar in the construction of prosperous and peaceful societies, culture stands at the heart of vibrant activities spanning the arts, entertainment and tourism. Culture manifests itself across myriad forms – through words, sound, images, movement, monuments, objects, traditional knowledge systems and now digital media – serving as a vital bridge between heritage and innovation, allowing societies to honour their past whilst adapting to contemporary advances and challenges.

Some cultural practices and forms of expression are of a universal nature as they can be found across all human societies, regardless of geography or history. Others are unique to certain communities or regions. Examples of universal cultural expressions include music and dance to communicate emotions, storytelling to pass down knowledge, values, history, rituals and ceremonies to mark important life transitions, visual arts to express beliefs and emotions, cooking and shared meals to reinforce family and social bonds, fashion and body decoration to define cultural identity, humour and play for social interaction and stress relief, and religious or spiritual practices. By contrast, contextual forms of cultural activities are determined by specific historical, environmental and social backgrounds. Music genres and dance styles, traditional dresses, culinary traditions, festivals and celebrations, social customs and greetings, and architectural styles are instances of such contextual forms and practices. However, there are also cultural expressions based on specific traditions that contradict universal human rights (such as Female Genital Mutilation), and in this sense culture must not be used to legitimize gender violence, inequality and discrimination.

Countries with strong democratic institutions and traditions tend to be more tolerant and supportive of diversity in cultural expression and activities, as opposed to authoritarian regimes, which are prone to promoting cultural expressions within the boundaries of their political and ideological orientations and often prefer conformity over cultural diversity. The differences apply especially to minority rights, freedom of expression and cultural autonomy (Anderson et al., 2014; Asia Center, 2022).

Support for culture takes the form of specific policies and financial resources deployed in favour of cultural and artistic activities. For example, in Western Europe – France, Germany and the Netherlands are known for generous public funding for artists, cultural institutions, and cultural and creative industries. The Nordic countries are the 'European champions' when it comes to investment in the arts, music and literature, protection of Indigenous culture and policies in support of linguistic and ethnic diversity, not only within their own countries, but also in the Global South where they generously support artistic freedom through their development agencies, such as SIDA or NORAD, for example.

After the end of apartheid in the early 1990s, South Africa inscribed the protection of cultural rights in its new Constitution, adopted policies supporting Indigenous and marginalized communities, and has since invested generously in arts, music and literature. In Latin America, Bolivia's constitution recognizes the nation as a 'Plurinational State', affirming Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, cultural identity and language preservation. Colombia has implemented a comprehensive framework to protect and promote cultural rights, emphasizing its diverse heritage and the inclusion of Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and other marginalized communities. Costa Rica stands out for its high level of investment in cultural education and heritage protection, its active promotion of artistic and literary expression, and its robust legal framework in favour of Indigenous rights and cultural preservation.

In North America, Canada follows a multiculturalism policy that protects ethnic and linguistic diversity, offers abundant funding for arts and cultural initiatives, and has put in place strong legislation to compensate and protect First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures.

In Asia, Japan has shown long-term commitment to the protection of cultural heritage, the provision of solid support for traditional arts, crafts and performing arts, and the regular organization of government-backed cultural festivals. In the Pacific region, New Zealand has long been considered as a frontrunner in recognizing Indigenous cultural rights and languages, actively promoting Indigenous heritage in education and the media, and providing strong state support for the cultural and creative industries. Recent political debates surrounding the interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi have sparked public discussion and drawn international attention. These developments have highlighted the continued importance of constructive dialogue and inclusive policy approaches in upholding New Zealand's strong reputation for cultural rights and Indigenous engagement.

It is worth noting that legal frameworks – even foundational treaties such as the Treaty of Waitangi – are not static. Their interpretation can evolve over time and, in some cases, be influenced or manipulated in ways that undermine the very principles and intentions for which they were originally established.

2022 data produced by UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (UIS) show that expenditures in support of culture vary substantially across regions and countries, reflecting both their economic development and degree of commitment. However, it is also important to note that UIS data on heritage expenditure does not include wider expenditure across the culture sector (e.g. on festivals, cultural education and other development activities).

Colombia demonstrates good practice in this regard, having leveraged its Culture Satellite Account to integrate a gender equality perspective into culture sector financing. During 2020 in Bogotá, UN Women used this data to conduct a 'Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of the Culture Satellite Account: A Gender Equality Perspective', which examined women's working conditions – including remuneration, career stability, social protections and informality – while identifying structural barriers they face. This example illustrates how Colombia has gone beyond tracking cultural expenditures to evaluate them through a gender-sensitive framework.

**Table 1.**
**Per Capita Public Expenditure on Cultural and Natural Heritage, by regional group.**

| Regions | Median Per Capita Expenditure (PPP$, 2017) |
|---|---|
| Europe and Northern America | $75 - $365.9 |
| Northen Africa and Western Asia | $12.5 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | $10.5 |
| Eastern and South-Eastern Asia | $4.6 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | <$1.0 |

Source: UIS

(https://uis.unesco.org/en/news/Check-out-recent-updates-SDG11.4.1-Monitoring-Progress-Heritage-Preservation-February2025)

Note: The numbers are expressed in constant 2017 PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) dollars to facilitate international comparisons.

While universal human dignity and human rights remain fundamental goals, their full realization varies across countries worldwide. According to the 2023 Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 7.8 per cent of the global population resides in countries characterized by fully consolidated democratic governance, representing 24 nations – a decline from 12.3% in 2010. The remainder of the world's population resides in countries with varied governance systems, including those with democratic institutions facing challenges or limitations, countries exhibiting a mix of democratic and other governance features, and countries with centralized governance structures that limit political pluralism (EIU, 2024).

In some political contexts where governance structures are more centralized, cultural policies may reflect a stronger emphasis on national cohesion and state narratives. In such settings, legal and institutional frameworks for safeguarding cultural diversity may face challenges, including difficulties to implement gender equality policies, limitations on judicial independence, fewer formal protections for Indigenous cultural expressions and artistic freedom, and reduced support for pluralism in identity (Laws Learned, 2024).

These conditions can lead to censorship of art, literature and media, diminished minority and Indigenous cultures, marginalization of women, distortions of historical narratives, limited access to international cultural exchange, and limited space for creative innovation.

## Defining our right to culture

Against this background, the international community has found it indispensable to protect and promote cultural practices and modes of expression through a series of instruments that define cultural rights as a fundamental yet distinct category within the international human rights framework. The right to participate in cultural life and enjoy the arts is enshrined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966). Several more specific international and regional agreements have spelled out the various dimensions of cultural rights, most of them inspired and driven by UNESCO. UNESCO's normative framework for cultural rights has evolved through several key instruments, each addressing specific aspects of cultural rights protection and measurement, as documented in Box 3.

Amman, Amman Governorate, Jordan. © brokenadmiral_ / Pexels.com

# Box 3. Evolution of cultural rights in international frameworks

1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – the first international acknowledgment of cultural rights as part of human rights. Article 22 states that 'economic, social and cultural rights [are] indispensable for [human] dignity', and article 27 refers to the right to 'freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. It also asserts the right of an author 'to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production [they have made]'.

1954 – The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two protocols (1954 and 1999). These three international treaties are crucial for preventing conflicts, aiding recovery and preserving movable and immovable cultural property of all humanity in times of peace, during and after armed conflict.

1966 – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), whose Article 15 explicitly refers to cultural rights, including the right to participate in cultural life, enjoy scientific progress and benefit from intellectual property protections. The covenant emphasizes state obligations to preserve, promote and make cultural life accessible to all.

1966 – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – complements the ICESCR through its provisions that address the protection of minority groups.

1970 – UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Focuses on protecting cultural heritage as illicit trafficking of cultural property deprives peoples of their memory, history and full enjoyment of cultural rights.

1972 – UNESCO World Heritage Convention, which protects cultural and natural properties of Outstanding Universal Value.

1979 – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which seeks to bring one half of humanity into the focus of human rights concerns and to reaffirm fundamental human rights, the dignity and worth of the human person, and the equal rights of men and women.

1980 – UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist, which seeks to improve the professional, social and economic status of artists through the implementation of policies and measures related to training, social security, employment, income and tax conditions, mobility and freedom of expression.

1982 – Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, which defines culture as the 'whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society.' It also links cultural rights to development and human identity.

2001 – UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which positions cultural diversity as a common heritage of humanity and underscores its role in fostering sustainable development.

2001 – Convention for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage, which aims to safeguard and preserve underwater cultural heritage and prevent its looting trough the promotion of international cooperation.

2003 – UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which highlights the importance of safeguarding living heritage such as traditional knowledge, oral traditions, performing arts and rituals by duly protecting the rights of the communities, groups and individuals that create, bear and transmit these traditions.

2005 – UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which seeks to ensure equitable access to cultural resources and ensure the protection of cultural expressions, particularly for marginalized groups.

2005 – Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, which recognizes cultural heritage as a human right and emphasizes participation in cultural heritage as essential to democracy, focusing specifically in Article 4 on the right to participate and benefit from it, and the responsibility of states to protect these rights.

2007 – UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which explicitly recognizes Indigenous Peoples' cultural rights, including the right to maintain, control, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, languages, and traditions.

2007 – Cultural Rights Fribourg Declaration, which seeks to define culture as covering those values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, traditions, institutions and ways of life through which a person or a group expresses their humanity and the meanings that they give to their existence and to their development. It also stresses civil society involvement, calling for a clarification of the position of cultural rights as indivisible from human rights, and the assertion that cultural rights should be universally respected.

2009 – General Comment No. 21, issued by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which provides a detailed interpretation of Article 15(1)(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This article recognizes the right of everyone to take part in cultural life.

2009 – Establishment of the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights by the Human Rights Council, with the mandate to advance cultural rights as an essential component of human rights.

2011 – UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, which promotes a holistic approach to managing historic urban areas and preserving cultural heritage.

2015 – UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society, which emphasizes the pivotal role of museums in society, not just as custodians of heritage but as dynamic spaces for learning, intercultural dialogue and peace, cultural exchange and social cohesion while being simultaneously cultural, scientific and educative institutions.

2015 – UN Sustainable Development Goals. Although culture is not a stand-alone goal, it is acknowledged in Target 11.4, which calls for protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, and Target 4.7, which refers to global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development. Similarly, initiatives that promote the rights of artists and creators to benefit equitably from their work can contribute to employment and economic growth and reduction of inequalities (SDG 8 and 10).

2019 – UNESCO's Culture|2030 Indicators are designed to measure and evaluate the contribution of culture to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This framework provides governments, policymakers and cultural institutions with tools to assess the impact of culture on economic, social and environmental sustainability.

2022 – MONDIACULT Declaration, which calls for a stand-alone cultural goal in the post-2030 development agenda and frames culture as a global public good that is central to fostering peace, inclusion, and sustainable development.

Building on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant, UNESCO's Culture Conventions have substantially advanced the understanding and implementation of cultural rights. With the designation of a UN Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights in 2009, the international community has further confirmed its firm commitment to advance cultural rights as an essential component of human rights. The role was specifically created to serve three purposes: (i) address issues of access to and participation in cultural life; (ii) advocate for the protection of cultural diversity, including the rights of marginalized communities and Indigenous Peoples; and, (iii) examine the impact of globalization, development and digital technologies on cultural rights. The mandate of the Special Rapporteur has been extended several times, most recently in 2024 through Resolution 55/5 of the Human Rights Council.

In her initial report submitted to the General United Nations Assembly in 2016, the first Special Rapporteur proposed a working definition of cultural rights with the purpose of clarifying their characteristics and scope (A/67/287, para. 7). Cultural rights are meant to protect: (i) human creativity in all its diversity and the conditions for it to be exercised, developed and made accessible; (ii) the free choice, expression and development of identities, which includes the right to choose not to be a part of particular collectives, as well as the right to exit a collective, and to take part on an equal basis in the process of defining it; (iii) the rights of individuals and groups to participate, or not to participate, in the cultural life of their choice and to conduct their own cultural practices; (iv) the right to interact and exchange, regardless of group affiliation and of frontiers; (v) the rights to enjoy and have access to the arts, to knowledge, including scientific knowledge, and to an individual's own cultural heritage, as well as that of others; and, (vi) the right to participate in the interpretation, elaboration and development of cultural heritage and in the reformulation of cultural identities (United Nations. Human Rights Council 2016, para. 9; United Nations. Human Rights Council 2019, para. 15).

As emphasized by the Special Rapporteur, culture is much more than the sum of artistic and cultural products; it is a process and way of life that permeates all spheres of human experience (United Nations. Human Rights Council 2022, para. 9). Culture embodies how people give meaning to their lives and how they understand their human, natural and manufactured environment, as both individuals and collectives. In this way, culture serves as a critical enabler and driver of progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, as cultural rights encompass both individual and collective entitlements that are indispensable for human dignity and social development (United Nations General Assembly and Economic and Social Council 2023, para. 56).

This chapter is structured around three interconnected dimensions that cultural rights operate across. The first one is about access and opportunity to experience cultural life and heritage, meaning the freedom of individuals to enjoy their own cultural heritage and that of other people and communities. The second is about participation in cultural activities, referring to the ability to actively engage in cultural practices, criticize traditions and choose one's cultural affiliations freely. The third dimension is about artistic contribution, embodying the right to create and influence cultural practices, norms and heritage as well as protection of the moral and material interests resulting from their creations.

Gender is a fundamental element at the heart of all three dimensions. As emphasized by the Special Rapporteur – gender, culture and rights intersect in intricate and complex ways, often resulting in women facing multiple forms of discrimination (United Nations General Assembly, 2012, para. 3). The reality of individual identities being 'multiple and complex' makes women particularly vulnerable to overlapping forms of exclusion (Op. Cit., para. 11), especially as they navigate between their cultural communities and broader societal participation. This frequently involves facing disproportionate opposition when claiming their rights to participate in or opt out of specific cultural practices (Op. Cit., para. 22). Furthermore, as RESILIART emphasizes, we must protect cultural rights for all regardless of their gender identity, inclusive of LGBITQ+ communities (UNESCO, 2022c).

Within this context, cultural rights are recognized as empowering, providing individuals with control throughout their lives and facilitating the enjoyment of other rights (Op. Cit., para. 38; UNGA, 2012). This transformative aspect is particularly important for women, enabling them to challenge and overturn presumed gender roles that often restrict their activities and opportunities (Op. Cit., para. 39).

In 2016, the Special Rapporteur's report on the intentional destruction of cultural heritage in conflict and non-conflict situations, by state and non-state actors (A/71/317), examined its impact on a broad range of human rights, including the right to take part in cultural life. The report highlighted the need to consider heritage as a whole – beyond the separation between physical and living heritage (tangible and intangible) – underscoring that attacks on one form of heritage are often accompanied by assaults on the other, recognizing heritage as a living resource with deep meaning for people explains why its destruction causes profound harm beyond physical damage. The report further emphasized the continuity and interconnections between the 1954 Hague Convention and its protocols and human rights instruments applying to the field of heritage, as well as areas of work between the bodies of international law that would benefit from more synergies. It paved the way to the adoption of a series of Human Rights Council resolutions on cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage (33/20, 37/17 and 49/7).

Against this background, the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, established by the 1999 Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention, decided to establish regular dialogue with the Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights with the objective to advance the observance of cultural rights in times of peace and in the event of armed conflict, using a human rights-based approach (UNESCO Decision 17.COM 6, 2022). The UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT, 2022) marked a watershed moment, with 150 States unanimously calling for the recognition of culture as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 development agenda. The trigger for this milestone was the recognition that cultural rights protection requires systematic policy development, implementation and monitoring as societies navigate rapid technological change, are caught in a succession of global crises, and seek to address persistent inequalities in cultural participation and expression.

> *Further reaffirming the imperative of protecting and promoting human rights and cultural diversity, in view of the increasing threats to culture and its use for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the context of armed conflicts, which result in the intentional or collateral destruction of cultural heritage, the acceleration of illicit trafficking of cultural property, the violation of human and cultural rights, including through discrimination, the disruption of living cultural practices and exacerbated vulnerability of cultural actors, institutions, sites and markets...*
>
> MONDIACULT, 2022. Point 5 – Preamble
>
> *We commit, to this effect, to foster an enabling environment conducive to the respect and exercise of all human rights, in particular cultural rights – individual and collective – in all areas of culture, from cultural heritage to cultural and creative sectors [sic], including in the digital environment, in order to build a more just and equitable world, and reduce inequalities, including for women, youth, children, Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable groups...*
>
> MONDIACULT, 2022. Point 10 – Call to Action

UNESCO's normative instruments have allowed the international community to establish improved reporting mechanisms reflecting progress in cultural rights implementation, leading to the current set of indicators that assess (i) access and participation in cultural life, including a key focus on equitable access and participation, protection and access to cultural heritage, and cultural and linguistic diversity; (ii) artistic freedom and artist status and mobility; and, (iii) cultural governance and policy-making.

However, persistent monitoring challenges confirm the need for a dedicated cultural goal and efforts to develop a comprehensive system of quantitative and qualitative indicators that are agreed upon and regularly produced based on a clear political commitment to generate the needed information. Reporting by Member States reveals insufficient data for evidence-based policy-making, limited capacity to assess policy impact and inadequate collaboration between governments and civil society. These gaps have adverse consequences for cultural rights protection: they obscure disparities in cultural participation, mask barriers to artistic expression and impede the development of effective, inclusive cultural

policies. Without specific, measurable and verifiable targets for the protection and promotion of cultural rights in the global development framework, these challenges are likely to persist. Moreover, highlighting the importance of cultural rights is consistent with a broad understanding of the human condition, where the symbolic milieu is a central component.

This approach aligns closely with the Pact of the Future (United Nations, 2024), the global agreement adopted at the United Nations Summit of the Future in September 2024. With the aim of reinvigorating multilateral cooperation, addressing global challenges and promoting a sustainable and peaceful future, the Pact represents a renewed commitment by the international community to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. Significantly, it affirms the importance of cultural rights, recognizing culture's fundamental role in fostering social cohesion, and individual and community identity. The Pact outlines a set of comprehensive commitments: integrating culture into economic, social and environmental development policies; strengthening international cooperation for the return of cultural property to countries of origin; and, ensuring adequate public investment in cultural protection and promotion. These commitments emphasize culture's role as an integral component of sustainable development and recognize its dynamic nature in contemporary society.

In this context, a stand-alone cultural goal could provide the necessary framework for strengthening the generation of robust data, developing standardized indicators and implementing more effective cultural policies, even if there is a tension between data availability and the formulation of attainable goals. The analysis hereby presented is focused on examining equitable participation in cultural life, protection of artistic freedom and inclusive cultural governance. It demonstrates both the feasibility and necessity of systematic monitoring of cultural rights. These dimensions form essential components of cultural rights, as recognized in international human rights frameworks (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022, para. 32). This evidence-based approach, aligned with the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration's recognition of culture as a global public good, highlights how specific cultural targets could enhance both rights protection and sustainable development outcomes in the post-2030 agenda.

Access to and participation in cultural life constitute fundamental dimensions of cultural rights, each related to distinct but complementary attributes: access refers to guaranteeing the availability and accessibility of cultural goods, services and experiences without discrimination, while participation enables active engagement in cultural practices, decision-making and development.

Within the framework of monitoring and reporting mechanisms set around the UNESCO Culture Conventions and Recommendations, Member States report five primary areas of advancement in cultural rights: national policies and normative frameworks, improved access to culture, recognition of cultural diversity, safeguarding artists' rights and addressing restitution of cultural property (UNESCO, 2024). These reports indicate progress in establishing supportive policy frameworks, with 95% of reporting Member States declaring that they have measures in place to facilitate access to diverse cultural facilities and expressions (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

The analysis reveals both progress in implementation frameworks and persistent disparities in cultural participation across regions and demographics. Recent data reflects this development, including greater inclusion of gender, sexual and identity diversities in cultural policies, as well as enhanced efforts to prevent the illegal trade of cultural properties (UNESCO, 2024). States have reaffirmed their commitment to this progress through the Pact for the Future (United Nations, 2024), which ensures that cultural policies and strategies contribute to more effective, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development by integrating them into economic, social and environmental frameworks.

Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to comprehensively implement and protect cultural rights for all citizens, particularly when it comes to ensuring equitable access and participation across different socioeconomic contexts.

## The evolving landscape of cultural participation after COVID-19

Global patterns in the recovery of cultural participation since COVID-19 are complex. Comparative analysis of participation trends between 2015 and 2022 reveals major changes across cultural activities, with varying impacts by gender (Eurostat, 2022).[8] At the same time, Member States report that digital platforms and virtual formats have become crucial tools for expanding accessibility, with many adopting innovative approaches that combine physical and remote access (UNESCO, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these recovery measures varies significantly across regions and socioeconomic contexts.

For cultural events that are formally organized in specific venues (like theatres or arenas), participation is strongly correlated with broader socioeconomic factors, particularly educational attainment (Eurostat, 2022), which are consequently linked to differences in opportunities. These patterns echo broader structural inequalities that particularly affect marginalized communities' ability to maintain and develop their cultural life (United Nations General Assembly, 2023, para. 71).

The expansion of digital access initiatives shows promise in several ways, including the promotion of dialogue among different national and international groups. Many Member States are also developing national digital strategies and establishing platforms for cultural initiatives (UNESCO, 2024). However, there are significant challenges related to the persistent digital divide, particularly affecting rural and low-income communities (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022, para. 44). The digital divide is deeply connected to issues regarding the existence of a proper infrastructure of digital communications. This, in turn, is dependent on national policies and how those policies address market dynamics. Even with such an infrastructure is in place, however, other issues remain like access to digital devices, linguistic barriers and unequal patterns of digital service consumption.

It is also important to note that digital technologies do not operate in a vacuum – they are embedded within the broader social, political and economic frameworks within which they are mobilized by different agents. The so-called digital 'social networks' and mobile applications in particular can have a strong impact on mental health – particularly among younger generations – (Haidt, 2024, Turkle, 2011), reading and thinking practices (Wolf, 2016, 2018; Carr, 2011), and the overall organization of human experiences (Zuboff, 2020). At the same time, increased online exposure can pose risks through the circulation of harmful content that undermines cultural values, fuels discrimination and enables gender-based violence and harassment against women and minorities.

Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia

## Heritage access and participation

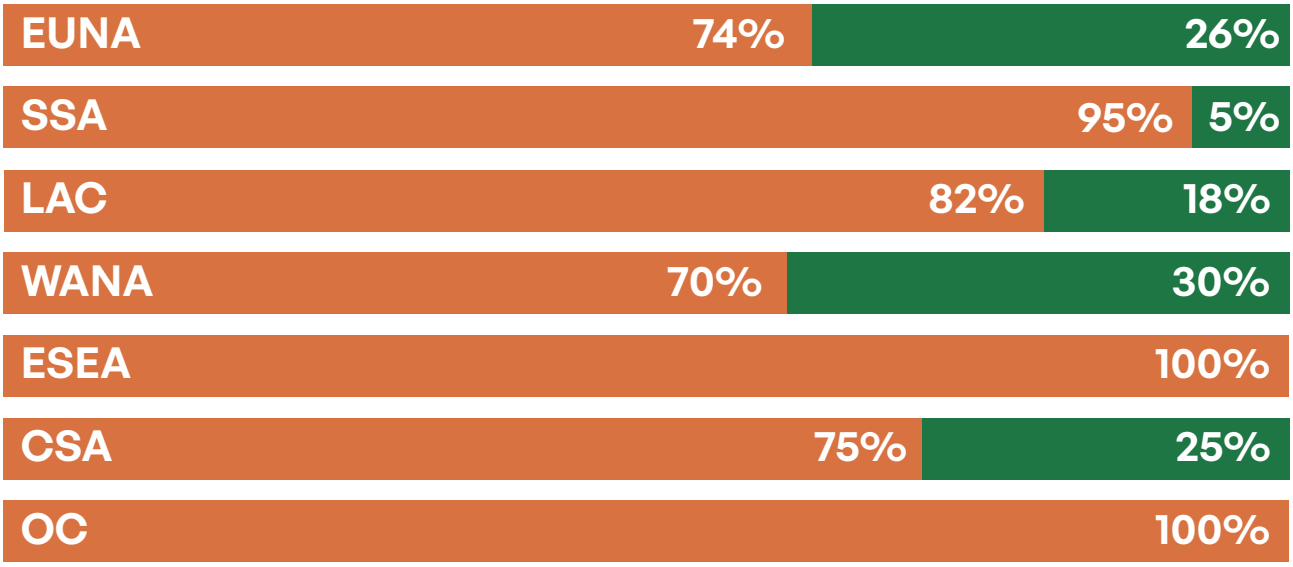
A fundamental aspect of cultural rights is access to and participation in heritage, including tangible, intangible and natural. This highlights the importance of enabling individuals and communities to engage with their own and wider cultural heritage, both as a form of identity and as a means of fostering cultural diversity. Importantly, as the Special Rapporteur has emphasized, cultural heritage extends beyond monuments, collections, museums and cultural institutions to include traditions and living expressions inherited from ancestors and passed on to descendants (United Nations Human Rights Council 2011, para. 5). In this context, Member States report important progress in establishing safeguarding frameworks for cultural heritage through comprehensive legal protections and the development of specialized institutions (UNESCO, 2024). This progress is particularly evident in the integration of heritage considerations into broader policy frameworks, with multiple ministries – from education to environment – increasingly incorporating heritage protection into their mandates (UNESCO, 2024).

[8] *Data currently available disaggregates gender only by women and men.*

- Tangible and Natural Heritage

Different regions take varying approaches to protecting communities' customary rights to land, sea and forest ecosystems. Data reported by Member States shows that 95% of Sub-Saharan African countries have implemented protective policies for these rights, compared with 74% in Europe and North America (2003 Convention Periodic Reports).

**Figure 1. Member States reporting policies and/ or legal and administrative measures that recognise the importance of protecting the customary rights of communities and groups to land, sea and forest ecosystems necessary for the practice and transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage, by regional group.**




(Global total n=135, Europe and North American States n=39, Sub Saharan Africa States n=38, Latin American and Caribbean States n=28, West Asian and North African States n=20, Eastern and South-eastern Asian States n=5, Central and Southern Asian States n=4, Oceanian States n=1).

Source: UNESCO, 2003 Convention Periodic Reports

This high adoption rate suggests growing awareness of environmental factors in cultural rights protection. Member States report increasing efforts to integrate culture into climate policies, particularly in protecting cultural heritage from climate-related threats. To do this, they are preserving some aspects of cultural goods by implementing specialized units for emergency response, digital documentation and archives of cultural assets, in case of loss of the original (UNESCO, 2024). As in other cases, one part of the problem is enacting policies and normative frameworks, while another is actually implementing it effectively, which also requires a systematic data generation effort.

Urban heritage conservation is implemented very differently across economic contexts. Recent initiatives demonstrate progress in establishing cross-sector coordination, particularly in integrating heritage conservation with tourism planning, environmental protection and urban development (UNESCO, 2024). However, challenges persist in fully incorporating cultural considerations into climate action plans and ensuring necessary resources for adaptation and mitigation (UNESCO, 2024). Notable examples of integration include the 'Barcelona, Heritage City' initiative,[9] which updates the traditional concept of heritage by incorporating a vision. To this end, it accounts for both neighbourhood identity-linked heritage and climate change action, establishing a specialist team for landscape and heritage to oversee these efforts.

Secondly, Edinburgh, through its Climate Emergency Strategy[10], funds targeted energy efficiency and climate change adaptation work in its World Heritage Site. This aims to demonstrate how 'regular maintenance, high quality conservation

[9] *https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/tema/urban-planning-and-infrastructures/protecting-the-citys-historical-environmental-and-popular-heritage_1165934.html*

[10] *https://ewh.org.uk/our-impact/climate-emergency/*

and sensitive energy efficiency measures' can place historic environments at the heart of climate action. Finally, Rotterdam's integrated climate change adaptation strategy[11] provides a third model, which focuses on adapting urban spaces to combine three critical functions: 'sponge' (water squares and green spaces), protection (dykes and coastal barriers) and damage control (evacuation routes and water-resistant buildings).

Policies promoting diverse heritage are implemented very differently, by context. These frameworks range from legal protections for multicultural heritage sites to programmes ensuring representation of minority communities in heritage interpretation. Regarding inclusive heritage narratives, Member States report successful initiatives that acknowledge multiple historical perspectives, cultural contributions and the role of women to protect heritage (UNESCO, 2024). For example, collaborative museum programmes have emerged that actively involve diverse communities to curate and interpret exhibitions. However, challenges persist in ensuring equitable representation, particularly for underrepresented communities. Resource limitations often affect the capacity to document and preserve diverse heritage expressions, while power imbalances can influence which narratives receive prominence in heritage interpretation. Despite these challenges, diverse heritage serves as a crucial resource for fostering intercultural understanding and appreciation, contributing to social cohesion through shared recognition of multiple cultural traditions and historical experiences.

- **Intangible Heritage and Living Traditions**

The Indigenous Navigator Index reveals disparities in the levels of legal recognition and practical implementation of intangible heritage. National and community-level data collection has produced a rich and wide-ranging dataset. For instance, while the majority of reporting countries (18 out of 24) show higher levels of recognition of Indigenous Peoples' right to establish their own media, development of national poverty reduction strategies remains extremely limited – 17 out of 24 reporting countries indicated lower levels to no participation at all. These two examples show the profound diversity of situations even in places where participation in the Indigenous Navigator Index is present.

In the context of globalization and deep power asymmetries, intercultural exchange often leads to promoting the dominant cultures, while undermining local, Indigenous, or minority cultures (García Canclini, 1989; Toti, 2024). This process can accelerate the erosion of traditional practices, languages and ways of life. As such, throughout the world, dominant cultures tend to adopt, commercialize, or misrepresent elements of minority cultures without permission or understanding, stripping them of their original context and meaning. Avoiding over-commercialization or decontextualization, misappropriation and misrepresentation of living heritage involves raising awareness about community stewardship and responsibilities in safeguarding it. It also requires increasing understanding and associated responsible action on cultural rights, intellectual property and ethical practices. Ensuring that cultural practices and knowledge are represented accurately and respectfully and that the relevant communities benefit equitably from products and services relating to their own cultural heritage may require additional support for those communities and practitioners, careful regulation by government and ethical engagement by third parties (UNESCO, 2023a).

Parco Sommerso di Baia, Italy. Especially designated as an Example of Best Practice for its efforts to enable public access while preserving the Roman remains.

Cross-ministerial policymaking for heritage protection is becoming increasingly sophisticated. Member States report active collaboration between cultural heritage authorities and other government departments: environmental ministries play a crucial role in integrating heritage conservation with climate resilience planning; education departments incorporate heritage awareness into national curricula; and, tourism ministries have developed frameworks balancing site accessibility with preservation needs, though challenges persist in managing visitor impacts.

Successful examples include integrated management systems where urban planning departments incorporate heritage, historical and archaeological considerations into development regulations, and transportation ministries adjust infrastructure projects to protect cultural landscapes. On the other hand, commercializing heritage sites often creates tensions between economic objectives and conservation imperatives in spite of generating necessary

[11] *https://www.c40.org/case-studies/c40-good-practice-guides-rotterdam-climate-change-adaptation-strategy/*

resources for preservation and restoration. It also raises debates on the degree of intervention desirable in restoration efforts and how to distinguish the presumable original from the restored elements.

In summary, while whole-of-government approaches show promise in heritage protection in all its forms, with high rates of cross-ministerial collaboration, significant challenges remain in reconciling conservation with increasing tourism pressure and commercial interests. At the same time, it is important to stress the role of local communities in safeguarding living heritage. Success depends on robust coordination mechanisms and clear prioritization of living heritage objectives across all government sectors.

Gender-responsive approaches to heritage management show varying levels of progress. Data indicates that 82% of Member States who submitted reports declare having positive policies supporting women's participation in cultural activities (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). Recent progress further includes the integration of gender, sexual and identity diversities into cultural policies (UNESCO, 2024). However, the Special Rapporteur notes that gaps in implementation persist between policy frameworks and practical outcomes, particularly affecting marginalized communities (United Nations General Assembly 2023, para. 71). National reports show that addressing these gaps requires improved coordination among stakeholders and enhanced institutional capacity (UNESCO, 2024).

Ownership, stewardship or custodianship, equitable benefit, return and restitution is a frequent area of debate in the effective protection and management of cultural heritage. These issues reflect fundamental principles of cultural rights and justice, particularly in addressing historical inequities in cultural property distribution and management. For successful heritage protection, Member States have emphasized this requires not only robust frameworks for addressing restitution claims, but also enhanced legal regulatory frameworks and implementation plans that ensure ethical stewardship of cultural assets (UNESCO, 2024). This includes developing comprehensive strategies that combine emergency preparedness, capacity building and measures or tools against illicit trafficking of cultural property (UNESCO, 2024).

Tangible heritage access programmes have been led by cities, who are emerging as key innovators. Urban heritage initiatives increasingly combine physical access improvements with digital interpretation tools, as demonstrated in recent research (Liu, 2020). However, implementation varies significantly by region and resource availability. Public-private partnerships have proven effective in expanding access, with private sector funding supporting technological innovations in heritage interpretation and virtual access platforms.

Natural heritage access programmes demonstrate strong civil society involvement, with community-led conservation initiatives playing crucial roles in site management and interpretation. However, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access for marginalized communities, particularly in remote areas. Youth engagement programmes show promise, with 95% of reporting Member States indicating they implement heritage education programmes designed to improve young people's understanding of heritage, to promote diversity and to foster intercultural dialogue, either through formal programmes or on an ad-hoc basis (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). To help with this, the UNESCO Toolbox for Youth Policy and Programming emphasizes youth as active change-makers, offering a participatory framework for policy design. With 50% of the global population aged 30 or younger, the report calls for inclusive, cross-sectoral approaches, and underlines that 69% of people agree that youth should have a stronger voice in policymaking (UNESCO, 2023b).

International cooperation has become increasingly vital in advancing heritage access and participation globally. Bilateral and multilateral programmes have proven especially valuable for the Global South, enabling knowledge transfer in areas such as site management, conservation techniques and digital documentation. Also, the implementation of UNESCO Conventions provides a robust framework for collaborative heritage protection, and SDG 11.4's emphasis on protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage has led to increased international support.

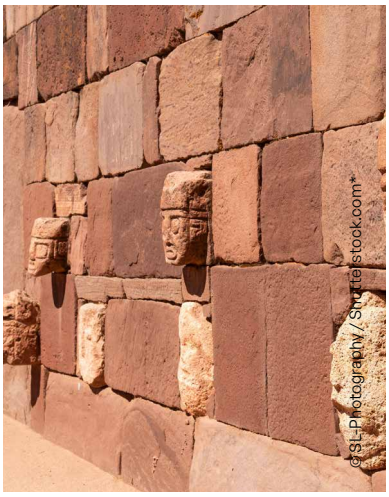
Funding remains a significant challenge and resource disparities continue to affect implementation capacity. While international support mechanisms exist, they often struggle to fulfil the scale required, particularly for large-scale conservation projects and digital infrastructure development. Globally, Member States emphasize

International Festival of Masquerade Games "Surva", Pernik, Bulgaria. © Chavdar Lungov / Pexels.com

that sustainable heritage protection requires more consistent and substantial international funding streams, alongside enhanced capacity-building support (UNESCO, 2024).

The evolving landscape of heritage access and participation intersects with several critical emerging areas that warrant further examination. Firstly, digital environments are transforming heritage engagement by creating new opportunities for accessibility and archiving. As digital technologies increasingly utilize cultural heritage data, they reshape how people interact with and experience historical assets, from virtual museum tours to augmented reality historical reconstructions. While these technologies expand access, it is important to recognize that digitally archiving heritage elements differs fundamentally from preserving their physical integrity – this distinction becomes especially crucial as heritage sites face growing environmental threats. Secondly, climate change poses significant risks to tangible heritage through extreme weather events, rising sea levels and shifting temperature patterns. These will necessitate innovative adaptation strategies and emergency preparedness measures.

Beyond environmental concerns, heritage also plays complex roles in social contexts. It can serve as a powerful tool for peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation when it functions as a mediating point between different value systems, demonstrating its broader significance in strengthening social cohesion and mutual understanding. However, it should also be noted that some heritage elements become focal points for competing interpretations, as objects or sites may embody different meanings representing divergent historical trajectories and cultural values. These themes will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters, examining their specific implications for cultural rights and heritage management.




Carved stone head sculptures in the semi-underground courtyard temple at Tiwanaku, La Paz, Bolivia.

## Return and restitution

The return and restitution of cultural property represents a critical dimension of cultural rights, addressing historical injustices rooted in colonialism and affirmation of collective identity. This Cultural property and objects are significant not merely as artefacts but as 'elements of individual and collective identity' that connect communities to their past, present and future.[12] As such, the forcible appropriation of cultural objects during colonial periods constituted part of a systematic pattern of domination that continues to shape power imbalances in heritage access today. To remedy this, the principle of cultural self-determination provides a crucial framework for understanding restitution as a human rights issue. It supports claims for restoring peoples' fundamental access to their cultural heritage as 'an act of historical justice' that helps address the inequities created during colonization.[13] The United Nations therefore has recognized this connection through various resolutions, establishing special obligations for countries that acquired valuable cultural objects through colonial occupation.

Recent successful restitution cases demonstrate the tangible progress in addressing historical injustices, while creating opportunities for renewed cultural relationships. Notable examples include the repatriation of 174 objects from the University of Manchester to the Anindilyakwa community in Australia's Northern Territory, and 26 pieces from the Royal Treasures of Abomey in France back to Benin.[14] Another landmark case is the resolution of the century-long Peru-Yale University dispute over Machu Picchu artefacts, which led to an agreement in 2010 for the return of more than 35,000 archaeological items excavated by Hiram Bingham between 1911 and 1916 (Chechi, Aufseesser, & Renold, 2011).[15] This agreement established the Cusco-Yale International Center for the Study of Machu Picchu and Inca Culture at University San Antonio Abad. This was founded as a collaborative framework for research, educational exchanges and public exhibitions that serves as a model for restitution

[12] *https://opiniojuris.org/2023/05/12/restitution-of-cultural-property-and-human-rights/*

[13] *https://www.qil-qdi.org/legal-aspects-concerning-the-restitution-of-cultural-property-removed-during-colonial-occupation/*

[14] *https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking/agreement-and-cooperation-return-and-restitution*

[15] *https://news.yale.edu/2015/06/04/peru-yale-partnership-future-machu-picchu-artifacts*

with continued scholarly engagement.[16] Similarly, the Benin Bronzes case has seen significant progress, with Germany signing a restitution agreement covering approximately 1,100 works, the Smithsonian Institution transferring ownership of 29 bronzes, and the UK's Horniman Museum agreeing to repatriate 72 bronzes.[17] These returned treasures will have a lasting home in Benin City's new Edo Museum of West African Art, where they will provide local citizens permanent access to their cultural heritage.[18]

International cooperation frameworks for cultural property return and restitution have been strengthened through numerous mechanisms and initiatives. UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPR-CP), established in 1978, serves as a permanent body pursuing the 'appropriate means of facilitating bilateral negotiations for the restitution or return of cultural property to the countries of origin' through mediation, conciliation and technical assistance.[19] Furthermore, a legal framework for resolving disputes without interfering with other procedural measures is provided by the Committee's Rules of Procedure for Mediation and Conciliation, developed according to principles of fairness, impartiality and good faith. Regional initiatives have also expanded in recent years, with UNESCO hosting open dialogues and debates presenting 'new forms of agreements and partnerships regarding requests for return and restitution' across different regions.[20] Likewise, the 2022 Africa Regional Consultation on Cultural Policies featured 'a strong and unanimous pledge to ensure the restitution of cultural property as a cornerstone of cultural identity' and commitment to unified positioning on the international scene.[21]

UNESCO has further expanded its support for return and restitution through technical assistance, capacity-building activities for professionals, museum development and public awareness campaigns, notably through its Global Priority Africa 'Fostering cultural heritage and capacity development' initiative.[22] It is noteworthy that the Pact for the Future includes a specific commitment to facilitating the return of cultural properties of spiritual, ancestral, historical and cultural value to countries of origin (United Nations, 2024). These are the reflection of UNESCO's advocacy work in the field of culture, where the Organization has been present in a series of multilateral discussions, contributing as a privileged partner and building on the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration. This set of instruments express a growing international consensus on the importance of cultural property restitution as both a matter of historical justice and a foundation for future cooperation.

Regarding judicial incompatibilities that hinder restitution efforts, 25% of states report their existence, out of the 77 states who submitted a national report on implementation of the 1970 Convention (1970 Convention Periodic Reports). This proportion reaches 29% for the 28 European and North American countries reporting. However, it is important to note that these figures may not fully reflect the true scale of the challenges. The relatively low number of countries reporting such issues may also stem from the fact that only a limited number of states hold significant collections originating from other countries, and thus not reporting on related challenges. This thereby concentrates the practical implications of restitution within a smaller subset of reporting states.

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[16] *https://news.yale.edu/2015/06/04/peru-yale-partnership-future-machu-picchu-artifacts*

[17] *https://www.withersworldwide.com/en-gb/insight/read/are-alternative-dispute-resolution-mechanisms-the-way-to-resolve-cultural-property-disputes*

[18] *https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/nigeria-stolen-benin-bronzes-london-museum*

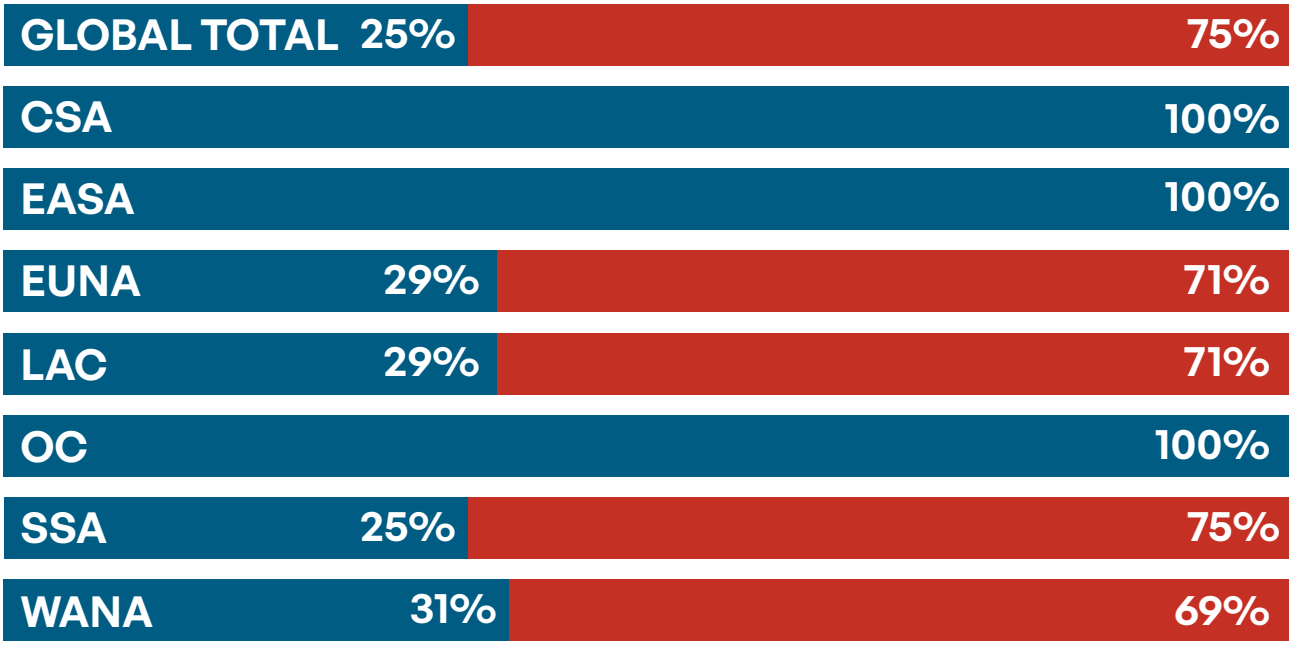
[19] *https://www.unesco.org/en/fight-illicit-trafficking/return-and-restitution*

[20] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-forms-agreements-and-cooperation-field-return-and-restitution-cultural-property*

[21] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-mondiacult-2022-africa-raises-its-voice-more-robust-and-resilient-cultural-and-creative*

[22] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-promotes-open-and-inclusive-dialogue-return-and-restitution-cultural-property*

**Figure 2. Member States reporting difficulties in returning / restituting cultural property to its place of origin due to incompatibilities with national judicial decisions, by regional group.**




(Global total n=77, Europe and North American States n=28, Sub Saharan Africa States n=8, Latin American and Caribbean States n=17, West Asian and North African States n=13, Eastern and South-eastern Asian States n=5, Central and Southern Asian States n=5, Oceanian States n=1).

Source: UNESCO, 1970 Convention Periodic Reports.

On a national level, reports do not necessarily address how cultural property originating from local or Indigenous communities are treated within national collections. While there is increasing attention to enhancing legal and regulatory frameworks to protect cultural heritage, including specific measures against illicit trafficking of cultural properties (UNESCO, 2024), monitoring capacity remains limited in many regions, affecting the ability to track and prevent illicit trafficking. In terms of infrastructure, Member States highlight the need for specialized training and capacity building in heritage sites and museums' emergency preparedness to enhance the protection of cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2024).

The Special Rapporteur has also stated that effective restitution processes require meaningful engagement with source communities, not just legal frameworks (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023, para. 55). This engagement becomes particularly crucial in cases involving Indigenous Peoples and traditional cultural expressions, where cultural context and community rights play essential roles in the restitution process.

State success in restitution efforts often depends on coordinated action across multiple government departments. Local cultural institutions play a vital role in implementing national restitution policies, with municipal museums increasingly engaging in direct dialogue with source communities and favouring engagement by Indigenous Peoples and communities, who are usually involved in restitution campaigns. To this end, recent data indicate that seven out of ten Member States have established such multi-level coordination mechanisms (UNESCO, 2024).

Similarly, implementation frameworks for return and restitution increasingly recognize the importance of inclusive consultation processes. The effectiveness of these processes depends partly on ensuring diverse representation, including women's participation in decision-making regarding cultural property management and return. Accordingly, National reports have highlighted that successful implementation requires enhanced dialogue mechanisms and collaborative approaches in addressing historical acquisitions (UNESCO, 2024).

While Member States demonstrate significant progress in developing legal and institutional frameworks for cultural property return and restitution, with most of them establishing multi-level coordination mechanisms, implementation effectiveness remains constrained by several factors. These include judicial

incompatibilities and limited monitoring capacity, as well as challenges highlighted during the Africa Dialogue on the return and restitution of cultural property in January 2025[23] – namely, the lack of data and transparency regarding where artefacts might be kept and insufficient funding to conduct provenance research activities. These issues collectively highlight the need for enhanced international cooperation and specialized training programmes to bridge the gap between policy frameworks and practical outcomes.

## Protecting and promoting the diversity of contemporary cultural expressions

While heritage protection and restitution address historical dimensions of cultural rights, safeguarding and promoting contemporary cultural expressions reflects the dynamic and evolving ways in which communities create, share, and participate in culture today. These expressions represent both continuity with traditional forms and innovation in cultural practice, demonstrating how cultural rights encompass both preservation and creative development.

Contemporary cultural expressions often deliberately challenge or break with established traditions, rules and conventions – representing not just continuity with heritage but also intentional ruptures that expand the boundaries of cultural practice. This tension between tradition and innovation highlights the importance of protecting freedom of expression as a fundamental cultural right. The Pact for the Future (United Nations, 2024) recognizes this dynamism, emphasizing culture's role as a catalyst for sustainable development and social transformation. However, it should be noted that cultural expressions – both derived from heritage and contemporary creation – can also be exclusionary and run counter to other people's cultural rights (e.g. for LGBTIQ+ communities).

The Special Rapporteur notes that meaningful participation in contemporary cultural life demands frameworks that actively support diverse forms of cultural expression (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022). This is particularly crucial in addressing the intersecting challenges faced by marginalized communities in accessing and participating in cultural activities (United Nations General Assembly, 2023, para. 71). As part of these supportive frameworks, Member States underscore the importance of protecting the rights of cultural workers, including decent working conditions, fair pay and the elimination of the gender pay gap (UNESCO, 2024).

These frameworks have achieved varying degrees of success in practice, with data on infrastructure and accessibility showing both progress and persistent challenges in cultural access. 96% of Member States report policies and measures facilitating participation in cultural life and access to diverse cultural facilities and expressions, however, this data does not explicitly account for specific areas of accessibility (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). Significant disparities exist not only between urban and rural areas but also in how different communities conceptualize meaningful cultural access. Indigenous and traditional communities may have robust access to their own cultural practices and expressions while simultaneously facing barriers – whether physical, economic, or social – to accessing institutionalized cultural spaces. This situation highlights the importance of distinguishing between policies that focus on institutional access versus those that support diverse forms of cultural engagement that communities themselves define as valuable.

Targeted programmes facilitating participation in cultural activities show varying effectiveness across demographic groups. These activities are youth engagement initiatives, cultural minority access programmes, programmes for persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples' access initiatives, and refugee/migrant access programmes (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). Public funding schemes supporting cultural diversity show varying levels of implementation. Despite the limitation on available data,[24] targeted support measures reveal imbalanced distribution

[23] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-types-cooperation-and-agreements-field-return-and-restitution-cultural-property-africa*

[24] *The sample size for this dataset is considerably low, accounting for 41 countries globally.*

Lima, Callao, Perú. © Carla Vanessa Gonzales Larrea / Pexels.com

across different demographic groups: 19% of measures target youth engagement, 15% cultural minorities and 14% artists with disabilities, whilst Indigenous Peoples (8%) and refugees/migrants (10%) receive notably less support (Op. cit.). Barriers to access may be governed by issues such as social convention, to practical affordability and countries must decide on appropriate policies.

Member States report increasing success in developing digital platforms that expand access to cultural content, though the digital divide continues to affect rural and low-income communities disproportionately (UNESCO, 2024). Despite progress, significant challenges persist in relation to (i) resource disparities that affect programme sustainability, particularly in rural areas; (ii) the digital divide continues to limit access to online cultural content; (iii) demographic disparities in participation rates reflect broader social inequalities and other cultural barriers to access; and (iv) limited coordination between cultural and other policy domains affects programme effectiveness.

It is equally critical to address the right to cultural content that authentically reflects the diversity of societies. Digital platforms are not neutral intermediaries – they play a powerful role in shaping cultural narratives, amplifying certain voices while marginalizing others. Beyond mere access, there is a pressing need for policies that ensure diverse storytelling – representing different cultures, genders, identities and perspectives – is both produced and made visible on these platforms. Digital platforms must therefore be approached not only as tools for access but also as cultural ecosystems that require governance, accountability and investment in diverse cultural creation and distribution. Ensuring equitable visibility of diverse narratives and languages aligns with the fundamental cultural rights of communities to participate in and contribute to the digital cultural landscape.

As will be developed below, gender-responsive approaches to supporting contemporary cultural expressions are another key concern regarding the work of artists and the development of cultural and creative industries.

Engagement with contemporary cultural expressions serves multiple societal functions. While many forms foster social cohesion through shared experiences, others deliberately challenge and disrupt societal conventions, questioning established norms and power structures. This dual nature – building connection whilst also enabling critical examination – reflects the complex role of cultural participation, whether as creators or audiences. When people create cultural expressions, they contribute to cultural diversity and innovation. When they experience others' cultural expressions as audiences, they gain exposure to different perspectives. Both modes of participation can strengthen understanding across diverse communities while respecting cultural differences, though not without productive tensions and disagreements that are themselves essential to cultural development.

Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea

## Voices of culture: language as a right

Language, a central component of culture, works as both a medium for cultural expression and a key to cultural heritage. As emphasized by the Special Rapporteur, substantive equality requires states to protect diverse linguistic frameworks, particularly for minority and Indigenous communities (United Nations Human Rights Council 2023, para. 32). This protection intersects significantly with broader cultural expression mechanisms, as linguistic rights are fundamental to cultural participation and identity formation (United Nations General Assembly, 2012, para. 7). Language is also a key component in the formation of collective identities and has been at the centre of diverse social tensions and controversies that stress the crucial importance of promoting multilingualism and the mutual respect of different linguistic communities.

Recent data demonstrates varying levels of policy implementation across regions. There is a high adoption rate of mother tongue instruction and multilingual education policies, across different educational levels: 95% of European and North American states, 78% of Sub-Saharan African states and 61% of Latin American and Caribbean States who submitted reports have implemented such measures (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). Member States report significant progress in acknowledging cultural diversity through frameworks that protect minority and Indigenous languages, while promoting education about cultural diversity to build more inclusive and

respectful societies (UNESCO, 2024). However, implementation effectiveness varies considerably across different aspects of language rights protection. Developing better policies in both the culture and educational sectors requires clarity about the distinctions, on one side, between the formal register of any language (and why this is important) and its colloquial usage. It also requires understand of the differences between the spaces where languages are used (households, families, local communities, instruction, official purposes, global languages, etc.) and the need for linguae franca (national and international). It is important to assert the intrinsic value of linguistic diversity including the protection of endangered languages and local varieties of languages. Simultaneously, there is a disparity between having regulatory frameworks and having the professional capabilities and other resources needed to implement these policies. These implementation gaps present significant challenges, as policies often remain aspirational without the means to put them into practice.

Media programming reveals significant regional variations in linguistic diversity support. While 92% of European and North American States who submitted reports to the 2005 Convention reported policies supporting linguistic diversity in media, this rate drops to 83% in Sub-Saharan Africa and is only 45% in Latin America and the Caribbean, over a total of 112 respondents across all regions (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). These disparities highlight areas requiring targeted support to strengthen linguistic diversity in cultural expression. Nevertheless, recent policy developments show increased attention to integrating diverse perspectives into cultural institutions and legal frameworks, ensuring that linguistic and cultural diversity are recognized as fundamental cultural rights (UNESCO, 2024).

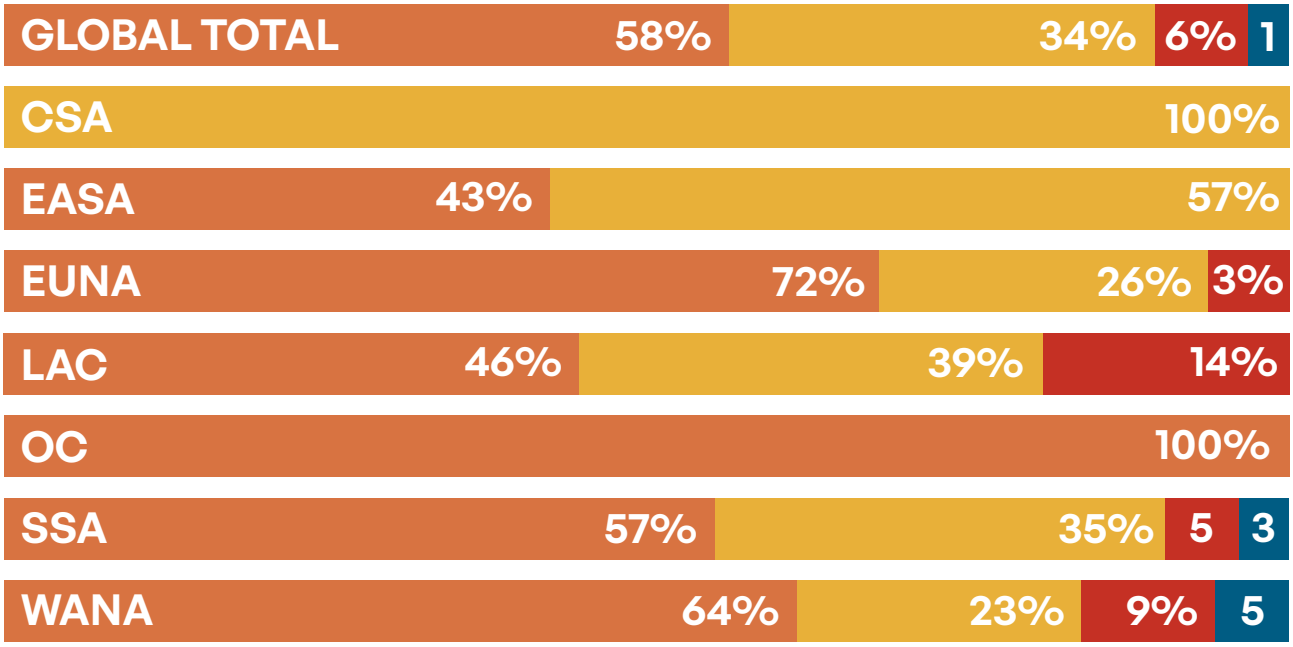
## Fostering social cohesion and intercultural dialogue

Building upon the previous discussion of contemporary cultural expressions, this section examines how social cohesion and intercultural dialogue serve as essential bridges between participation in and contribution to cultural life. While diverse cultural expressions may sometimes challenge social norms, they ultimately contribute to a dynamic environment where cultural rights play a vital role in enabling active involvement and shared experiences that strengthen social bonds. In line with this, data indicate that 92% of Member States who have submitted reports to the 2005 Convention have established dialogue mechanisms between public authorities and civil society for cultural policymaking (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Cultural participation programmes demonstrate success in building social cohesion through initiatives that create safe spaces for encounter and engagement. These include community-driven festivals that bring together people of different backgrounds, participatory arts projects that gather residents across social divides and support for grassroots initiatives that encourage national and local dialogue. The Pact for the Future (United Nations, 2024) underscores the importance of these approaches, recognizing that culture offers individuals and communities a strong sense of identity while fostering social cohesion.

Implementation effectiveness varies significantly across regions. Despite low sample sizes for certain regions, analysis of formal community participation in cultural policymaking reveals significantly disparate levels of national engagement across different regions, indicating substantial room for improvement even among the better-performing regions. These variations suggest there are diverse institutional capacities and implementation approaches. Similarly, NGO participation in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage shows strong regional variations (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). Member States also report success in programmes that engage diverse populations through participatory arts projects and support for grassroots cultural initiatives (UNESCO, 2024).

**Figure 3. Member States reporting on the level of participation of NGOs and other civil society actors in the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, in general or of specific elements, by regional group.**




(Global total n=139, Europe and North American States n=39, Latin American and Caribbean States n=28, Sub Saharan Africa States n=37, West Asian and North African States n=22, Oceanian States n=2, Eastern and South-eastern Asian States n=7, Central and Southern Asian States n=4).

Source: UNESCO, 2003 Convention Periodic Reports.
Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to label rounding.

Gender-responsive approaches to intercultural dialogue demonstrate varying levels of implementation. Regionally, implementation of policies supporting women as artists, culture professionals and/or creative entrepreneurs shows significant variation, with adoption rates ranging from 56% for Latin America and the Caribbean, to 93% for West Asian and North African States (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). National reports show notable progress in integrating gender, sexual and identity diversities into cultural policies (UNESCO, 2024). However, the Special Rapporteur emphasizes that persistent implementation gaps affect women and marginalized communities' ability to participate fully in cultural dialogue contexts (United Nations General Assembly 2023, para. 71).

Cross-governmental coordination plays a crucial role in strengthening intercultural dialogue initiatives. The effectiveness of these initiatives depends significantly on the quality of coordination between national policy frameworks and local implementation mechanisms. Member States report that successful implementation often relies on collaborative networks that facilitate knowledge exchange and strengthen collective efforts to promote social cohesion (UNESCO, 2024), though resource constraints continue to affect implementation in many contexts (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022, para. 44).

The role of cultural rights in this context operates along two interconnected dimensions: social cohesion – the strengthening of bonds within communities through shared cultural experiences; and intercultural dialogue – the exchange and mutual understanding between different cultural communities. Both dimensions extend beyond passive participation to encompass active contribution to cultural life. As we will explore in the following section, this manifests through co-creation of cultural programmes, participatory funding mechanisms and collaborative development of cultural initiatives that simultaneously strengthen social bonds within communities while facilitating meaningful dialogue across different cultural identities.

# Artists at the heart of cultural life

The right for culture and creative professionals to contribute to cultural life depends heavily on their working conditions. These artists' rights have many components that reflect the complexity and diversity of their work. These include the right to create, produce, shape, influence, transform, distribute art and discourse on art making, the right to innovate in cultural practices and modes of expression, the right to advocate for cultural policies and opportunities to occupy leadership positions in cultural organizations. Artists also play a fundamental role in cultural life by capturing, interpreting and expressing the values, traditions and social narratives of their societies. While the work of many artists may be essentially driven by personal emotions translated into purely aesthetic creation, they can also be custodians of traditional culture to help communities keep their unique identities, or they can contribute, as innovators, to the evolution or transformation of culture in a context of changing realities.

The original artists were, amongst others, troubadours, puppeteers, poets, musicians, dancers, writers, illuminators of manuscripts, painters, sculptors, stonemasons, goldsmiths, stained glass makers, miniaturists and tapestry embroiderers. Artistic occupations have changed and new roles have emerged over the past centuries including professionals in architecture, dance, cinema, radio, television and fashion. In today's digital world, new kinds of culture workers have become active in the cultural and creative industries, including web designers, sound and multimedia specialists, digital illustrators, 3D and VR specialists, generative AI artists, eco-artists and social media influencers. Indeed, digital advances have disrupted some cultural occupations and creative processes, leading to debates on the rights of creatives and intellectual property.

Today, most artists do not work in isolation. The creation and dissemination of culture involve the collaboration of numerous professionals across the entire value chain – from production to marketing and distribution. The work of artists is also connected to and facilitated by cultural operators, such as museum directors, curators, gallery owners, librarians and archivists.

Against this background, the following four dimensions linked to the work of artists and culture professionals are considered in this section, in line with UNESCO's normative instruments in the field of culture: (i) legal and regulatory recognition of the status of artists; (ii) socioeconomic rights; (iii) opportunities for professional development and mobility; and, (iv) protection of artistic freedom.

Cape Girardeau, United States

## Advancing the status and recognition of artists

> *If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.*
> John F. Kennedy

The 1980 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist defines an artist as 'any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers their artistic creation to be an essential part of their life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not they are bound by any relations of employment or association'.[25] While the terminology used to refer to artists varies globally – ranging from cultural worker to creative professional – the term culture professional more broadly encompasses individuals who support, manage, enable or promote cultural activities. These professionals may not be artists themselves, but they play vital roles in sustaining the cultural ecosystem. They include technicians, producers, curators, cultural journalists, designers, educators and critics. The number of culture professionals active in the various cultural sub-sectors has risen rapidly and is estimated to number 30 million across the planet. Their employment

[25] *https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382658*

status varies by country and may include categories such as registered professional, part-time professional or contract worker.

Many countries have established legal frameworks that formally recognize the status of artists and define them as professionals within the national labour force.[26] While some countries have adopted comprehensive legislation that explicitly addresses all measures concerning the status of the artist, others have opted for targeted legislation. These try to establish specific provisions for artists and culture professionals in key areas such as social protection, taxation, intellectual property rights and working conditions.

Between July 2022 and January 2023, UNESCO undertook the fifth global consultation on the implementation of the 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist, which provided a useful update on progress achieved in recent years (UNESCO, 2023c). A significant majority – 67% of the reporting Member States – reported having laws or regulations in place to define and protect the status of the artist. It is not possible to compare with historic data, as the 4th global consultation carried out in 2019 did not provide data on the proportion of Member States with legal or regulatory frameworks to support artists' status in place. Other sources, however, indicate steady progress across regions.

A number of countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe have undertaken significant legal reforms in recent years. In Côte d'Ivoire, a 2021 decree granted legal status to artists across all cultural domains. This reform aimed to structure and professionalize a sector that has long operated informally. Among its key measures were the establishment of a minimum wage for artistic services and the issuance of professional artist cards.[27]

In Mozambique, a draft law on the status of the artist is under preparation with the support of UNESCO. The purpose of this initiative is to formalize and protect the rights of artists, as a way of stimulating the growth and recognition of the culture sector.[28] Similarly, Tunisia is finalizing its first-ever law on the status of the artist and elaborating its texts for implementation. This effort aims to provide a comprehensive legal framework to safeguards artists' rights and encourage their professional activities.[29]

In the Republic of Korea, the government enacted the Act on the Protection of Status and Rights of Artists in 2021, complementing its earlier Artist Welfare Act of 2011. The new law reinforces protections of artistic freedom, promotes artists' professional rights and seeks to create a gender-equal creative environment.[30]

In Mexico, a 2022 law was enacted to protect the cultural heritage of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities. Addressing issues of cultural appropriation, the law seeks to ensure that these communities retain control over the use and commercialization of their cultural expressions, while providing a legal framework for recognizing and safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage.[31]

In Central America, the Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination (CECC-SICA) partnered with UNESCO in 2024 to launch a regional effort to develop a regional policy framework for the protection and promotion of artists' rights in Belize, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.[32]

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[26] *https://cultureactioneurope.org/fr/knowledge/what-do-we-mean-by-status-of-the-artist/*

[27] *https://weafrica24.com/2023/01/28/ivory-coast-artists-will-soon-benefit-from-their-own-legal-status/*

[28] *https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/articles/supporting-elaboration-law-status-artist-mozambique*

[29] *https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/articles/finalizing-draft-law-status-artist-and-elaborating-its-implementation-texts-tunisia*

[30] *https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/policy-monitoring-platform/enactment-act-protection-status-and-rights-artists-and-relevant-system*

[31] *https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LFPPCPCIA.pdf*

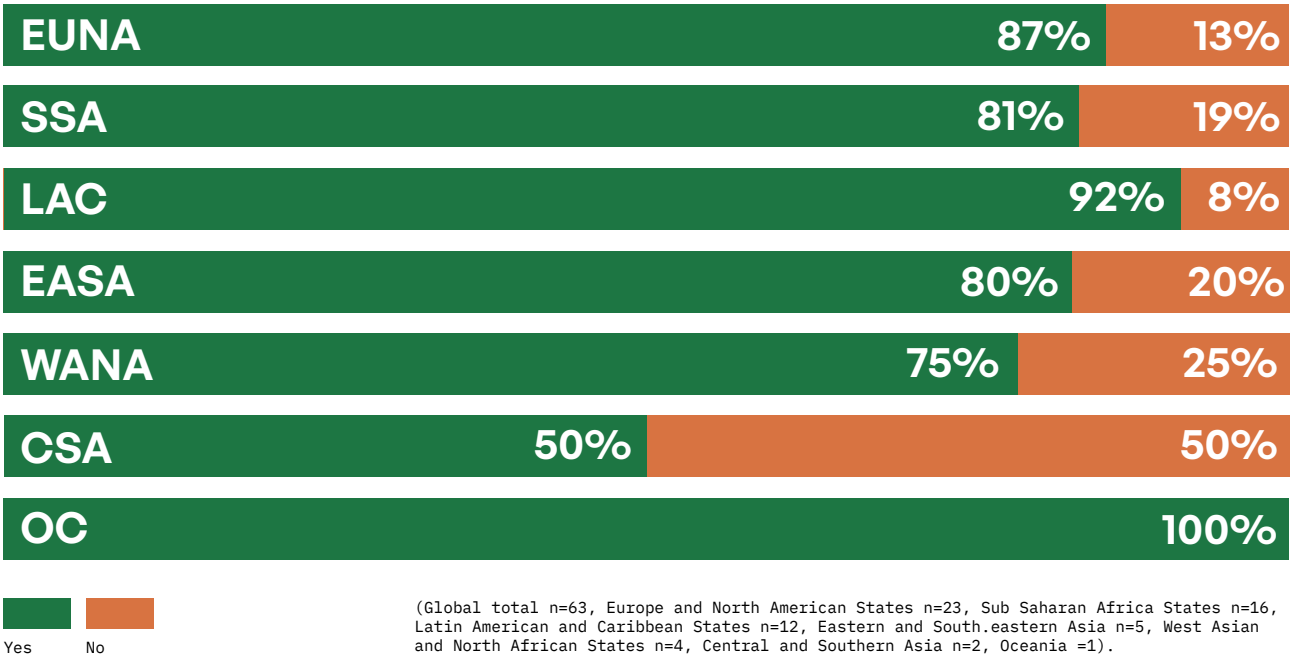
[32] *https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/articles/designing-regional-policy-protection-and-promotion-status-artists-and-cultural-professionals-central*

Several European countries have also made significant strides. In Romania, a 2023 decree established a legal and fiscal regime for cultural workers, with the purpose of 'maximizing [their] creative potential'.[33]

In Belgium, a 2024 reform led to the creation of the Commission du travail des arts (Art Work Commission), which will issue 'art work certificates' to grant employment status to artists and improve their social protection and recognition. The reform acknowledges both artists and technical support roles.[34] Spain followed with new regulations in 2024 that introduced the 'artistic employment contract', expanded the definition of public performance beyond stage activities and included technical and auxiliary roles to reflect contemporary cultural practice. These measures aim to improve working conditions for culture professionals, including actors, writers, filmmakers, composers and dancers.[35]

Despite such progress, significant challenges remain, especially for women artists who were, for example, also disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2023c). Concerning the general protection of the status of artists, the 63 Member States across all regions report a relatively high level of implementation of legal frameworks. Furthermore 87% of the 23 responding European and North American countries have enacted specific legislation or policies addressing artistic freedom. However, the inclusive access and equitable access to cultural life figures range from 75% to 92% across the globe, without considering regions with insufficiently representative data, such as Central and Southern Asia and Oceania (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). These results, however, should be complemented with the conclusions from the 2023 and 2024 UNESCO reports on the implementation of the 1980 Recommendation, which highlight that many countries in the Global South face systematic constraints, including limited legal and institutional infrastructure and insufficient resources for cultural activities.

**Figure 4. Member States reporting specific policies, legal and regulatory frameworks, measures and initiatives addressing Artistic freedom & Inclusive and equitable access to cultural life, by regional group.**




(Global total n=63, Europe and North American States n=23, Sub Saharan Africa States n=16, Latin American and Caribbean States n=12, Eastern and South.eastern Asia n=5, West Asian and North African States n=4, Central and Southern Asia n=2, Oceania =1).

Source: UNESCO, 1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports

[33] *https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/documentViewer.xhtml?v=2.1.196&id=p::usmarcdef_0000387452&file=/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_5d9c47b7-30cc-4d20-9d36-63dbabce6bb4%3F_%3D387452eng.pdf&locale=en&multi=true&ark=/ark:/48223/pf0000387452/PDF/387452eng.pdf#Statut_Artiste_MeP_EXE_FINAL_EN_WEB.indd%3A.133523%3A1787*

[34] *https://www.mondaq.com/music-and-the-arts/1448430/reform-of-the-artist-status-the-issues-at-stake-for-the-commission-du-travail-des-arts*

[35] *https://creativesunite.eu/article/spain-seeks-to-improve-the-status-of-the-artist*

National registers of culture professionals serve as essentials tools for collection, management and analysis of data pertaining to individuals and organizations engaged in the cultural and creative industries. These registers aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the workforce, support the development of cultural policies, and enhance visibility and support for culture professionals. The registers often contain detailed information on individual culture professionals and artists, such as demographic data (e.g. age, gender, education level, geographic location), as well as professional details (e.g. artistic discipline, type of practice, employment status). While these systems can lay a key role in professionalizing the sector and facilitating access to benefits, in some national contexts they may also be used for more restrictive purposes – such as regulating or controlling artistic production by allowing only officially registered workers or practitioners to operate, thereby potentially limiting artistic freedom.

## Ensuring fair remuneration and social protection for artists

It is important that an official legal status for artists exists to ensure that their contributions and that of other culture professionals are fully recognized and valued in a fair way. It allows them to create, produce, distribute and enjoy their work with the full respect and protection of their socioeconomic rights. It is also important to guarantee equitable economic benefit for living heritage practitioners and communities. The socioeconomic rights of artists and other culture professionals comprise the following dimensions: (i) fair remuneration; (ii) access to financial support; (iii) social protection; (iv) protection of intellectual property rights; and, (v) the right to organize themselves into professional associations and trade unions.

Fair remuneration for artists and culture professionals means adequate funding and support, with pay on par with national labour market standards. Many countries provide statutory protections, while collective management organizations (CMOs) help artists enforce and license their rights. According to UNESCO's Empowering Creativity report, about 60% of Member States have put in place laws defining a minimum wage for workers that applies to artists as well (UNESCO, 2023c). In countries of the Global South with large informal sectors, establishing fair compensation systems remains a significant challenge, yet promising initiatives demonstrate progress. In India, the Atal Pension Yojana targets informal and self-employed workers who do not contribute to other pension programmes and do not pay income tax. The scheme offers flexible contribution options and aims to provide a safety net for workers in the informal sector, including artists.[36] In Togo, the Mutual Social Protection Scheme for Workers in the Informal Sector (MUPROSI) is a health mutual initiative developed in collaboration with workers' associations, including those of artisans and artists. This scheme provides health coverage and social protection to informal workers who are often excluded from formal systems.[37]

Reality on the ground may, however, remain far less optimistic: among the NGOs that participated in the consultation, only 22% confirmed the existence of a minimum wage for artists in their respective countries (UNESCO, 2023c). Even where such legislation exists, it rarely applies to self-employed or freelance artists, and even less so to those working in the informal sector – a common occurrence in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Central and South America. Based on International Labour Organization (ILO) data, it is estimated that between 40% and 60% of cultural and creative industry workers in the Global South are self-employed, compared with between 30% and 50% in Europe (UNESCO, 2023c). The absence of formal work relationships exposes artists to economic vulnerability and aggravates the precarity of their work. Unlike workers in other industries, many artists lack unions or collective bargaining mechanisms to advocate for fair remuneration.

Two groups of artists face additional structural barriers. Firstly, artists with disabilities often encounter significant obstacles to fully participating in the cultural and creative industries, requiring targeted measures by national authorities to ensure inclusion.

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[36] *https://socialprotection-humanrights.org/category/key-issues/topical-issues/workers-in-the-arts-and-entertainment-sector/*

[37] *https://www.wiego.org/events/webinar-social-protection-nigeria-uganda-togo/*

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Secondly, artists and culture professionals from ethnic minorities may confront language, cultural and social obstacles that limit their access opportunities and prevent them from fully exercising their cultural rights.

In the digital and platform-based economy, artists face further challenges. Many are subject to challenging practices that result in low pay – for instance, musicians often earn low revenue per stream on digital platforms.[38] Advocacy initiatives such as the Broken Record campaign in the UK and the global Fair Trade of Music campaign seek to address these imbalances by calling for fairer streaming compensation and combatting discriminatory practices that deny royalties to non-native music creators.[39]

Access to financial support is vital for many artists, especially in the early stages of their careers. Alongside direct funding, initiatives that promote entrepreneurial activities within the cultural and creative industries contribute to the overall economic rights of artists. These measures foster an enabling environment for creative businesses, helping to create jobs and support innovative endeavours. Unfortunately, these initiatives often face substantial barriers, many of which stem from the same structural challenges previously identified – namely high levels of informality, the self-employed or freelance status of many artists and negative perceptions among funders regarding the financial viability of cultural work. As noted in the 2024 UNESCO Survey on MONDIACULT Declaration Follow-up Actions Findings, cultural and creative firms face further obstacles in obtaining financing due to business models that are not always compatible with traditional financial schemes (UNESCO, 2024). To better understand these constraints in the African context, the ILO Regional Office for Africa published a comprehensive study in 2023 of the situation of artists in the cultural and creative industries in the context of a joint ongoing initiative between ILO and UNESCO that seeks to improve the social and economic rights of artists and culture professionals (ILO, 2023).

Despite these difficulties, a growing number of countries have implemented systems and strategies to improve funding and offer support to artists in the form of subsidies and financial aid. This support can be decisive to help artists begin their career and provide core funding to improve their infrastructure and scale up their activities. Member States in advanced economies tend to have dedicated agencies to enhance artistic and cultural programmes. The International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA) supports and helps to showcase relevant programmes implemented in both the Global North and South.[40] [41]

Financial opportunities of this nature are less prevalent in the Global South, but several promising initiatives are worth mentioning (UNESCO, 2024). In East Africa, the HEVA Fund is the first financing programme in Africa that is explicitly dedicated to artists in the cultural and creative industries. In Uruguay, the Fondo Concursable para la Cultura (Competitive Fund for Culture) invests in artistic and cultural creation projects submitted by fledging artists and culture professionals. In Singapore, the Asia-Europe Foundation created in 2020 offers inception grants to young artists from South Asia, specifically in visual arts. In addition to financial aid, the beneficiaries have access to mentors and curators who assist them in developing their art practice. There is also an increasing number of awards, grants and direct subsidies provided by both state and non-state agencies that, on one hand, are insufficient given the need to promote a thriving sector and, on the other, not always are designed thinking about creating a whole ecosystem that is sustainable and fosters cross-cultural communication, cooperation and exchanges creating solid artistic networks beyond national or disciplinary borders.

Social protection play a vital role in giving artists the stability and security they need, and — when well designed — can free them to devote their energy fully to their creative work without financial insecurity. While social security mechanisms

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[38] *https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/feb/19/spotify-discovery-mode-payola-playlist*

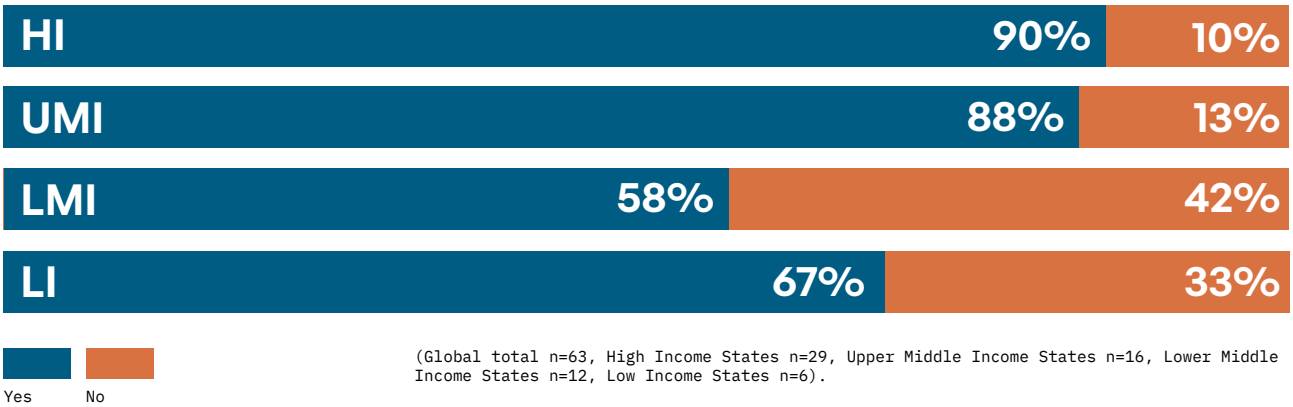
[39] *https://www.soundexchange.com/news/music-industry-launches-campaign-for-the-fair-trade-of-music/*

[40] *https://ifacca.org/*

[41] *https://ifacca.org/media/filer_public/5e/6f/5e6fe804-eb05-4fed-9658-4da2834dcafe/a_crisis_of_sustainable_careers_-_september_2022_-_eng.pdf*

do not always take the specificities of artists' jobs and activities into account, the majority of Member States who submitted reports to the 1980 Recommendation reported having social protection programmes, policies or regulatory frameworks in place for artists and other culture professionals. The share in the Global North countries is only slightly higher than in the Global South: 88% and 76% respectively (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports).

**Figure 5. Member States reporting any programmes, policies or regulatory frameworks that provide social protection to artists (including those universal to all workers), by income group. Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to label rounding.**




(Global total n=63, High Income States n=29, Upper Middle Income States n=16, Lower Middle Income States n=12, Low Income States n=6).

Source: UNESCO, 1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports.

However, the scope of these benefits varies significantly depending on the income level of the countries. Around 89% of high-income and upper-middle-income countries provide comprehensive social coverage, compared with only 62% among lower-middle-income and low-income countries (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). It is to be noted, however, that this sample may not be globally representative, considering the lack of robust data from the latter group.

Furthermore, the survey responses from artists and culture professionals point to serious implementation difficulties in ensuring effective enforcement of existing legal provisions. Only 9% of the respondents report adequate or strong protection of their economic and social rights, while 62% report that they are getting poor or no protection at all (2024 MONDIACULT Survey). Similarly, international mobility protection shows stark disparities: 76% of Global North countries provide social protection for artists working abroad, compared with just 25% in the Global South (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). As mentioned above, artists and culture professionals active in the Global South face additional challenges linked to the high level of informality in the economies where they are active. To guarantee that artists can benefit from social protection coverage, mechanisms must be in place to ensure a smooth transition from the informal to the formal economy. Women artists need special consideration when it comes to social protection, including access to childcare, paid maternity leave and health insurance.

The fifth global consultation on the implementation of the 1980 Recommendation again shows artists have difficulty acquiring social protection. The special contractual arrangements that characterize their status as artists often mean that they do not easily meet the conditions necessary to benefit from it. This is the case when they transition frequently between various contractual arrangements involving regular employment, self-employment and short-term contracts. Two noteworthy examples from the Republic of Korea and Spain offer promising models that may help guide efforts in the Global South (UNESCO, 2024).

In the Republic of Korea, revisions to the Employment Insurance Act, adopted by Parliament in May 2020, extended unemployment benefits to an estimated

75,000 artists. These amendments recognize the precarious nature of their work and make artists eligible to receive unemployment benefits equivalent to approximately 60% of the national average monthly income.

In Spain, a Royal Decree approved in 2023 ensures access to unemployment benefits for artists in recognition of the intermittent nature of their work. It further provides for compatibility between the state pension and artistic activity for both employees and self-employed artists, and reduces the monthly self-employed contribution for low-income artists. In addition to this, the Decree introduces a special unemployment benefit for those workers in the cultural and artistic sector who would not be entitled to the contributory unemployment subsidy under the general regime. Thirdly, the Decree allows for compatibility of the retirement pension with the revenues derived from the artistic activity carried out as employees or when self-employed.

Finally, the international community has built a comprehensive legal framework to protect intellectual property rights for artists aimed at promoting a vibrant and diverse cultural landscape. The most significant agreements include the Berne Convention of 1886, which recognizes copyright protection for literary and artistic works in over 180 countries, the 1994 TRIPS Agreement that ensures minimum standards for IP rights enforcement worldwide through the World Trade Organization, and the WIPO Copyright Treaty of 1996, which strengthens digital rights protection. Alongside this, many countries have introduced legislation and policies to complement these global agreements. By safeguarding intellectual property rights (IPRs), Member States ensure that the creative works of artists are protected from unauthorized use or exploitation. This applies also to the importance of specific IP protections and labelling schemes for intangible heritage in Arab States and in Africa.[42]

The effectiveness of intellectual property protection frameworks varies significantly across regions and by income levels, depending on national laws and enforcement mechanisms. While the European Commission's Joint Research Centre measures international property rights on an annual basis, there is no similar instrument to measure the enforcement of IPRs for artistic work.[43] Europe is considered as the region with the best protection of IPRs for artists, the USA offers robust copyright protection but does not recognize the resale right, and Asia, Japan and the Republic of Korea have strong copyright laws that are widely applied. Enforcement is, however, weak in many parts of the Global South, where artists suffer from piracy and unauthorized use of their works.

Within the context of intellectual property rights, artists have specific economic rights that are normally protected under copyright laws. These include:

- Reproduction rights: the exclusive right to reproduce the work in any format (prints, digital copies, merchandise);
- Distribution rights: the right to control how the work is distributed (sales, rentals);
- Public performance rights: the right to control how the work is performed (concerts, plays, film screenings);
- Public display rights: the right to control the public exhibition of their work (galleries, museums and digital platforms);
- Derivative works: the right to authorize adaptations or modifications of the original work (translations, remixes, film adaptations);
- Rental and lending rights: the right to receive compensation when works are rented or loaned;

[42] *https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-24-19.COM-INF.6.c_EN.docx; https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-24-19.COM-6.b_EN.docx*

[43] *https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/explorer/indices/ipri/international-property-rights-index*

- Resale rights (droit de suite): right to receive a percentage of the resale price when their works are sold in secondary markets (e.g., auctions); and,
- Moral rights: the right to be credited as the author and to object to distortions or modifications that could harm the artist's reputation.[44] [45] [46]

As far as resale rights are concerned, one of the most comprehensive frameworks is the EU Resale Right Directive (2001/84/EC), which was adopted in 2006. It allows artists to receive royalties when their works are resold in the art market. This innovative right provides financial benefits to artists by entitling them to a small percentage of the resale price, ensuring that they benefit from the increased value of their works overtime. This law is particularly advantageous for emerging artists whose work may become more valuable later in their careers.

While around 80 countries recognize the Artist's Resale Right (ARR), its implementation varies, and not all nations have adopted such legislation. Examples of countries that have implemented such legislation include Congo, Senegal and Tunisia. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) continues to discuss and promote the adoption of ARR to help artists worldwide to benefit from the economic appreciation of their works.

There is a growing concern that the widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI) in cultural production may infringe on the economic rights of artists. This is because AI can undermine artists' ability to control, monetize and receive fair compensation for their work. Their rights are also being infringed as all AI models (image generators, music / text generators) are trained on massive datasets that include copyrighted works without direct consent or compensation.[47] [48]AI-generated works are not clearly protected by copyright laws, making it difficult for artists to claim ownership or control over AI-assisted creations. Further still, emerging copyright frameworks aimed at addressing the rapid evolution of AI-generated or AI-assisted works present ongoing debates regarding how best to balance the rights and interests of human creators and technological innovation.[49] Alarmingly, the first global study measuring the economic impact of AI in the music and audio-visual sectors, published in December 2024, predicted that generative AI will enrich tech companies while substantially jeopardizing the income of artists in the next five years.[50] A recent ILO brief attempts to mitigate this by making recommendations on how collaborative efforts involving governments, industry stakeholders, employers' organizations and trade unions to lower risks, protect the culture industry and foster a human-centred AI governance system.[51] UNESCO adopted the 2021 UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of artificial intelligence to help countries address some of the dilemmas associated with new technology.

While there is no international database on the implementation of Indigenous intellectual property rights, New Zealand stands out as one of the few countries that has pioneered cultural protection laws that go beyond conventional IPRs. For example, Māori Toi Iho is a trademark that certifies that art products are authentically created by Māori artists.[52] In South-East Asia, the Philippines has also introduced measures aimed at protecting Indigenous cultural expressions, though the effectiveness of these efforts may be limited by challenges such as rapid commercialization.[53] Likewise, an evaluation of Indigenous IPRs carried out by the World Resources Institute highlighted Burkina

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[44] *https://goclip.org/en/music/music-creators-rights/common-music-industry-rights*

[45] *https://www.artists.fi/en/taiteilijalle-en/how-make-living-visual-artist/economic-copyright-visual-artist*

[46] *https://bytescare.com/blog/economic-rights-in-copyright*

[47] *https://www.pymnts.com/artificial-intelligence-2/2024/music-industry-confronts-ai-compensation-issue/*

[48] *https://www.techpolicy.press/ai-and-harms-to-artists-and-creators/*

[49] *https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyd3r62kp5o*

[50] *https://www.cisac.org/Newsroom/news-releases/global-economic-study-shows-human-creators-future-risk-generative-ai*

[51] *https://www.ilo.org/publications/generative-ai-and-media-and-culture-industry*

[52] *https://www.toiiho.org.nz/*

[53] *https://ncip.gov.ph/*

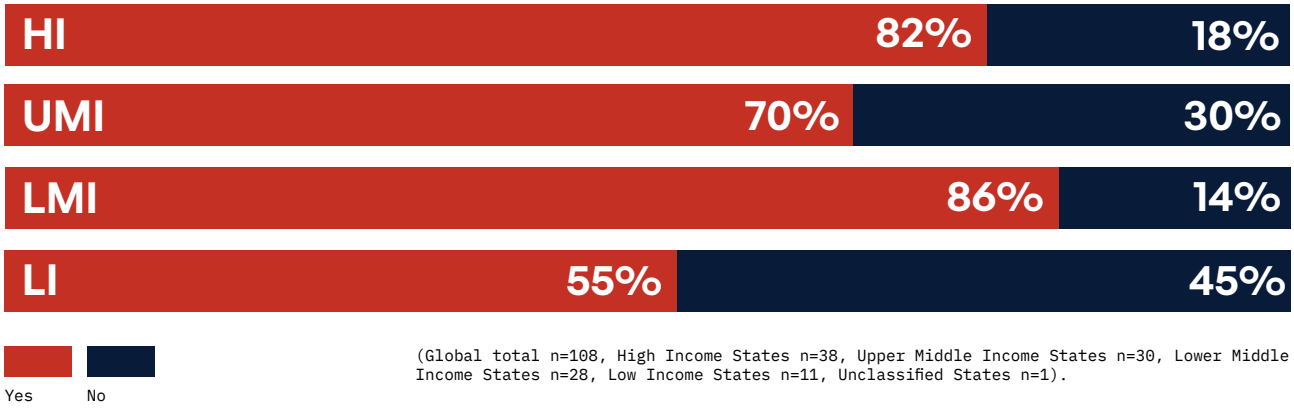
Faso, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda in Africa, as well as Bolivia, Colombia and Peru in Latin America, as countries that have developed significant measures to recognize and protect the rights of Indigenous communities over their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions.[54]

CMOs vary significantly across regions in terms of their availability and effectiveness.[55] The distribution of these organizations shows a marked concentration: European and North American states have 108 organizations, Latin America and the Caribbean have 46, and Sub-Saharan Africa only have 26, highlighting substantial disparities in rights management capacity (CISAC, 2023).

The effectiveness of intellectual property protection frameworks varies significantly across regions and income levels, with data from functioning collective management systems indicating that high-income countries are much more likely to have active systems for royalty collection and distribution of IP-related income, with 121 CMOs operating in high-income countries compared to 67 in upper-middle-income and only 28 in lower-middle-income countries (CISAC, 2023).

Gender-responsive provisions within these frameworks indicate increasing adoption but uneven distribution across regions and countries. Data show that 84% of Global North countries and 73% of Global South states who submitted reports have implemented specific policies supporting women artists and culture professionals (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). These measures include equal access to funding, mentoring schemes and anti-discrimination provisions. However, implementation gaps persist: 82% of high-income countries report active policies advancing women artists, while this proportion drops to 55% among low-income nations, a 27-percentage point difference (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

**Figure 6. Member States reporting the adoption of policies and measures to support the recognition and advancement of women as artists, cultural professionals and/or creative entrepreneurs (e.g. ensure equal pay for equal work or equal access to funding, coaching or mentoring schemes, anti-discrimination measures, etc.), by income group.**




(Global total n=108, High Income States n=38, Upper Middle Income States n=30, Lower Middle Income States n=28, Low Income States n=11, Unclassified States n=1).

Source: UNESCO, 2005 Convention Periodic Reports

Gender disparities in remuneration remain a significant concern, even though comprehensive data on gender pay gaps in the culture industry is scarce in current reporting mechanisms. Available evidence from CMOs suggests persistent gender inequalities in royalty distribution, though exact magnitudes cannot be reliably determined from the existing reporting frameworks. It appears also that women artists have less access to public funding, and to financial support in general, than men artists (UNESCO, 2022).

[54] *https://www.wri.org/insights/indigenous-land-rights-how-far-have-we-come-and-how-far-do-we-have-go*

[55] *A CMO is an option, with the copyright system, that allows right holders to manage their rights in a collective manner rather than on an individual basis.*

Effective action is necessary to tackle the barriers faced by women artists at all levels: legal, institutional, financial and societal. Firstly, governments could mainstream gender in cultural policies by systematically using sex-disaggregated data and gender analysis during planning and evaluation. They could also mandate gender equality targets in national culture strategies and fund guidelines and institutional charters. Canada and Sweden are two examples of countries that explicitly include gender equality goals in cultural funding frameworks.[56][57]
A second step would be to provide targeted funding and economic support in the form of women-specific grants, residencies and fellowships for women artists and cultural entrepreneurs. In Rwanda, for instance, women-led cooperatives in crafts and design receive special support through public-private partnerships.[58]

## Enhancing skills and mobility for creative professionals

Professional development and mobility are crucial for artists because they enhance creativity, career opportunities and financial sustainability. To expand their skills and creativity, artists must constantly experiment with new media, be exposed to different cultures and artistic styles. To help get exposure, participation in international events and artist exchange programmes broadens perspectives and leads to new opportunities. Alongside this, programmes like artist residencies at home or in a different country offer immersive experiences that help artists grow professionally and creatively. Support is provided for these endeavours directly by UNESCO and European Union through programmes like Creative Europe for cross-border collaborations to promote cultural exchange.[59]

Digital platforms offer new remote opportunities to participate in virtual exhibitions and concerts, benefit from online courses and mentorship programmes, and engage in virtual collaborations. For example, the [Digital] Transmissions programme brings Jordanian and UK artists together virtually.[60] The SomoS Berlin Virtual Artist Residency offers a three-month online experience aimed at supporting artists' work progress, and is particularly beneficial for artists in the Global South.[61] The South-South Arts Fellowships, initiated by Living Arts International in 2022, aim to nurture long-term connections in arts, heritage and culture within the Global South. This fellowship provides support for artists to engage in collaborative projects and professional development activities across the Global South.[62]

UNESCO has also led efforts to build up support for the mobility of artists in the Global South. Article 16 of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions encourages countries in the Global North to offer a preferential treatment for artists based in the Global South.[63] However, professional mobility data reveals pronounced disparities between the two. While 100% of Global North countries report public support for outward artists' mobility through public grants and subsidies, the figure drops to 76% in the Global South (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). The disparity widens for inward mobility support through measures, policies, programmes or schemes: 96% of Global North countries maintain specific measures supporting incoming artists, compared with 56% in the Global South (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). Thus, Global North programmes target artists from the Global South, but South to South programmes are much rarer and lack funding. Alongside this, the Special Rapporteur has highlighted how these mobility restrictions particularly affect migrants and

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[56] *https://www.konstnarsnamnden.se/en/about-the-swedish-arts-grants-committee/kulturpolitiska-malen-och-konstnarspolitiken/*

[57] *https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/gender-equality/gender-results-framework.html*

[58] *https://indegoafrica.org/*

[59] *https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe*

[60] *https://futureeverything.org/portfolio/entry/digital-transmissions-ii/*

[61] *https://somos-arts.org/somos-berlin-virtual-artist-residency/*

[62] *https://www.connectingsouth.org/2024/04/23/why-the-fellowship/*

[63] *https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392217_eng/PDF/392217eng.pdf.multi*

displaced populations, impacting their ability to maintain cultural connections with their heritage (A/HRC/52/35, paras. 71–75).

The nature of mobility support varies across regions. According to survey responses on types of grants and subsidies, countries in the Global North show a distribution of 29% for export support, 39% for individual mobility and 33% for internationalization of artists' careers, while countries in the Global South show 30%, 41% and 29% respectively (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). Adverse visa policies present additional challenges for artists from the poorest nations, directly affecting their ability to participate in international cultural exchange and heritage preservation efforts. Mobility is also a bigger issue for women artists owing to factors such as care responsibilities and discriminatory social norms, which can impact their access to equal opportunities (UNESCO, 2023c).

Support mechanisms demonstrate a significant range of levels of effectiveness across regions. Public funding schemes supporting civil society organizations' cultural initiatives show high adoption rates: 98% in the Global North and 82% in the Global South based on the data available from periodic report submissions (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). However, the implementation of minimum wage frameworks reveals significant disparities: 91% of the countries in the Global North report having minimum wage frameworks relevant for artists, while only 59% of the reporting countries in the Global South have implemented such a policy (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports).

## Artistic freedom

Artistic freedom is a fundamental cultural right that enables artists to express Artistic freedom is a fundamental cultural right that enables artists to express their ideas, challenge societal norms and contribute to cultural and intellectual progress without fear of censorship, political pressure, or persecution. This is enshrined under the guarantee of freedom of expression for all in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and further reinforced by Article 27, which reaffirms the right of everyone to participate in cultural life and enjoy the arts, while also protecting the moral material interests resulting from artistic production. These principles are further elaborated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), artistic freedom encourages innovation and creativity, drives social and political change, and preserves cultural diversity. Indigenous artists use dance, music and storytelling to preserve endangered languages and traditions. In the early 20th century, movements like Surrealism, Dadaism and Abstract Art emerged because artists were free to explore new forms of expression. In the 1970s, hip-hop music became central to civil rights protests worldwide, with rap music playing a similar role today. World-renowned figures like Doris Salcedo (Colombia), Kara Walker (USA), Tania Bruguera (Cuba), Zanele Muholi (South Africa), Alfredo Jaar (Chile), El Anatsui (Ghana), Ai Weiwei (China) and Banksy (UK) use art to highlight social injustices.

Because of its importance, artistic freedom needs to be protected wherever it faces threats such as economic restrictions, censorship and political oppression. In its yearly report on the State of Artistic Freedom, published since 2019, the NGO Freemuse monitors the numbers and cases of artists who are sanctioned, imprisoned or even murdered. In 2021, for instance, more than 1,200 violations of artistic freedom were documented, including the killing of 39 artists (Freemuse, 2022). The 2024 Freemuse report offers a detailed analysis of the scope of violations in all parts of the world, including in many UNESCO Member States.[64]

Women artists often face heightened risks compared to men regarding artistic freedom. A 2018 report by Freemuse, Creativity Wronged: How women's right to artistic freedom is denied and marginalized, documented over 90 cases of violations against women artists worldwide.[65] The report highlighted patterns of inequality, exclusion and harassment faced by women artists, emphasizing the need for greater protections.

[64] *https://www.freemuse.org/state-of-artistic-freedom-2024*

[65] *https://www.freemuse.org/creativity-wronged-how-womens-right-to-artistic-freedom-is-denied-and-marginalised*

Artistic freedom is not just threatened by governments and state authorities, it can also be constrained by range of non-state actors, including, private corporations, religious groups, social movements, and in some cases, criminal organizations. These entities may exert control over artistic expression through economic pressure, cultural norms, activism, intimidation, or internal policies, shaping what artists are able to create, share, or sustain financially. In some instances, private sector actors, including firms in the entertainment industry, have been criticized for accommodating censorship demands.[66] More recently, artists have faced censorship in connection with their public statements critical of the humanitarian impact of the ongoing conflict on the Gaza strip on Palestinian civilians.[67] [68] [69]

Paradoxically, the data reported by Member States confirm the existence of strong formal safeguards for artistic freedom in many countries. Among the Member States that submitted reports on the 1980 Recommendation, 85% in the Global South and 84% in the Global North reported having policies and laws to promote artistic freedom (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). What is not clear, though, is the extent to which existing legal provisions are effectively enforced. Only 61 % of responding States Parties to the 2005 Convention report having independent bodies mandated to receive complaints or monitor violations and restrictions to artistic freedom, revealing a significant gap between legal frameworks and actual practice (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Given the ongoing erosion of democratic governance in many parts of the world, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, declining political freedoms are likely to have adverse effects on artists, whose work often seeks to raise awareness about social issues and stimulate critical thinking. In response to these challenges, the reinforcement of artistic freedom can be driven by both government-led initiatives and civil society actions, as illustrated by several recent examples. In Asia, UNESCO has supported the Indonesian civil society organization Koalisi Seni (the Arts Coalition), which set up a monitoring system for artistic freedom in 2023.[70] In Europe, Malta approved the Act to Strengthen the Freedom of Artistic Expression in 2023 and issued a Charter for the Status of the Artist in 2024 that further strengthened artistic freedom. This legislation aims to protect artists from prosecution related to perceived insults or threats conveyed through their work.[71] In Africa, the Ikirenga Artistic Freedom Initiative launched in Rwanda in 2024 in collaboration with UNESCO, aims to promote an enabling environment for artistic freedom.[72]

As the Indonesia and Rwanda initiatives show, UNESCO and civil society organizations can form powerful partnerships to improve the enforcement of artistic freedom laws. Strategies for effective collaboration include joint monitoring and reporting (collaborative data collection, shadow reports, early warning systems), policy and legal reform advocacy, public campaigns, capacity building and independent accountability mechanisms. At the global level, the UNESCO-Aschberg Programme, supported by the Norwegian government, is actively promoting artistic freedom and the status of the artist worldwide, with a specific attention to countries in the Global South, including Africa and SIDS through (i) research, advocacy and monitoring, (ii) capacity building in cooperation with the ILO, and (iii) on-demand technical and financial assistance.[73]

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[66] *https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/23/briefing/censoring-games.html*

[67] *Germany and the Netherlands: https://creativesunite.eu/article/peace-now-artists-across-europe-raise-their-voices-against-the-war; https://artmatters.info/2024/01/15/heritage-professionals-oppose-censorship-of-artists-and-curators-over-war-in-gaza/; https://ifex.org/art-institutions-accused-of-censoring-pro-palestinian-views/; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/22/germany-antisemitism-israel-gaza-arts-censorship/*

[68] *United Kingdom: https://www.eu-newstoday.com/archives/1708.html*

[69] *USA: https://telavivtribune.com/2024-was-a-year-of-anti-palestinian-censorship-and-active-artistic-rebellion-notice/*

[70] *https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-invests-artistic-freedom-indonesia#:~:text=On%2010%20May%202023%2C%20Koalisi,upholding%20artistic%20rights%20in%20Indonesia.*

[71] *https://ifacca.org/news/2023/07/12/bill-protecting-artistic-expression-receives-unani/; https://artscouncilmalta.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/0572-%E2%80%93-Charter-of-the-Status-of-the-Artist-Final-Document-EN.pdf*

[72] *https://ikirenga.rw/artistic-freedom/#:~:text=On%20the%2027th%20of%20January,through%20the%20UNESCO%2DAschberg%20Programme.*

[73] *https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/programmes/aschberg*

# Fostering inclusive and participatory cultural governance

Participatory governance in cultural policymaking is a fundamental dimension of cultural rights. It embodies the right to participate in and contribute to cultural life, and reflects international standards for inclusive decision-making in cultural matters. This governance approach requires robust frameworks, inclusive institutional structures and effective participatory processes that engage diverse stakeholders across all levels of policy development and implementation. The effectiveness of these elements directly impacts communities' ability to shape the cultural policies that affect their lives. National reports emphasize that cultural policies are most effective when they emerge from and respond to community needs and aspirations, while ensuring the protection and promotion of cultural rights for all (UNESCO, 2024).

While recent assessments suggest progress in establishing participatory mechanisms, implementation effectiveness varies considerably by region and income level, reflecting broader challenges in ensuring meaningful participation across different socioeconomic contexts. These variations highlight the importance of developing context-sensitive approaches while adhering to international standards for participatory governance. Member States report that successful implementation often depends on clear communication and coordinated efforts to establish common goals among national, departmental, municipal, academic and social actors (UNESCO, 2024).

Although the landscape of participatory cultural governance has evolved significantly in recent years, shaped by increasing recognition of diverse stakeholder needs and rights, women are still underrepresented in decision-making processes and positions. This underrepresentation contributes to reinforce structural gender inequalities in the culture sector. Furthermore, the Special Rapporteur emphasizes that effective participatory governance requires not just formal consultation mechanisms but actual decision-making power for affected communities (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023, para. 55). This is particularly crucial in cases involving Indigenous Peoples and traditional cultural expressions, where community rights and cultural context play essential roles in policy development and implementation.

Digital technologies have expanded opportunities for participation in cultural governance processes, though evidence of their effectiveness varies across contexts. For example, video conferencing platforms enable remote communities to participate in national cultural policy discussions, potentially addressing longstanding geographic barriers. In Pacific Island countries, where communities may be separated by vast oceanic distances, digital connectivity offers new possibilities for inclusion, although the prerequisite of reliable internet access highlights persistent digital divides that may reinforce existing inequalities.

The following analysis examines three critical dimensions of participatory cultural governance: policy frameworks, institutional structures and implementation processes. As documented by the UNESCO MONDIACULT follow-up survey (UNESCO, 2024), the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms depends on how these dimensions interact to create meaningful engagement opportunities across diverse communities and contexts.

Many countries have legal and policy frameworks for participatory cultural governance, reflecting the commitment to align cultural policymaking with international standards while ensuring meaningful community engagement. However, their development and effectiveness vary widely across regions. Public funding schemes supporting civil society involvement in promoting the diversity of cultural expressions exist in 75% of the reporting low-income countries as opposed to 93% of high-income countries across different regions (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). These variations echo differences in resource allocation and institutional capacity for supporting participatory mechanisms. Member States report that effective implementation requires comprehensive transformation strategies that recognize culture as a national asset and align cultural objectives with broader sustainable development goals (UNESCO, 2024).

The integration of participatory frameworks into broader governance systems reveals both the potential and challenges of inclusive cultural policymaking. Successful implementation requires mechanisms that ensure community voices,

particularly those of Indigenous Peoples and living heritage bearers, remain central to decision-making processes in cultural management, safeguarding, promotion and transmission. Member States emphasize the importance of establishing mechanisms to integrate and align national cultural policies while addressing both immediate and long-term challenges (UNESCO, 2024).

Cross-governmental coordination emerges as a fundamental component of effective framework implementation. While 92% of the reporting Member States have established mechanisms for policy coordination across different government levels for the conservation, protection and presentation of cultural and natural heritage (1972 Convention Periodic Reports), the quality and consistency of these coordination efforts vary significantly. These variations reflect the complex challenge of aligning cultural governance across national, subnational and city levels while ensuring gender equality and meaningful engagement from multiple stakeholders, including public bodies, NGOs, Indigenous Peoples and youth. Member States report that successful implementation requires overcoming resource limitations and policy gaps, particularly in contexts where cultural governance frameworks must compete with other development priorities (UNESCO, 2024).

Several specific measures can protect traditional knowledge systems from co-optation or misappropriation in policy processes. These include establishing formal protocols for free, prior and informed consent; creating legal frameworks that recognize collective intellectual property rights; developing dedicated funding for community-led documentation and transmission initiatives; and, establishing oversight bodies with significant Indigenous representation. Policy gaps that deserve particular attention include inadequate recognition of non-Western knowledge systems, limited trans-sectoral coordination mechanisms and insufficient long-term funding models. Addressing these gaps requires integrating cultural considerations into national development plans, establishing dedicated budget lines for cultural policy implementation across sectors and developing evidence-based advocacy strategies that demonstrate culture's contributions to broader sustainable development outcomes.

Institutions supporting participatory cultural governance operate at a across local, regional and national levels encompasses through a wide array of entities and mechanisms. The effective implementation of participatory cultural governance relies on robust institutional structures operating across multiple levels of government. Many Member States have established specialized departments or centres dedicated to overseeing cultural transformation, providing expertise, resources and support to ensure effective implementation practices (UNESCO, 2024). These institutional frameworks aim to facilitate sustained engagement between government bodies and diverse stakeholders, including cultural organizations, community representatives and civil society groups.

Recent data indicates that 92% of reporting countries have implemented dialogue structures between public authorities and civil society organizations (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). These structures range from national cultural councils to local consultative bodies, though their effectiveness varies considerably. Member States emphasize that institutional effectiveness depends not only on the existence of formal structures but on their capacity to facilitate meaningful participation in decision-making processes (UNESCO, 2024).

Gender-responsive institutional mechanisms demonstrate varying levels of development and effectiveness across regions. These include ensuring consistent representation in decision-making processes, addressing structural barriers to participation and maintaining effective monitoring systems. National reports note that implementation gaps affect not only women but also marginalized communities' ability to participate in institutional processes (United Nations General Assembly, 2023, para. 71). To remedy this, policymakers emphasize the importance of developing targeted strategies that promote women's participation and leadership in cultural governance through robust institutional frameworks (UNESCO, 2024). Adversely, cultural norms may themselves hinder such participation, as for example Indigenous communities may expect to communicate directly from chiefs or elders to the head or leaders of national government, rather than to delegated civil servants.

Reconciling gender equality principles with traditional governance structures presents complex challenges that require nuanced approaches. Successful strategies for addressing these challenges include phased implementation approaches that allow for gradual transformation; creating dedicated spaces for women's participation that operate alongside traditional structures; investing in women cultural leaders who

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can navigate both institutional and community contexts; developing locally-relevant gender awareness programmes designed with community input; establishing clear accountability mechanisms with gender-specific indicators; and, ensuring that women from marginalized communities participate in designing the policies intended to increase their representation. Critical to these efforts is recognizing that gender equality and cultural respect need not be mutually exclusive when communities themselves lead the process of examining and potentially reforming governance practices.

Local institutional structures play an increasingly vital role in participatory governance, often demonstrating greater adaptability to specific cultural contexts. Municipal and regional bodies frequently serve as primary points of contact between communities and cultural governance systems. Member States report that the effectiveness of these local structures depends on several factors, including alignment with national frameworks, adequate resources, sustained community engagement and integration with traditional governance systems (UNESCO, 2024).

Effective participatory governance in cultural policymaking requires systems that facilitate meaningful stakeholder decision-making. While formal frameworks and institutions provide essential foundations, the actual mechanisms of engagement determine the real impact of participatory governance. National reports emphasize that successful implementation requires addressing challenges related to institutional capacities, resource limitations and coordination among different sectors (UNESCO, 2024).

Several global examples illustrate both challenges and successful approaches to implementation. In Barcelona, the Culture and Citizenship Rights Plan demonstrates effective multi-level coordination by connecting municipal policies with neighbourhood-level participation, particularly in immigrant communities. In Seoul, the Citizens' Cultural Rights Declaration stands out for its use of participatory budgeting that empowers citizens to directly allocate cultural resources. Meanwhile in Colombia, the Cultural Development Plans have successfully incorporated traditional governance systems of Indigenous communities, using hybrid decision-making models that respect ancestral authority while connecting to national frameworks. These cases reveal that successful implementation typically involves context-specific adaptation rather than standardized approaches, with particular attention to power dynamics, resource distribution and the alignment of diverse stakeholder interests (UNESCO, 2024).

Multi-level coordination represents a crucial aspect of implementation effectiveness in cultural policymaking, although the quality and consistency of engagement vary significantly. Member States report that effective coordination often requires addressing challenges such as bureaucratic obstacles and misalignments in goals between different stakeholders (UNESCO, 2024). To this end, civil society can be an effective mediator between national institutions and local communities, though engagement processes demonstrate significant regional variation. Participation in intangible cultural safeguarding shows high engagement levels, ranging from 44% in the Global South to 61% in the Global North (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). These differences reflect varying capacities for sustained civil society engagement. National reports emphasize that effective participation requires ongoing support throughout the policy cycle (UNESCO, 2024).

Gender-responsive approaches to participatory processes show varying levels of implementation success across regions and contexts. Data indicate that while formal mechanisms for gender inclusion exist in many contexts, policymakers report that practical implementation faces several persistent challenges (UNESCO, 2024). These include ensuring consistent representation in decision-making processes, addressing structural barriers to participation and maintaining gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation systems. Recent progress in integrating gender perspectives into cultural policies (UNESCO, 2024) demonstrates potential pathways forward, though sustained effort is required to ensure these mechanisms translate into meaningful participation at all levels of cultural governance.

The implementation of participatory processes must particularly ensure meaningful engagement of Indigenous Peoples in cultural heritage management. Despite widespread establishment of consultative bodies, effective participation requires integration of traditional decision-making processes and knowledge systems. Member States report achieving better outcomes when Indigenous communities participate

directly in management processes, particularly when traditional governance practices are respected and incorporated into institutional frameworks (UNESCO, 2024).

The effectiveness of participatory processes relies significantly on the institutional monitoring and evaluation mechanisms discussed above, which enable evidence-based adjustments and improvements to engagement practices. Building on the gender-responsive institutional mechanisms described above, participatory processes must ensure these frameworks translate into meaningful engagement opportunities for women and gender-diverse communities. Beyond establishing institutional mechanisms, practical implementation requires transforming how participation opportunities are designed and facilitated. Gender-responsive participatory processes must address practical barriers such as meeting timing and locations, childcare provision and culturally appropriate engagement formats, while also tackling deeper structural issues including decision-making hierarchies and the valuation of different forms of knowledge and contribution.

The analysis reveals that successful participatory governance in the culture sector requires a comprehensive approach that addresses multiple dimensions simultaneously. Member States report that effective implementation depends on strong institutional frameworks, adequate resources and sustained commitment to inclusive practices (UNESCO, 2024). This includes developing mechanisms for meaningful stakeholder engagement, ensuring adequate representation of diverse communities and maintaining robust monitoring and evaluation systems that can track progress and identify areas for improvement.

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## Closing the gaps in monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring cultural rights encompasses multiple complementary approaches at global, regional and national levels. These include UNESCO's periodic reporting mechanisms, UN Special Rapporteur investigations, regional human rights frameworks, civil society shadow reports, academic research initiatives and national cultural observatories. While each plays a valuable role, UNESCO's periodic reporting system represents the most comprehensive and systematic global framework for tracking cultural rights implementation across diverse contexts. It provides a standardized structure for comparative analysis while offering Member States a platform to document progress and challenges.

Monitoring and evaluating cultural rights implementation effectively within the current global framework is a major challenge. While the analysis presented in this report draws on valuable data from Member States' periodic reports and UNESCO's global consultations, several critical limitations need to be addressed to allow for a comprehensive assessment of the state of cultural rights worldwide.

Periodic reporting by Member States, while valuable, presents several fundamental challenges. First, response rates vary substantially across regions and income groups, creating significant gaps in the understanding of cultural rights implementation, particularly in regions with lower response rates. For instance, the 2022–2023 global consultation on the implementation of the 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist revealed marked disparities in participation rates, with significantly lower engagement from low-income countries.

Even when Member States do submit reports, the content, depth and quality of information provided often vary considerably, making systematic comparative analysis very difficult. This heterogeneity reflects differences in national monitoring capacities, data collection methodologies and interpretations of requested information. While some countries provide comprehensive data supported by robust evidence, others submit more general assessments with limited quantitative indicators. One area that presents challenges is the reporting on culture professionals involved in exchange programmes. In the absence of contextualization relative to national population sizes, cross-country analyses may offer limited interpretive value and risk drawing misleading conclusions.

Archaeological site of Delphi, Greece

Periodic reporting typically emphasizes formal policy frameworks and legal provisions, which may not always reflect the effectiveness of implementation or real-world outcomes. This is where the intrinsic relationship between cultural rights and cultural policies becomes evident, particularly in situations where a legal framework exists but does not effectively translate into the protection of cultural rights, which calls for a rights-based approach to cultural policymaking. For instance, data on remuneration of culture professionals benefitting from CMO reimbursement concerns only a small proportion of artists, providing an incomplete picture of artists' economic conditions. This creates a persistent gap between reported commitments and practical realities experienced by cultural practitioners and communities.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms measuring institutional effectiveness also remain a critical challenge in participatory governance. While many Member States report having formal evaluation systems, policymakers note that the quality and consistency of monitoring vary significantly across regions and institutional contexts (UNESCO, 2024). This variation affects the ability to assess and improve institutional performance, particularly in measuring the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms and their impact on cultural policy development. This challenge extends to the evaluation of implementation processes, affecting the capacity to make evidence-based adjustments to participatory practices. Limited capacity for data generation and analysis in many contexts further complicates these challenges, highlighting the need for enhanced institutional frameworks that can support robust monitoring and evaluation practices across all aspects of participatory governance. It has also to be remembered that such reporting generally represents self-reporting by the governments concerned and needs to be interpreted in the light of other voices such as those of civil society and Indigenous groups.

Monitoring artistic freedom presents particular challenges in contexts where fundamental rights are restricted or where conflict or instability impedes open cultural expression. In such environments, official reporting mechanisms may be limited or incomplete, with more reliable information typically emerging from civil society organizations and individuals, who may face personal or professional risks in documenting violations. Self-censorship represents an especially insidious threat that remains largely immeasurable through conventional monitoring approaches, as artists may avoid creating certain works entirely rather than face potential repercussions. These challenges require specialized monitoring methodologies that protect sources, capture indirect indicators of restriction and contextualize apparent compliance with international standards against lived experiences of cultural practitioners. While these issues may be addressed more comprehensively in publications focused specifically on artistic freedom, they represent a critical gap in current monitoring frameworks.

A more robust, standardized and regular data collection system is essential to overcome these limitations. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) should play a central role in developing and implementing this framework, working in collaboration with national statistical offices, cultural observatories and other relevant institutions. This standardized monitoring system should encompass several key dimensions:

- **Comprehensive indicator framework** – Building on existing indicators while expanding to address current gaps. For example, current frameworks lack specific indicators to assess remuneration gaps between men and women artists, as well as between Indigenous and mainstream artists. Similarly, there is no indicator to measure the extent to which Indigenous and local communities benefit equitably from the commercial use of their cultural heritage and intellectual property, a significant omission given the ongoing challenges in protecting traditional cultural expressions and knowledge.

- **Regular data collection cycles** – Establishing consistent timeframes for data collection across all Member States would facilitate more meaningful trend analysis and timely identification of emerging challenges. These cycles should align with broader reporting on the implementation of UNESCO's cultural conventions and other relevant international instruments.

- **Standardized methodologies** – Developing clear guidelines and methodologies for data collection, ensuring consistency and comparability across different national contexts. This standardization should accommodate varying national capacities while maintaining common core standards,

particularly for contextualizing data (such as relating the number of mobile artists to population size). The development of clear internationally agreed definitions, appropriate to different cultural and linguistic contexts will be a prime task.

- **Capacity building for data collection** – Providing technical support and resources to strengthen national capacities for cultural statistics, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. This support should include training programmes, methodological toolkits and targeted assistance for developing national cultural information systems.

- **Triangulation across independent sources** – Complementing government data with information from CSOs, academic research and independent cultural observatories to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of cultural rights implementation.

- **Support for monitoring carried out by CSOs** – Beyond governmental and intergovernmental mechanisms, efforts should be made to increase the integration of cultural rights issues within established human rights monitoring mechanisms, particularly by promoting their inclusion in international submissions and enhancing engagement between specialized CSOs and the UN (including the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression). These complementary approaches would strengthen the overall monitoring ecosystem while ensuring diverse perspectives are represented in global cultural rights assessments.

While standardized quantitative indicators are essential, they must be fit for purpose and robustly produced and also complemented by qualitative assessments that capture the nuanced dimensions of cultural rights. These qualitative elements, often presented through periodic reports from Member States and CSOs, should include: (i) in-depth case studies highlighting both successful practices and persistent challenges; (ii) analysis of the experiences of specific cultural communities, particularly marginalized groups; (ii) assessment of the impact of emerging technologies on cultural rights; and, (iii) documentation of innovative approaches to cultural governance and participation.

Such qualitative information provides crucial context for interpreting quantitative indicators and understanding the complex factors influencing cultural rights implementation. This is particularly important for aspects that are challenging to quantify, such as the adequate remuneration of Indigenous cultural intellectual property or the quality of gender-responsive cultural policies.

While standardized monitoring approaches offer valuable comparative data, they must be complemented by region-specific considerations that address unique contextual challenges. Traditional knowledge systems and community-driven data generation approaches represent valuable but frequently overlooked resources in monitoring cultural rights implementation. For instance, many African communities maintain sophisticated informal practices for tracking cultural transmission, language vitality and heritage protection that exist outside formal institutional frameworks. Integrating these community-based monitoring approaches alongside conventional quantitative metrics would provide a more holistic understanding of cultural rights realization.

At the same time, several specific contextual factors require dedicated attention. Cultural destruction related to armed conflict has significantly impacted communities in countries like South Sudan, Mali and the Central African Republic, where traditional practices face erosion due to displacement and instability. Migration patterns, both forced and voluntary, reshape cultural transmission systems in profound ways that conventional metrics rarely capture. Additionally, globalization creates complex pressures on traditional cultural expressions, simultaneously offering new platforms for visibility while potentially accelerating homogenization. These factors highlight the importance of integrating cultural rights protection into broader peacebuilding, development and digital governance frameworks.

Power dynamics in monitoring processes demand particular attention, especially in contexts with limited governmental capacity or transparency. Relying primarily on governmental data risks perpetuating existing inequalities, particularly in countries with low response rates to international reporting mechanisms. CSOs and community representatives can be essential partners in data generation and interpretation provides crucial accountability and helps identify gaps in official reporting. The most

effective approach would combine standardized statistical monitoring coordinated by the UIS with the rich contextual information provided through periodic reporting. This integrated system would provide a more comprehensive basis for evidence-based policymaking, facilitating better targeted interventions and more effective international cooperation in advancing cultural rights.

Ultimately, strengthening monitoring and evaluation frameworks is not merely a technical exercise but a fundamental prerequisite for effective cultural rights protection. Only with robust, comparable and comprehensive data can the international community accurately assess progress, identify persistent challenges and develop appropriate responses to advance cultural rights for all. If culture is to find its place as a stand-alone development goal, alongside areas such as education, health and poverty alleviation, it will require Member States to commit political capital and financial resources to a strong application of cultural rights and a strong monitoring system to evaluate their implementation.

# Conclusions and key takeaways

Cultural rights are foundational elements of human dignity and sustainable development, intersecting with and enabling all dimensions of human rights. The review undertaken in this chapter reveals both significant progress and persistent challenges across the three core dimensions of cultural rights implementation.

Cultural rights are not peripheral considerations but central to how individuals and communities experience, express and transmit meaning. Available evidence reinforces the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration's recognition of culture as a global public good that warrants explicit recognition as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 development agenda.

The findings in this chapter confirm significant progress in establishing supportive policy frameworks for cultural rights. Digital innovation has expanded accessibility, with many countries implementing virtual formats and platforms. There is evidence of encouraging developments in the legal recognition of the status of artists, though implementation effectiveness varies considerably between high-income and low-income contexts.

However, persistent implementation gaps undermine the realization of cultural rights in practice. The digital divide continues to limit meaningful participation, particularly affecting rural and low-income communities. Regional disparities exist in supporting linguistic diversity despite widespread adoption of mother-tongue education. While cultural rights are comprehensively defined in global frameworks, monitoring mechanisms remain insufficient to ensure effective implementation.

Marked disparities in cultural rights implementation persist across regions and demographic groups. The implementation gap between formal recognition and practical protection emerges as a critical challenge. Gender inequalities also persist throughout cultural ecosystems, while Indigenous Peoples and cultural minorities encounter significant obstacles despite formal recognition of their rights.

Local governments often implement more effective approaches to cultural governance than national authorities. Multi-level coordination is shown to be essential, though it requires alignment between national, regional and local policies while ensuring meaningful stakeholder engagement. Cross-sectoral partnerships and civil society engagement demonstrate promise in expanding cultural participation, though coordination challenges affect sustainability.

Current monitoring frameworks for assessing cultural rights implementation remain inadequate. While improvements have been made in tracking legal frameworks, systems remain weak in assessing discrepancies between formal protections and practical safeguards. The monitoring framework better reflects intentions in official policies than in practice.

These persistent monitoring challenges confirm the need for a dedicated culture goal in the post-2030 development agenda. Such a goal would provide the necessary framework for strengthening data generation, developing standardized indicators

and implementing more effective cultural policies. It would enhance the international community's ability to monitor progress, identify challenges and implement solutions across all dimensions of cultural rights, recognizing them as essential components of human dignity and expression.

Based on the analysis of cultural rights' implementation globally carried out in this chapter, the following strategies are recommended to strengthen the protection and promotion of cultural rights across all dimensions:

- **Gender equality and inclusion.** Member States should implement mandatory gender impact assessments for all cultural policies and establish dedicated funding streams for women-led cultural initiatives. Special consideration must be given to intersectional barriers, recognizing that gender inequality often intersects with other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status. Cultural institutions should establish clear timelines for implementing gender-responsive measures, with specific benchmarks for increasing women's participation in leadership roles and creative positions.

- **Community and Indigenous cultural heritage management.** Governments should recognize and support diverse approaches to cultural heritage management, acknowledging that communities, particularly Indigenous Peoples, often have effective self-governance systems for managing their cultural expressions and living heritage. Where institutional structures are involved, co-governance frameworks should integrate traditional knowledge systems while respecting community autonomy. In alignment with the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, these approaches should affirm communities' role as primary custodians, with decision-making authority over their cultural expressions whether managed independently or in partnership with institutions. Support should include appropriate resources and capacity-building programmes while respecting communities' right to determine their preferred management systems.

- **Artistic freedom and status of the artist.** The protection of artistic freedom demands reinforced enforcement mechanisms, including independent monitoring bodies and legal protections against censorship and persecution. Professional development programmes need particular attention, combining traditional mentoring approaches with innovative peer-learning networks that support artists throughout their careers. Mobility support initiatives should be expanded, with special emphasis on addressing the Global North-South imbalance in artistic exchange opportunities.

- **Regional and international cooperation.** South-South cooperation should be strengthened through mechanisms such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network and other regional platforms. Regional cooperation mechanisms should be supported by sustainable funding frameworks and focus on strengthening networks of cultural institutions, enabling them to share resources and expertise more effectively. International cooperation should prioritize capacity building in regions with limited resources, particularly regarding rights management capacity and digital infrastructure development.

- **Multi-level governance and coordination.** At the national level, countries should establish inter-ministerial coordination bodies with explicit mandates and clear accountability frameworks, following successful models like France's Comité interministériel des affaires culturelles de l'Etat (Interministerial committee for cultural affairs). These bodies should ensure cultural considerations are integrated across all policy domains, from education to urban planning. Participatory governance mechanisms must be strengthened at all levels, with particular attention to ensuring meaningful engagement of marginalized communities in decision-making processes.

- **Addressing technological challenges and opportunities in cultural expression.** Governments, cultural and creative industries and advocacy groups should work together on a dual approach to technology: mitigating risks through stronger regulations, compensation models and ethical AI training practices to safeguard artists' rights, while simultaneously developing programmes that enable artists to harness new technologies as creative

tools. This includes education and training initiatives on digital content creation, funding for innovative digital art projects, and platforms for sharing best practices in utilizing AI and digital tools for cultural expression. Equal attention must be given to promoting culturally diverse digital content, ensuring technologies support rather than homogenize cultural expressions. Digital access initiatives should be expanded while addressing the persistent digital divide through inclusive infrastructure development and digital literacy programmes that empower both creators and audiences. At the core of all these developments and initiatives needs to be a joint fight against illicit trafficking, fraud, IP infringement, harassment and technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

- **Improved monitoring and data production.** UIS should take a leading role in developing standardized methodologies for cultural data collection and providing technical support to national statistical offices. International coordination for harmonizing measurement approaches is essential, complemented by capacity-building initiatives for countries with limited statistical resources. Monitoring frameworks should incorporate both quantitative indicators and qualitative assessments to capture the complex nature of cultural rights implementation.

- **A stand-alone culture goal.** The international community should establish culture as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 development agenda, with specific targets addressing access and participation in cultural life, protection of cultural diversity, artistic freedom and cultural governance. This goal would provide the necessary framework for strengthening data generation, developing standardized indicators and implementing more effective cultural policies, recognizing culture as an essential dimension of sustainable development and human expression.

# Policy Brief

## *Lucina Jiménez*

Doctor of Anthropological Sciences and expert in cultural policies and sustainable development

## Cultural rights for freedom, sustainability and equality

Cultural rights approaches have been enriched by the search for public cultural policies capable of meaningfully and pertinently influencing sustainable development, which also respects the rights of nature and all living beings. Guaranteeing these rights can contribute to reducing inequality gaps and building intercultural bridges for better understanding: making culture the way in which individuals, peoples and communities seek to be part of a diverse, equitable and peaceful world.

Designing public policies for the culture sector from a cultural rights perspective – across arts, heritage, reading and writing, film and digital media – allows us to prioritize their territorial, intersectoral and sustainable dimensions. These policies can maximize impact in responding to climate change, comprehensive development and harmonious coexistence – central themes in the post-2030 Agenda.

Achieving this strategic advance requires distinguishing between access policies that focus on the relationship between citizens and cultural products, goods, or services and the use of technological platforms, and those that promote participation in cultural and artistic life. This paradigm shift means emphasizing the recognition and development of cultural and artistic practices; facilitating citizen participation in cultural policy; deciding the expressions, memories, heritage and identities with which each person wishes to relate or to which they do not want to belong; promoting cultural democracy and digital and artificial intelligence ethics; diversifying content production; protecting artistic and artisanal creation, copyright and collective rights; recovering historically expropriated heritage or heritage resulting from illegal trade; and, emphasizing cultural sustainability.

Participating in cultural life commits us to defending the freedom of expression and creation inherent to democracy and promoting respect for differences; to shutting down hate speech, censorship and ideologization. We need artistic freedom to develop critical thinking, experiment with languages, engage in dialogue between tradition and innovation, and contribute to other fields. Working in favour of cultural life calls on governments, civil society and businesses to recognize the rights of artists to decent employment, better salaries, access to financing, social security and management autonomy, with international strategies still in the making.

In diverse societies, Indigenous languages must be present in the media, the administration of justice, medical care and in contemporary expressions. Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples and communities must be recognized not only in their cultural diversity, but as legal entities, subjects of law, with agency and the capacity to manage their own resources, as has recently happened in Mexico. Breaking away from patriarchal structures and heteronormative societies, from all forms of racism and discrimination against migrants, eradicating violence against women, and caring for children and youth, requires establishing a transversal gender focus as well as an intergenerational and intercultural approach that respects all subjectivities.

Strengthening cultural democracy requires investing in citizen training for diverse social actors in the region, including those who make decisions in cultural policy.

Developing cultural citizenship requires education in the arts, digitalization, cultural and artistic management, mobility, intercultural mediation, cultural economics, the construction of indicators and innovation to enrich institutional and citizen capacities, exploring new governance and participation schemes across all levels of government, civil society, artists, businesses, academia, activists, communities and citizenship.

The post 2030 agenda is an opportunity to reduce inequalities between the Global North and South, to share international experiences in financing systems, indicators and good practices. Achieving a cultural objective in the new agenda of global sustainable development will contribute to consolidating interconnected, non-regressive cultural rights that help promoting ecosystems, with public policy methodologies and tools based on comparative analysis and foresight for a democratic, egalitarian and peaceful future.

3D modelling visual for the UNESCO Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects. © Studio Francis Kéré GmbH

Chapter 2

# Leveraging digital technologies to reduce inequalities and stimulate innovation

# Creative Voices
## *Refik Anadol*

Co-Founder of Dataland
and Director of Refik Anadol Studio

## Reimagining aesthetics and cultural narratives in the age of artificial intelligence

The advent of artificial intelligence represents a profound reconfiguration of how we conceive, preserve and generate culture. While AI holds the potential to serve as both a repository of collective memory and an engine for new forms of creative expression – including co-creation, simulation and generative design – these capacities are far from neutral. AI systems are fundamentally shaped by the datasets they are trained on, which are often incomplete, proprietary, or historically biased. Rather than possessing agency, AI reflects the values and assumptions of its human creators, embedding and amplifying existing power structures unless critically examined. My practice resides within this complex terrain, exploring how machine learning might surface latent narratives embedded in ecological and cultural data, while remaining attentive to the ethical, aesthetic and epistemological implications of doing so.

Emerging technologies, particularly AI, hold the potential to reframe cultural heritage – not as static artefacts, sites and practices of the past, but as living, evolving phenomena. Through the computational interpretation of vast datasets – from ecological patterns to architectural archives – we can evoke the invisible, the ephemeral and the unseen. In our projects that draw from environmental data, for example, the shifting rhythms of wind, the slow drift of glaciers, or the complex movements of ocean currents are transformed into visual and spatial experiences. These works are not mere reflections of natural phenomena; they are reinterpretations that invite audiences to engage with the environment as an active, dynamic entity. In doing so, AI becomes a medium through which we do not simply observe nature but enter into a dialogue with it.

This reconfiguration extends to cultural heritage. Archives, traditionally viewed as static repositories, can be reimagined through AI as dynamic spaces of interaction. When machine learning models engage with architectural blueprints, historical documents, or visual art collections, they do not merely replicate existing forms – they generate new ones, uncover hidden patterns and reveal connections previously obscured by the limits of human perception. In this context, AI acts as a tool for rethinking how we narrate the past and envision the future.

As part of preserving and safeguarding cultural heritage, it is also imperative to explore how AI can revitalize and protect endangered and lost languages. Language preservation is not just about recording vocabulary and syntax but about capturing the cultural nuances, oral traditions and ways of thinking embedded within them. AI-driven linguistic models offer the ability to reconstruct phonetic patterns, generate new textual resources and facilitate accessibility, ensuring that linguistic diversity remains a vital part of our shared heritage. This is an area we are actively investigating, recognizing that language is as much a living entity as the cultures it sustains.

However, this transformative potential is accompanied by critical responsibilities. The integration of AI into the culture sector necessitates a rigorous commitment

to equity, inclusion, sustainability and ethical practice. Questions surrounding data sovereignty, authorship and access are central to any discourse on digital creativity. The datasets that inform AI systems often reflect historical biases; without careful curation and critical awareness, these biases risk being perpetuated or even amplified. Thus, the responsibility of building a more just digital world cannot rest solely on the shoulders of artists, curators and policymakers. While their leadership is vital, it must be in active dialogue with platform owners, developers, funders and data scientists – those shaping the very infrastructure of digital experience. Together, they must work to prevent not only the replication but also the amplification of systemic inequities through biased algorithms, extractive data practices, opaque governance and unequal access.

The democratization of digital cultural experiences must remain a priority. Technology should not reinforce existing hierarchies of access but rather dismantle them. In my work, this principle is embodied through public installations that transform urban environments into open galleries, where data-driven art becomes part of the shared fabric of daily life. By situating digital art outside traditional institutional spaces, we create opportunities for broader participation, as well as cultural encounters that are both accessible and transformative.

The intersection of AI and culture demands both imaginative boldness and ethical clarity. As we stand at this juncture, we must envision a future where emerging technologies do not simply mirror our world but expand our capacity to understand, protect and reimagine it. This is not only the promise of AI in the culture sector; it is its imperative.

Machine Hallucinations: Coral Dreams, 2021 by Refik Anadol. The artist has produced this work using Generative AI, and entirely assumes responsibility for his creation.

# Leveraging digital technologies to reduce inequalities and stimulate innovation

**Alejandra López Gabrielidis**
Philosopher specialized in Arts and Digital Technologies.

# Overview

**01.** While digital access is expanding, disparities persist in rates of access to digital infrastructure and skills training, with wealthier nations leading. The digital gender divide persists, with women, girls and the elderly facing significant barriers to internet access and digital participation. This is particularly apparent in lower-income regions and limits their ability to engage with and contribute to the digital cultural sphere. Digital literacy and upskilling are essential for culture professionals and broader society to navigate rapid technological changes, mitigate risks and take advantage of the opportunities of digital access. As such, increased public funding for digital infrastructure is crucial to address barriers to accessing and participating in culture.

**02.** Artificial intelligence systems pose new risks to cultural diversity and the visibility and circulation of diverse cultural expressions. This is due to the rapid expansion of AI-generated content, increasing the risk of biases embedded in training data and reinforcing hegemonic narratives and linguistic inequity. The exponential rise of synthetic content also raises concerns about 'model collapse', where AI systems degrade due to over-reliance on AI-generated data, threatening the diversity of digital cultural expressions in AI outcomes.

**03.** The digitization of cultural heritage must be accompanied by comprehensive policies to address governance, ethical risks and cultural data sovereignty. Current gaps in standardized digitization frameworks for cultural heritage – particularly in the Global South – can limit equitable access and cultural representation in digital spaces.

**04.** There is growing evidence of widespread unethical practices by many AI companies in the collection of training data, including the systematic scraping of copyrighted cultural content without consent or consideration of legal exception. This poses significant challenges in implementing intellectual property laws within these contexts. The technical complexities of AI model-training processes and model generation make it difficult for current copyright and intellectual property laws to effectively protect artists, cultural creators and the collective nature of data used in AI training. As such, this requires urgent legal and regulatory adaptation and innovation.

**05.** Cultural data is a key factor in AI development, as a key source for training AI models, yet its role remains largely unrecognized in policy frameworks. AI systems rely on vast amounts of cultural data to refine their capabilities, which subsequently generates large economic benefits for their owners without redistributing value. As such, policies must acknowledge cultural, economic and cognitive value, ensuring recognition, regulation and protection. They should also implement mechanisms to ensure fair compensation and redistribution of its value at a societal level.

# Introduction

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In April 2024, the Artist Rights Alliance (ARA) – a non-profit, artist-led education and advocacy organization – published an open letter denouncing unethical practices in the use and development of AI with regard to artists' work. The letter was signed by 200 artists, including Aerosmith, Aimee Mann, Billie Eilish, the estates of Bob Marley and Frank Sinatra, Elvis Costello, J Balvin, Juanes, Nicki Minaj and Pearl Jam. Their main concern was the irresponsible use of artistic works to train AI systems without the artists' permission, which diluted royalties and undermined fair compensation. The letter states 'We must protect against the predatory use of AI to steal professional artists' voices and likenesses, violate creators' rights and destroy the music ecosystem' (Artist Rights Alliance, 2024).

Artists raised similar concerns on the impact of AI on the culture sector in the MONDIACULT survey. One example was income declines, and concerns covered not only the music industry but also other artistic and creative domains, such as visual arts, cinema, illustration and design.

Artists and creators are, however, actively engaging with digital technologies and AI, showing through their works and experimentations that a more ethical, inclusive and skills-oriented approach is not only necessary but also feasible. Their efforts highlight critical challenges such as digital and AI literacy, the capacity to adapt to rapid technological advances, access to essential digital infrastructure, labour, moral and cultural rights and the need to ensure that artists maintain agency over their creative processes while fostering innovation.

## Box 4. "Proto", an example of a collaborative effort between human and machine

Proto, the 2019 album by performer and composer Holly Herndon, was composed using an AI system that she co-created with Mat Dryhurst. They developed their own dataset to train this system with recordings of their voices and those of close friends, who were both duly recognized and compensated for their contribution. The creative process was a collaborative effort between the human and the machine: as they trained the system, it produced vocal outputs that the artist then reworked. The end result is a polyphonic piece where the boundaries between human and AI are blurred – not in deceptive ways, but as a vocal ensemble that explicitly synergizes human and technological potential to create a new, hybrid sound. This outcome is not only an example of artistic innovation but also a model for equitable compensation. By integrating ethical remuneration practices, this approach establishes a framework where AI-driven creativity supports rather than undermines the cultural and artistic workforce.

Technological objects, systems and infrastructure are now intrinsic to all areas of culture – they are inseparable from them. Culture is both shaped by and rooted in the technological forms available in each historical moment because human and technological realities are interwoven. Viewing technology as something opposed to humanity leads us to think of culture as a defence against it. This deprives societies of the means to collectively think about technologies and democratize their development, use and governance for the common good. Viewing technology and humanity as opposed to each other from the outset is therefore misguided. Culture and technology must be integrated in healthy and sustainable ways, as they are two sides of the same coin: culture embodies the values, methods and thoughts that are externalized in technology. Technology, in turn, shapes societies, individual behaviours and the values that can be effectively supported and promoted. In this context, international organizations, public and private sector entities, policymakers and cultural institutions have a great responsibility to rise to the challenges that each historical moment brings in this interaction between culture and technology.

Digital devices, spaces and infrastructure are now fundamental components of cultural ecosystems, shaping how cultural goods and services are created, distributed and accessed. However, new technological capabilities not only create new opportunities but also new inequalities, and the digital divide remains a critical barrier to equitable participation in cultural life. While 66.6% of the global population has internet access, disparities are evident: less than 50% of Central, East, West and North Africa's population is connected, compared to well over 50% in most other regions (World Bank, 2023). The quality of internet access is also uneven – 89% of people in high-income countries have access to 5G, compared with only 1% in low-income countries (International Telecommunication Union, 2023). These asymmetries often manifest due to certain regions' extreme dependence on technical infrastructure that is produced or controlled by wealthier countries or the private sector. This can, in turn, impact the diversity of cultural expressions in the digital realm.

Gender disparities further exacerbate these divides: worldwide, 70% of men are using the internet, compared with 65% of women. This means that globally, there are 189 million more men than women using the internet. (International Telecommunication Union, 2024). Additionally, young people (15–24) are 13% more likely to use the internet than the rest of the population, illustrating generational gaps in digital engagement (International Telecommunication Union, 2024). Increased public funding for digital infrastructure is thus crucial to address barriers to access and foster equitable participation in culture.

Streaming, subscription and on-demand content services such as Netflix, YouTube and Spotify have radically transformed the way people access and enjoy cultural goods. In 2015, Spotify had 68 million monthly active users, but by 2024 this number had grown to 615 million (Backlinko, 2023). In 2020, Netflix users watched an average of 3.2 hours of video per day through the service, amounting to 6 billion collective hours per month (Comparitech, 2024). According to Netflix's 2024 Engagement Report, content consumption on the platform has increased significantly over the last five years, reaching a total of 94 billion hours played worldwide in the first half of 2024, more than double the volume recorded in 2020. Likewise, in recent years, podcast and audiobook consumption has skyrocketed (Edison Research, 2024; Grand View Research, 2024). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, are increasingly offering access to digital content or experiences. Furthermore, social media has created important channels of diffusion and promotion for artists and cultural creators. Software advances have also made the production of new music and its distribution more accessible and offer a realistic proposition for home-based production and recording, but financial returns to musicians have correspondingly fallen.

The proliferation of AI systems as part of the digital revolution presents additional significant opportunities and challenges for culture professionals, institutions and industries. The rise of generative AI is reshaping cultural content creation, as it is highly effective in generating scripts, fiction, music, images and videos. This has significant implications for the circulation of cultural goods. AI systems have also proven to be very effective in organizing and facilitating access to cultural institutions' collections, as well as in providing tools for the digitization and protection of cultural heritage. But AI poses many challenges as well, such as fair compensation for artists whose work has been used to train AI systems; risk of job losses for certain culture professionals; biases in AI outcomes; cultural flattening and homogenization; the reconfiguration of the concept of creativity; and, the increase of techno-monopolies. Beyond transforming how content is produced and distributed, AI systems will also have a major impact on artists' incomes. In 2023, the market for fully AI-generated music was valued at €1 billion and AI-generated audio-

visual content at €6 billion (CISAC, 2024). By 2028, these markets are projected to surge to €16 billion and €48 billion, respectively. However, this growth comes at a cost: music creators could lose up to €4 billion (24% of their revenue), while audio-visual creators face potential losses of €4.5 billion (21% of their revenue) due to AI-driven content replacing human work (CISAC, 2024).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the internet and digital technologies expanded beyond research centres and military organizations, a new world emerged where culture and everyday life began to develop digitally. Digital environments became new habitats – vital spaces for communication, thought exchange and sharing of ideas – and a key mediator for artistic, religious and traditional practices. This opened the possibility for establishing the social and cultural value of digital data. However, that opportunity was lost and in recent decades, the focus has been almost exclusively on the economic value of data. This has led to the commodification of life and culture in ways that were previously unimaginable. The recent proliferation of AI systems offers a renewed opportunity to rethink the nature and ownership of cultural data.

Cultural goods and services have a dual nature: they have cultural value, as they represent the modes of expression, sensibilities and cosmovision of a cultural group or individuals. They also have economic value, as they are exchanged in commercial terms and are the basis of the cultural and creative industries (UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, to protect culture it is essential to acknowledge and address its dual nature, as both aspects have specific particularities and challenges, linking cultural goods, services and activities to different actors, stakeholders, institutions and legal frameworks. This dual nature applies to all cultural goods and services, whether or not they are technologically mediated.

In the case of digital cultural goods, a third dimension of value emerges — cognitive value. This value comes out of datafication, which according to Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier (2013), is the transformation of social action into online quantified data. As such, datafied culture produces cultural data. We can define cultural data as the digital data and metadata issued out of the following:

- Digitized cultural goods (cultural heritage included);
- Digitized culture in a broad sense (digital data created from our online activities that are part of our contemporary digital life, regarding our commonality, our communications, habits, preferences, attention, friendships, interests, casual conversations, information searches, expressions of tastes, emotional status and responses, etc.);
- Production of cultural goods created by digital means;
- Distribution of cultural goods in digital environments;
- Promotion of cultural goods in digital environments; and,
- Consumption of cultural goods in digital environments.

In our daily lives, which are increasingly digitally mediated, we collectively contribute to the development of AI. More aptly described as collective intelligence rather artificial, they derive their 'intelligent' capacity from the cognitive potential embedded in cultural data. The more training data these algorithms process, the more refined their predictive and learning capabilities become. The current state of technical cognition is the result of decades of data being generated collectively using digital technologies and the internet. It is this datafied life that enables the extraction of cognitive value.

To fully protect culture in the digital context, the three types of value embedded in it must be recognized – namely, cultural, economic and cognitive. This is particularly relevant in discussions about cultural policy, where the narrative tends to consider AI as something new. But the perception of novelty of these systems must be balanced with an overall vision that recognizes the historical and social dimensions that made the emergence of these systems possible. In fact, culture is a major factor of innovation that has not been duly recognized in the development of these systems. The cognitive capabilities of AI do not derive solely from their algorithms but also from their ability to harness and process vast amounts of cultural data.

The datafication of culture in the last three decades is one of the main reasons why AI is as capable as it is today. In that sense, the equitable development and use of AI and digital technologies in the cultural and creative industries rely on the recognition, regulation and protection of cultural data as a collective common good.[74]

## Fostering access to digital infrastructure

Cultural rights, understood as the ability to access, participate in and contribute to cultural life, are considered universal human rights. In contemporary societies, the spheres of communication, socialization, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, access to information and knowledge, culture and education are already irrevocably connected – also enabled and/or limited, fostered or transformed – with digital technologies and the internet. Therefore, access to digital infrastructure and connectivity cannot be considered a privilege, but a necessary condition for guaranteeing cultural rights.

This principle of digital inclusion has been progressively recognized in many global governance frameworks that address digital rights and equitable access to technology. The UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (2020) advocates for universal connectivity and access to digital infrastructure by 2030 as fundamental for achieving the SDGs and reducing inequality. It also highlights the urgency of bridging the digital divide, particularly in underserved regions. The African Union Digital Transformation Strategy 2020–2030 (African Union, 2020) reinforced this perspective by framing internet access as a crucial factor for economic empowerment, social inclusion, democracy and human rights across the continent. At the same time, it called for universal access to digital technologies and the internet as a fundamental pillar of its development goals. The UNESCO Information for All Programme (IFAP) established the universal right for everyone to have access to education, job opportunities and health information, while SDG 16.10 calls for universal access to public information. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) further underlined the necessity of ensuring inclusive and accessible digital infrastructure to safeguard cultural and human rights in digital spaces and to address gender equality issues. That same year, the UN Human Rights Council Resolution on the Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet (2021) reaffirmed that the same human rights that apply offline must also be protected online, emphasizing that access to the internet should be recognized as a right rather than a privilege.

Building on these commitments, UNESCO has positioned digital inclusion as a core element in reducing inequalities and fostering cultural diversity online. Most recently, the Pact for the Future (UN, 2024a) reinforced digital cooperation as a key driver of sustainable development. It stressed the need to close digital divides, particularly between the Global North and South, to ensure that technological progress benefits all. Similarly, the Global Digital Compact (UN, 2024b), annexed to this document, explicitly calls for an inclusive, open and safe digital space that respects all human rights, including cultural rights. These instruments reflect a growing international consensus: digital access is not merely a matter of technological development but a fundamental enabler of cultural participation.

Studies also show that access to digital infrastructure is a condition for guaranteeing people's right to participate in cultural life. The Study on the Regional Situation of the Right to Culture in Latin America establishes households with computers and internet access as one of the indicators for monitoring cultural rights (OAS, 2022). It also highlights the importance of enabling universal access to culture by taking advantage of the resources of digital technology (OAS, 2022). The 2020 Annual Report of Cultural Statistics of Chile, revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of cultural life was sustained thanks to digital media and that, due to the lack of digital infrastructure

[74] *Cultural data as a common good refers to all the types of data mentioned above, insofar as they are not subject to intellectual property rights held by any specific rightsholder or when the rightsholder is not easily identifiable.*

in certain areas associated with rural and Indigenous communities, there was unequal access to digital content, thus affecting the universal right to cultural participation (MinCAP, 2020). Likewise, Peru's report Diagnosis of Infrastructure Gaps and Access to Services in the Culture Sector in 2023 identifies deficiencies of resources and digital infrastructure as an important barrier to the full realization of cultural rights, especially in underprivileged communities (Ministerio de Cultura de Perú, 2023). Without equitable access to digital infrastructure, entire communities risk exclusion from cultural and creative life.

In the last decade there has been some progress in connectivity, and access to digital equipment and infrastructure. This trend is reflected in the GSMA Infrastructure score,[75] which shows a consistent and gradual increase across all income groups (high, upper-middle, lower-middle and low) from 2014 to 2024 (GSMA / BOP Consulting, 2024). Similarly, the GSMA Affordability scores have also exhibited a steady rise across all income groups and between Global South and Global North regions during the same period, albeit with a marginal decline in a number of global regions (EUNA, WANA, OC, LAC, CSA) and income groups (high income and lower-middle Income groups) in 2024 (GSMA / BOP Consulting, 2024).

Efforts to improve access to digital infrastructure have taken various forms, reflecting different national priorities and socioeconomic contexts. In Kenya, the National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure (NOFBI) project (DPI Africa, n/d.) has been a key government initiative aimed at expanding digital connectivity across the country, enhancing internet accessibility in both urban and rural areas. In India, the Digital India campaign (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India, n/d) seeks to improve online infrastructure and expand internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas, through the development of secure digital infrastructure, the digital delivery of government services and universal digital literacy. In Spain, the Connectivity Voucher programme provides financial assistance to economically vulnerable groups at risk of digital exclusion, as outlined in the Plan for Connectivity and Digital Infrastructure for Society, the Economy and Territories of Spain (Ministerio de Asuntos Económicos y Transformación Digital de España, 2020). Similarly, in the United States, the Digital Equity Act (National Digital Inclusion Alliance, n/d) funds state-level programmes designed to promote digital inclusion and expand access to information and communication technologies, particularly among underserved communities. These initiatives illustrate the diverse approaches adopted by governments to bridge digital divides, ensuring broader connectivity and digital resources as a foundation for inclusive digital transformation.

Despite overall improvements in digital infrastructure and affordability, as mentioned above, significant disparities persist between high- and low-income countries, as well as between the Global North and South. The average GSMA Infrastructure score data reveals uneven progress, with higher-income groups advancing at a faster pace, highlighting that while access is expanding, inequalities remain entrenched. The rate

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*[75] The Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) Internet Affordability Score measures the cost of mobile internet services and devices based on multiple factors, including mobile data affordability (cost of 1GB and 5GB data plans, particularly for lower-income populations), handset affordability (general device costs and affordability for the poorest consumers), and taxation (general and sector-specific taxes on mobile data and devices).*

*[76] "Average GSMA internet score". While the units are not explicitly stated as a standard measurement like a percentage (%) alongside the scores, the scores themselves are derived from weighted percentages and proportions and are presented on a scale of 0 to 100. They represent a score reflecting the level of internet infrastructure or affordability, respectively.*

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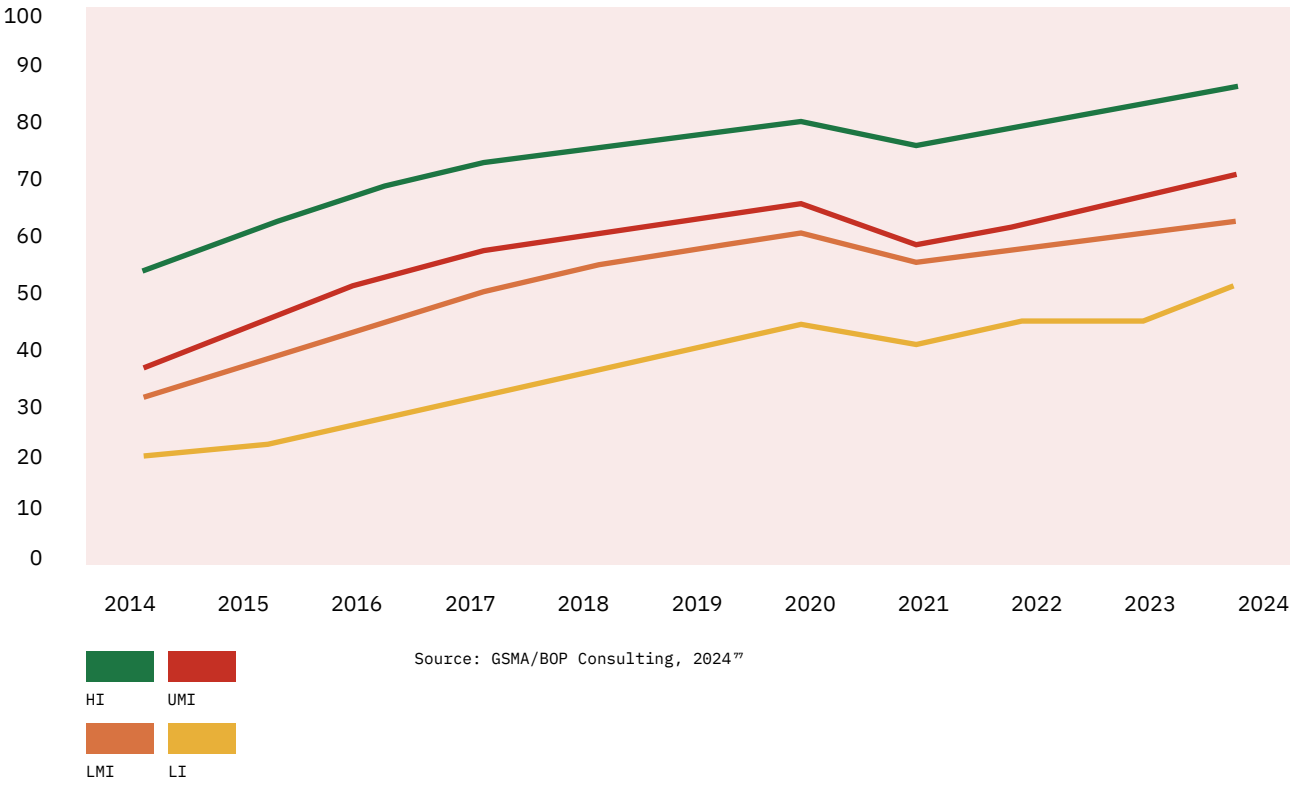
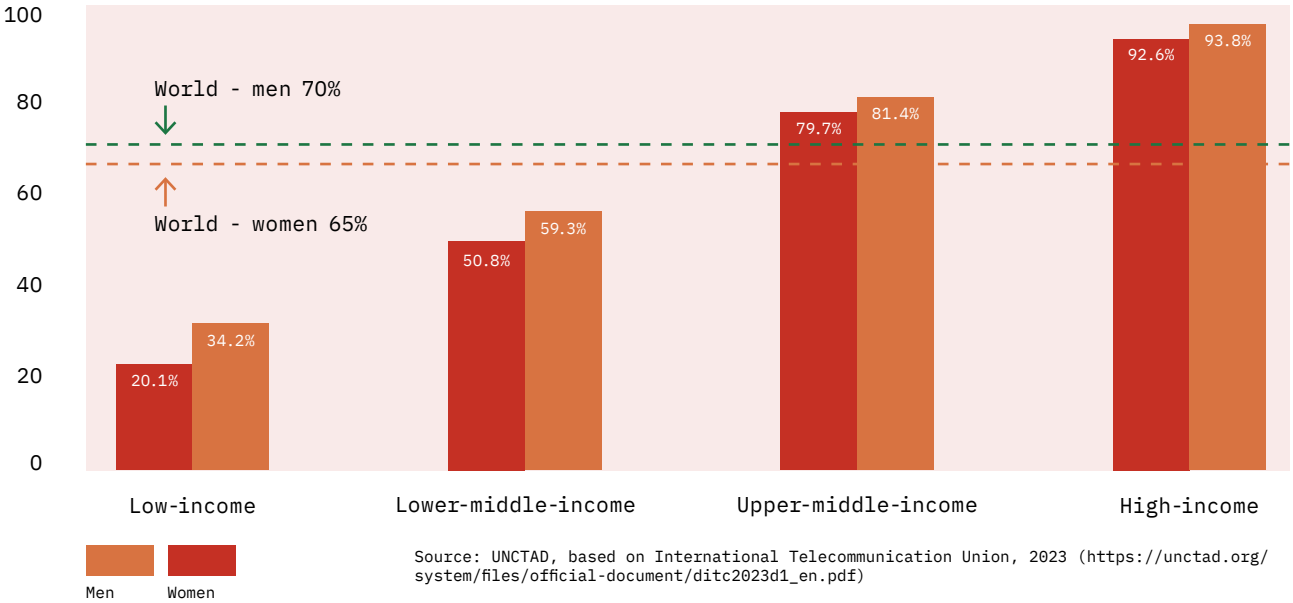
**Figure 7.**
**Average GSMA internet infrastructure score, by income group, 2014-2024.**




Source: GSMA/BOP Consulting, 2024[77]

**Figure 8.**
**Percentage of individuals using the Internet by gender and income group.**




Source: UNCTAD, based on International Telecommunication Union, 2023 (https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditc2023d1_en.pdf)

*[77] This publication is based in part on research conducted by the GSM Association with funding provided by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the GSMA, FCDO, Sida or BMGF*

Digital exhibition at TeamLab Tokyo, Japan

of improvement is not uniform, as wealthier nations and regions continue to progress more rapidly, reinforcing the persistent digital divide. While the average GSMA internet infrastructure score of high-income countries has improved from approximately 60 to 80 between 2014 and 2024, as Figure 7 shows, the score of upper-middle-income countries has increased from around 40 to just over 60, the score of lower-middle-income countries from about 30 to slightly above 50, and the one of low-income countries from nearly 20 to around 40, though at a slower pace. This data highlights a still significant gap between high- and low-income groups (GSMA / BOP Consulting, 2024).[76]

Additionally, there is a persistent digital gender divide, characterized by lower rates of internet and mobile internet use for women, especially in lower-income countries and regions (UNCTAD, based on International Telecommunication Union, 2023). The gender gap is a significant barrier to equitable participation in the digital cultural realm. Women and girls face significant barriers to digital access and participation, limiting their ability to create, engage with diverse digital cultural content and benefit from digital opportunities. Furthermore, technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a growing threat, so even if women and girls have access to internet, it is not a safe environment neither for women creators, nor for women and girls participating in digital culture and the digital cultural economy (UNFPA, 2024).

The various aspects of the digital divide mentioned above represent a complex reality that cannot be addressed with a single approach. One of the biggest problems in addressing these inequalities has to do with the current state of concentration of technological capital. This refers to the power and decision-making control held by a small group of technology companies, whose dominance creates dependency and makes much of cultural life subject to their profitability demands. As such, securing public funding for digital infrastructure is crucial for addressing the barriers that digital divides pose for access and participation in culture. This has commonly been addressed by countries instituting a Universal Access Fund, in which a levy on Telco and ISP profits is taken by the government to reinvest in underserved communities. However, UNESCO identifies a number of risks associated with this model, including: slow disbursement and underutilization of funds – with over US$ 11 billion remaining undisbursed across 64 countries studied; outdated regulatory frameworks; limited transparency and accountability; limited success in achieving rural broadband deployment despite it being a core mandate; poor inter-institutional coordination; lack of project sustainability; insufficient attention to gender equity; difficulty adapting to rapid technological change; weak impact assessment mechanisms; and, vulnerability to political and economic instability (UNESCO, n/d).

The challenges are considerable given the fact that there is a significant digital infrastructure investment gap, as it is estimated that at least US$ 1.6 trillion is required to close the global connectivity gap by 2030 (International Telecommunication Union, 2025). Rural areas, where infrastructure deployment faces high operational costs and low profitability, account for 70% of this financing gap (International Telecommunication Union, 2025). The situation therefore requires cross-sector collaboration and concerted efforts. According to International Telecommunication (ITU) recommendations, governments – in collaboration with development finance institutions (DFIs) – play a pivotal role in financing initiatives through grants, concessional funding, and risk mitigation strategies. This includes mechanisms such as public-private partnerships, government-backed guarantees and national investments targeting underserved areas. Innovative financing models are also needed, including pooled investment platforms to attract smaller investors and support small- and medium-sized projects, as well as blended finance mechanisms that integrate public, private and philanthropic contributions to reduce investment risks. A good example of blended financing is Internet para Todos (IpT, 2022) in Peru (2019–2023), a collaborative initiative between Telefónica, Meta, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) to expand broadband infrastructure in rural areas. By leveraging cross-sector partnerships, innovative technologies and a revenue-sharing model, the initiative has successfully expanded connectivity to over 3.5 million people. Additionally, partnerships across the connectivity value chain – encompassing device manufacturers, network providers and local governments – are essential for building an inclusive digital ecosystem.

However, the problem of the digital divide as a barrier for cultural rights cannot be seen solely in terms of universal access to these technologies. It must also include a perspective in which governments determine the way in which this access is conceived, through these cross-sector agreements, in order to make it operate within democratic frameworks of digital sovereignty and autonomy.

## Enhancing digital skills for creativity and innovation in the cultural and creative industries

Digital technologies in the cultural and creative industries can significantly contribute to innovation by enhancing efficiency, enabling new forms of cultural expression and management, giving tools for cultural organization and collaboration, fostering imagination and leveraging diversity. But the digital world is in constant evolution, giving rise to new tools that leave old ones obsolete, as well as automating tasks previously done by humans, thus disrupting cultural occupations such as film editing. This rapidly evolving nature of the digital landscape requires a comprehensive approach to equipping culture professionals with the necessary skills to navigate emerging technologies while ensuring inclusiveness and sustainability. The MONDIACULT Declaration (UNESCO, 2022) recognizes the structural impact of digital transformation on cultural and creative industries and advocates for the integration of digital literacy into education to enhance knowledge, conservation and cultural diversity. Furthermore, digital literacy is recognized as a cornerstone of national development, enabling individuals to engage with digital technologies in education, communication and employment (ITU, 2023; UNDP, 2023).

Similarly, the Global Digital Compact (UN, 2024) highlights the development of open-source digital public goods and tailored digital skills programmes for marginalized groups, ensuring equitable participation in the digital economy. Regulation plays a crucial role in these efforts, as reflected in the Global Digital Regulatory Outlook 2023 by the ITU, which benchmarks global digital governance and informs policy adaptation to foster digital transformation. It also emphasizes that digital skills are essential not only for artists and professionals but also for arts organizations and public sector employees (ITU, 2023a). This report highlights the importance of public sector readiness in responding to digital disruption and ensuring effective support for the cultural and creative industries.

Many UNESCO Member States report having digital literacy programmes for creation and experimentation. However, there is significant variation in the implementation of digital literacy programmes, with higher-income countries more likely to have them. A clear disparity exists between the Global North and Global South, with respectively 70% and 54% of countries reporting having programmes. These disparities suggest that access to digital literacy resources is not evenly distributed, reinforcing the digital divide (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). Lack of digital skills limits people's ability to participate in culture, innovate in forms of expression and creativity, and generate income sustainably and lifelong. Furthermore, it impacts a country's ability to boost innovation and engage in the global digital economy, something that is crucial especially for the Global South. This skill gap also restricts access to emerging employment opportunities in the cultural heritage sector, including those requiring technical proficiency in operating digital devices such as drones or remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), which are increasingly used for documentation, preservation and monitoring of cultural sites. Addressing these disparities is critical for ensuring more equitable participation in the digital world and leveraging the potential of digital technologies for cultural expression and innovation. This could involve educational partnerships and capacity-building initiatives leveraging digital online platforms to bring educational resources to different regions and countries that have lower resources for investment in digital literacy programmes.

Another issue is the impact of generative AI on employment. The proliferation of generative AI tools that can execute tasks related to image generation, writing or music production is leading to significant job losses in the cultural and creative industries. Studies and surveys from 2023 and early 2024 reveal significant

declines in job opportunities and earnings for professionals like copywriters, graphic designers, illustrators and translators, with many fearing further income reductions in the future (SoA, 2024; Hui et al., 2023). In the music industry, research studies suggest that by 2028, AI could jeopardize 27% of music creators' revenues, potentially resulting in financial losses of nearly €950 million annually and a cumulative impact of around €2.7 billion over five years (Kulesz, 2024).

To reduce job losses and to facilitate a fair transition, it is crucial to upskill the cultural and creative industries workforce in the of AI. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence of 2021 underscores the importance of AI education and digital training for artists and creative professionals. The result of providing professionals in these fields with the necessary expertise to effectively navigate AI technologies may be to ensure their advantages are leveraged while potential risks are mitigated. Given the wide-ranging nature of cultural and creative industries, however, the impacts of AI systems vary significantly across different fields and stages of the value chain. Some of these domains include: automated subtitling in audio-visual production, AI-assisted music composition, algorithmic curation in publishing, and the use of generative tools in graphic design and illustration. Effective and responsive policymaking will therefore require granular, sector-specific data, as well as mechanisms to identify and anticipate the evolving digital skill needs of professionals – whether they work in performance, heritage conservation, media arts, or independent publishing. This nuanced understanding is essential to design targeted upskilling strategies that reflect the specific dynamics of each sub-sector and ensure inclusive adaptation to technological change.

Specific demographic and socioeconomic groups experience more significant barriers to digital access and participation. Lower incomes can limit people's ability to benefit from AI-driven innovations in the culture sector. Older individuals are also less likely to adopt new AI technologies due to lack of training and lower levels of digital literacy. Women artists have been at the forefront of the intersection of art, technology and science. Notable examples include Ada Lovelace's visionary understanding of the potential of machines to create, or more recently , the I am AI pop music album, the first to be composed and produced with AI with input by the human artist Taryn Southern (2018). Nevertheless, gender is another transversal factor of inequality in terms of access and digital literacy, and this gap is becoming increasingly evident in the field of AI. As of 2023, women make up only about 30% of the global AI workforce (World Economic Forum, 2023) – the gender gap in acquiring future-oriented skills remains significant. While online platforms offer flexibility and accessibility, persistent digital divides limit women's access compared to men. Even when women engage in online learning, disparities are evident in crucial skill areas expected to grow in demand. For instance, as of 2022, women's enrolment in technological skills such as technological literacy (43.7%), AI and big data (33.7%) remained below 50%. The gender gap widens as proficiency levels increase (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Analysis from the UNESCO Creative Cities Network indicates that most cities are implementing measures and initiatives to enhance digital competencies and skills among culture professionals and civil society in general. The most frequently referenced policies focus on upskilling (100 cities), followed by partnerships across education and training institutions, certification, lifelong learning and TVET systems. However, only 16 out of 132 cities responding to the UNESCO Creative Cities Network report referenced programmes targeting youth, 4 referenced programmes targeting women and 11 for senior citizens. This highlights a critical gap in ensuring equitable access to digital training opportunities across different demographic groups (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). Digital literacy and upskilling programmes should therefore target the most vulnerable groups and be responsive to age, income and gender. They should focus on increasing participation among youth, women and older individuals to combat persistent digital divides. Addressing these disparities through inclusive policies and initiatives will be crucial for fostering equitable access to AI and digital competencies in the cultural and creative industries.

Combined with specialized programmes for developing and enhancing digital skills, digital literacy is fundamental to fostering inclusive participation in cultural life. Integrating AI education into school curricula is particularly crucial to equip future culture professionals with the knowledge needed to engage with these technologies effectively. Initiatives such as AI Leap in Estonia are beginning to emerge to bridge this gap. The programme will provide AI applications and training

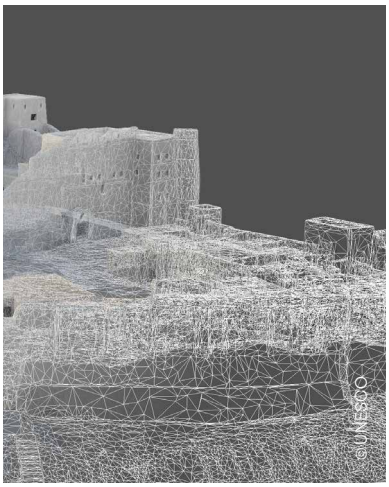
for both students and teachers, ensuring broader digital literacy and preparedness for future technological demands. To facilitate its implementation, the AI Leap Foundation will be established as a collaborative effort between the government and some private technology companies (e-Estonia, 2025). Similar efforts are underway in other regions: China has introduced AI curricula in primary and secondary schools to foster early engagement with artificial intelligence, while Indonesia has initiated pilot programmes aimed at exploring the role of AI in driving systemic reforms across the public education sector (Channel News Asia, 2024; Asia News Network, 2024).

As culture is a driver of innovation and economic expansion, equipping individuals with digital competencies enables them to access cultural goods and services more effectively, and to engage in creative production and distribution. With the cultural and creative industries contributing 3.39% to global GDP[78] and representing a mean share of 3.55% of employment[79] (2005 Convention Periodic Reports / 2023 Eurostat Data), enhancing digital skills strengthens their role as engines of economic growth. Digital education is particularly important for lower-income countries, providing them with the tools to reposition themselves in the global economy, fostering innovation and unlocking new opportunities for sustainable development.

Coordinated efforts by national and local governments, alongside international cooperation and public-private partnerships, are necessary to design and implement effective digital literacy and upskilling programmes. Such initiatives require sustained policy commitments and investment to ensure equitable access to digital education and cultural participation. Strengthening these collaborative frameworks is also essential to enable individuals to fully engage in the creative economy and reinforce culture's role in promoting social inclusion and economic resilience. These concerted efforts will be critical to ensuring that the cultural and creative industries contribute to inclusive and sustainable growth in support of the SDGs outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## Digitizing and increasing access to cultural heritage

The digitization of cultural heritage has become an essential strategy for recording, promoting and increasing access to cultural expressions. It is more than just a technical process, and represents a fundamental mechanism for increasing access to both tangible and intangible heritage. It also ensures their transmission across generations and expanding its role in contemporary cultural life. Digital technologies provide powerful tools to document, restore and disseminate cultural assets – including underwater cultural heritage – and to enhance the understanding of heritage values, fostering new ways of engaging with the past while shaping the cultural landscapes of the future.




3D model (wireframe) of the World Heritage property "Bahla Fort" in Oman. UNESCO, Dive into Heritage

The digital transformation of cultural heritage involves a complex interplay of innovation, policy and governance. Institutions worldwide so far have embraced technologies such as 3D scanning and photogrammetry, remote sensing and AI to enhance the preservation and accessibility of heritage. Through digital archives and open-access platforms – including digital storytelling – historical monuments, archaeological sites and artistic artefacts are now available to global audiences, reducing geographical and economic barriers to cultural engagement. A key example of this transformation is the Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, which aims to foster the creation and reuse of digital cultural heritage content in the cultural and creative industries. It aggregates digitized cultural heritage content – accompanied by high-quality metadata, including 3D formats – from over 4,000 museums, libraries, archives and galleries across Europe resulting in more than 50 million digitized objects (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

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[78] *Estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.*

[79] *Mean share of employment for the 61 countries for which there is available data.*

Traditional Fishing of the Weenhayek people in Bolivia, is among the living heritage identified with the communities as part of the project 'International Food Atlas and Digital Platform for Safeguarding, Promoting and Transmitting Foodways to Future Generations'

UNESCO is also contributing to this shift through the new digital platform Dive into Heritage. It leverages digital technologies by creating immersive and interactive 3D experiences to enhance understanding of World Heritage values and their related intangible cultural heritage, while also supporting conservation and monitoring efforts. Funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the project's first phase focuses on the Arab States region and is set to be launched in 2025. At the same time, intangible cultural heritage – including oral traditions, rituals and Indigenous knowledge systems – is being recorded and shared through digital storytelling, multimedia documentation and AI-assisted language preservation, reinforcing cultural diversity in digital environments. In this regard, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has developed an online platform for sharing good safeguarding experiences. The platform promotes participatory and bottom-up principles. Developed in the framework of a broader implementation of Article 18 of the 2003 Convention — the platform aims to enhance the visibility of community-led safeguarding efforts, leveraging the digital environment to bring to the forefront the voices, experiences, and approaches of communities regarding the safeguarding and transmission of their living heritage.

Museums are playing a significant role in digital heritage preservation: some recent examples include the National Museum Lagos, which in mid-2023 launched a project to create detailed 3D scans of its artefacts (METROPOL, 2024). This initiative aims to ensure the digital preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage while broadening accessibility to both national and international audiences. Similarly, in Europe, the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin (n/d), initiated a pilot project in October 2021 to digitize 500,000 insect specimens using a semi-automated conveyor belt system. This large-scale effort seeks to enhance public access and facilitate scientific research, demonstrating how digital technologies can transform the way institutions safeguard and disseminate cultural and natural heritage. Digitization initiatives of cultural heritage as these ones can bridge preservation needs with broader accessibility and knowledge-sharing objectives.

However, the lack of comprehensive digitization strategies can pose significant risks to the preservation and security of cultural heritage, as demonstrated by the recent challenges faced by the British Museum. In August 2023, it was revealed that approximately 2,000 artefacts – including gold, jewellery and gems – had been stolen over an extended period, exposing critical gaps in the museum's documentation and inventory management (Sherwood, 2023). A subsequent internal review determined that many of the stolen items had not been properly catalogued or digitized, making their recovery particularly difficult. In response to this situation, in October 2023, the institution announced a five-year plan to digitize its entire collection, aiming to enhance security, accessibility and transparency. This case underscores the urgent need for comprehensive digitization policies in cultural institutions, including in museums, not only to expand public access to heritage but also to safeguard collections against loss, theft and mismanagement.

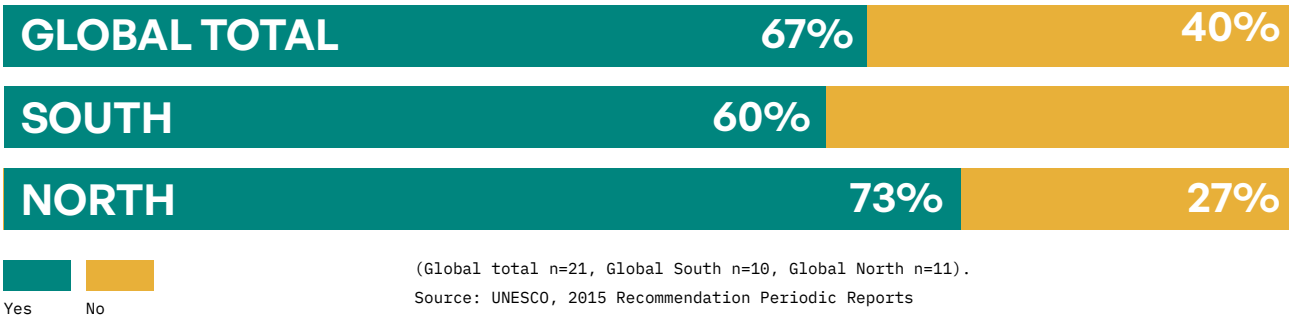
Global policy frameworks have also integrated digital technologies into heritage management. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration highlights the need to build institutional capacities for the use of digital technologies in safeguarding, promoting, digitizing and inventorying cultural heritage, recognizing their role in ensuring its conservation and accessibility (Section II, para. 18). It also stresses the importance of digital tools in combatting illicit trafficking of cultural property, emphasizing their potential to track, document and protect heritage from illegal trade. The UNESCO Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects serves as a pioneering use of digital tools to raise awareness and promote cultural heritage safeguarding. By digitizing stolen cultural objects selected by Member States in 3D and contextualizing them with educational content and testimonials from the communities of origin of the objects, the Virtual Museum will enhance their visibility, thus facilitating their return. Through this initiative, UNESCO emphasizes how digital technologies and AI tools can play an essential role to protect cultural heritage and make it accessible to all.

Geospatial information technologies – such as remote sensing and geographic information systems (GIS) – are playing a growing role in monitoring the conservation status of tangible heritage. These tools help detect and analyse both natural and human-induced threats, from sudden events like wildfires and floods to slow-onset risks such as coastal erosion and sea-level rise. The availability of open-access datasets from Earth observation projects further enhances this capacity, allowing for the visualisation of risks through digital maps – an increasingly widespread format thanks to mobile apps and geolocation tools. An example of such application is UNESCO's World Heritage Online Map Platform (UNESCO World Heritage, n/d, a), which provides heritage stakeholders and the public with accessible, high-quality monitoring data.

The relevance of AI in cultural heritage has also gained increasing attention in global policy discussions. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) encourages Member States to integrate AI systems into the preservation, enrichment, understanding, promotion, management and accessibility of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. As an example, AI-powered systems are increasingly used to classify and catalogue vast collections, identifying patterns and relationships between artefacts that might otherwise remain undiscovered. Incorporating virtual reality (VR) and virtual tours of sites and museums allows them to be appreciated as fully three-dimensional objects or environments, rather than flat images. Restoring three-dimensionality makes objects and sites more relatable and brings heritage alive. Three-dimensional analysis has also strongly affected academic studies: fossil and artefact scanning of Egyptian mummies has provided non-destructive views of internal organs. To take one remarkable example, a three-dimensional reconstruction of one Egyptian throat has even allowed his voice to be synthesized (Pruitt, 2020).

However, such technological advances must be accompanied by inclusive policies that ensure digitized collections remain accessible, adaptable for educational purposes and open to creative reuse. It is essential to implement standardized metadata and interoperability protocols to facilitate cross-institutional exchanges and expand the reach of digitized heritage resources. Furthermore, policy frameworks should promote interoperability, sustainability and long-term digital preservation planning, not just access and usage. According to the Periodic Reporting of the 2015 Recommendation, the majority of the 21 Member States who responded (67%) report having a standardized or unified inventory system (manual or digital), enforced by their government. However, there is a notable difference between the Global North and Global South, with the former showing a higher percentage (73%) of Member States enforcing these systems compared to the latter (60%). The lack of standardized guidelines for the digitization of cultural heritage in the Global South poses a major challenge to cultural diversity in the digital realm.

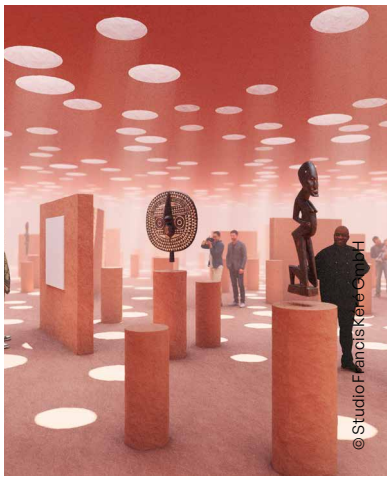
**Figure 9. Member States reporting their government enforces a standardized / unified inventory system (manual or digital) at national or other appropriate level with guidance on standards of documentation, by Global North / Global South.**




(Global total n=21, Global South n=10, Global North n=11).
Source: UNESCO, 2015 Recommendation Periodic Reports

Alongside the many benefits of digitizing cultural heritage, the risks and challenges to adequately inform and mobilize cultural policies in this area must be acknowledged. One of the risks associated with the digitization of cultural heritage, concerning both land and underwater heritage, is that increasing access can simultaneously facilitate unethical practices. An example of this is the Afghan Genizah, a collection of historical documents from northern Afghanistan that appeared on the international market after being stolen. These manuscripts were then digitized and incorporated into the Ktiv online portal. This process was framed as an act of preservation and accessibility, however, effectively functioned as a digital transit port – an online space where illicit cultural objects pass through in digital form on their way to public legitimization. Such digital transit ports enable stolen heritage to be showcased in virtual environments, distancing objects from their source communities, connecting virtual consumers with illicit cultural goods and ultimately facilitating their integration into academic and market spaces (Palombo and Yates, 2023).

Digital tools and AI can, however, be utilized to help monitor the illicit trafficking of cultural property, as shown by the SIGNIFICANCE project (Abate et al., 2022; The Cyprus Institute, 2022). This project, funded by Horizon Europe, developed a platform using AI and deep learning to help authorities identify, track and block illegal online activities related to cultural goods. By performing web scraping on social networks, sales platforms and the dark web, it analyses images and text with advanced algorithms to detect signs of illicit trafficking and dismantle criminal networks.




3D modelling visual for the UNESCO Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects

It also incorporates a data ontology that provides contextual information on the provenance, legal status and cultural significance of identified objects, facilitating informed decision-making during investigations (Abate and al., 2022).

AI also has great potential for application in the preservation of Indigenous identities, the conservation of cultural heritage and the revitalization of languages. For example, in Mexico, a team of researchers from the Autonomous Metropolitan University developed to preserve Indigenous clothing. Using a battery-powered machine capable of processing text strings using AI techniques, they were able to preserve the formal and aesthetic qualities of Indigenous clothing from the Chiapas Highlands region, and also explore possible contemporary clothing proposals. The aim was to reconstruct the traditional clothing's iconography from photographic samples of textiles from the region (UNESCO, 2023). However, given that a large part of these types of initiatives are carried out from outside the communities, these projects must be restructured from a perspective of respect for their perspectives and priorities, and to ensure ownership in their leadership, development and implementation.

Regarding this, digitization also presents broader challenges related to the appropriation and misrepresentation of cultural knowledge, particularly in the context of AI. The African Union's AI Strategy (2024) warns of the risks of subverting Indigenous Knowledge and African cultural heritage through AI-driven misrepresentations, which may erode living heritage practices and hinder their continued transmission. Moreover, the inadequate representation of Indigenous traditions in AI models can contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge systems, which have historically played a central role in African cultural and intellectual heritage. As stressed by the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) and the preamble of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the participation of the communities themselves in safeguarding endangered and Indigenous languages and knowledge is of crucial importance. This is to ensure that digital heritage initiatives remain inclusive, ethically governed and aligned with the diverse cultural expressions and values of different communities. At the core of this discussion is the question of cultural data sovereignty, which refers to the right of Indigenous Peoples to control the collection, access, use and dissemination of data related to their culture, heritage and traditional knowledge. This means that the unique relationship between Indigenous Peoples and their data needs to be recognized, emphasizing self-determination, control and benefit for the community. This concept challenges traditional data governance models that often prioritize external control and exploitation, advocating instead for culturally appropriate and equitable data management practices.

As heritage institutions increasingly digitize collections, Indigenous Peoples and historically marginalized communities are asserting their right to control how their cultural assets are recorded, stored and shared. The goal is also to resist digital extractivism – an approach aligned with the rights articulated in Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN, 2007). A good example of this approach is Local Contexts (n/d), a global initiative that supports Indigenous communities with tools that can reassert cultural authority in heritage collections and data. By focusing on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and Indigenous Data Sovereignty, Local Contexts support Indigenous communities to repatriate knowledge and gain control over how their data is collected, managed, displayed, accessed and used in the future. Another eloquent example of this approach is Te Mana Raraunga, the Māori Data Sovereignty Network in New Zealand that develops protocols for Māori community data to be managed by Māori communities themselves (Te Mana Raraunga, n/d).

Similar efforts to engage communities and promote inclusive practices in cultural heritage preservation were reflected in the March 2025 event Women. Heritage. Digital Technology – Action to Safeguard World Heritage in Africa (UNESCO, n/d, b). Designed to enhance the visibility and agency of women in the sector, the initiative focused on strengthening their leadership and technical competencies in areas such as photogrammetry, virtual reality and drone-based mapping. By addressing the considerable gender imbalance in heritage management – only 3 out of 140 World Heritage site managers in Sub-Saharan Africa are women – the event underscored the need for structural change. It also emphasized the critical role of digital technologies in enabling women to shape conservation strategies, contribute to sustainable development and reclaim narrative authority over cultural heritage. In addition to capacity building, the initiative called for gender-transformative policies and fostered collaborative networks aimed at cultivating a more inclusive and equitable ecosystem at the intersection of heritage and digital innovation.

# Box 5. The UNESCO Urban Heritage Atlas, World Heritage Canopy and climate hazard assessments

In response to decisions of the Executive Board and resolutions of the General Conference and following the requests of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO has developed a digital platform, UNESCO Urban Heritage Atlas (UNESCO World Heritage Centre. n/d, b). Based on the approach of the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, which also includes a glossary of definitions (UNESCO, 2011), the Atlas was launched at an Information Meeting for all Member States on 9 February 2024, and functions at multiple levels as a platform to educate and raise awareness about urban heritage for all stakeholders, and a tool to support professionals directly engaged with the management of historic urban areas to better protect and conserve them. This new digital tool and platform supports the conservation of urban heritage and serves to guide compatible new designs in historic contexts. The Atlas is linked to a second resource, Managing Urban Heritage, and its digital tools that provide practical guidance for national and local authorities on the implementation of the 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape in a framework that advances sustainable development and climate resilience in historic cities and settlements. The Managing Urban Heritage manual and related digital tools are currently under development.

Another example is the World Heritage Canopy (UNESCO World Heritage Centre. n/d, d), a living digital platform of innovative and good practices for heritage-based solutions for sustainable development at the local level. Finally, in response to Member States' calls for stronger climate action, UNESCO collaborated with the Group on Earth Observation (GEO) and the Greek GEO Office to assess climate hazards facing 114 World Heritage Cities in the Mediterranean region. The report, Climate Change in Mediterranean World Heritage Cities, finds that nearly two-thirds of them were already experiencing at least one climate change-related hazard, and a fifth of them were experiencing multiple climate change-related hazards. A high-level launch of this report at the end of June 2025 raised much interest in the IPCC Chair and Vice Chair of the 7th Assessment Report. The report also highlighted urban heritage as a resource for adaptation and mitigation solutions and provided recommendations to enhance its resilience.

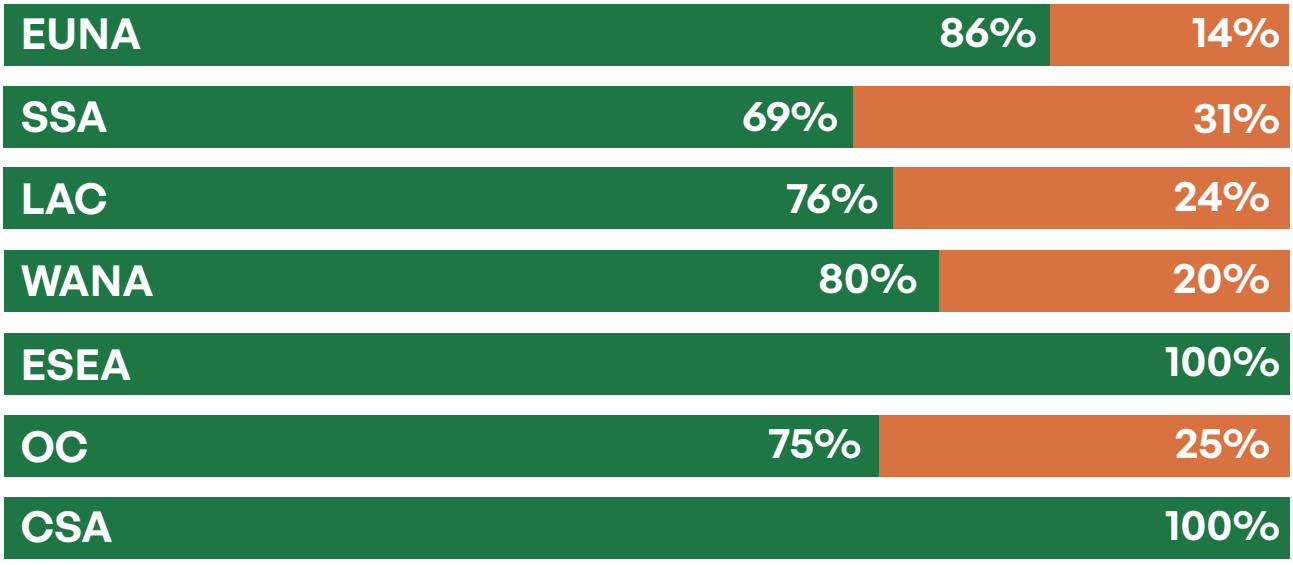
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000394251

## Diversifying cultural expressions in the digital realm

The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions remains the cornerstone for safeguarding cultural diversity, recognizing that globalization and digital technologies present both opportunities and challenges for equitable cultural participation. This concern is reinforced by the Operational Guidelines on the Implementation of the 2005 Convention in the Digital Environment (2017), which call for policies that ensure the discoverability of national and local cultural content, promote digital competencies and encourage transparency in algorithmic governance. The Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity report (UNESCO, 2022) emphasizes the importance of supporting diverse content in digital media and ensuring broad access to cultural expressions online, and the importance of fostering local cultural markets and ensuring access to diverse cultural goods globally. Additionally, Council of Europe Recommendations (2018, 2019) address transparency in media ownership, the role of internet intermediaries and the promotion of pluralistic content in digital platforms.

When analysing the landscape of policies for cultural diversity in digital environments, data suggests that a significant proportion of countries are implementing measures to enhance the access to and discoverability of their domestic cultural content in the digital environment, as Figure 10 shows.

**Figure 10. Member States reporting policies and measures enhancing access to and discoverability of domestically produced cultural content in the digital environment, by regional group.**




(Global total n=113, Europe and North American States n=36, Sub Saharan Africa States n=29, Latin American and Caribbean States n=18, Eastern and South-eastern Asian States n=7, West Asian and North African States n=16, Central and Southern Asian States n=3, Oceanian States n=4).

Source: UNESCO, 2005 Convention Periodic Reports.

However, significant barriers persist, and linguistic domination stands out as one of the biggest. For example, although less than 20% of the global population speaks English as a first language, over half of all websites are in English (Kulesz, 2024). This linguistic asymmetry impacts the visibility and circulation of cultural expressions, reinforcing structural inequalities. The Los Pinos Declaration (2020) addresses these challenges by advocating for greater Indigenous representation in digital media, and initiatives such as the IberCultura Viva Program (IberCultura Viva, 2024) aim to respond to this need. This programme fosters transnational collaboration between Latin American countries and Spain, supporting cultural networks that integrate Indigenous, Afro-descendant and migrant communities. One of its projects, Community Audio-visual Dictionaries (IberCultura Viva, 2024), empowers local communities in Peru to document and revitalize native languages through short audio-visual productions, demonstrating how digital tools can be leveraged to strengthen Indigenous languages and cultures, as well as cultural diversity.

Beside specific programmes to address the barriers in terms of access and discoverability of diverse cultural content in the digital environment, governments must also integrate systemic and structural responses into their national and local digital strategies. As such, they must implement measures that not only promote but also ensure the long-term discoverability of local cultural content. The initiatives implemented in Quebec by the Advisory Committee on the Discoverability of Diverse European Cultural Content in the Digital Environment (Beaudoin et al., 2024) are a strong example of this, fostering French-language cultural content in digital environments. Key international actions resulting from this initiative include strengthening the Franco-Quebec alliance and mobilizing francophone networks. Additional measures include funding mechanisms for cultural content production to ensure distribution in digital environments and to support new content types, increase financial support for dubbing and subtitling Quebecois audio-visual content into other languages. This Committee highlights, however, the lack of standardized metadata – such as title, author, genre and keywords – making it difficult to manage and share cultural works and thus the discoverability of Quebecois cultural content. To address this, the initiative

suggests promoting a unified framework for structuring descriptive data, ensuring compatibility across platforms and alignment with international standards. Furthermore, it considers the creation of a specialized Quebec organization to oversee standardization efforts, support stakeholders and monitor data practices. To encourage adoption, cultural organizations must adhere to these standards as a prerequisite for public funding, incentivizing them to comply. This type of initiative can serve as a guide for local and national governments to implement systemic measures that have a long-term effect on the inclusion of local cultural content in digital environments.

Another important factor to protect cultural diversity in digital environments is knowing the demographics of creators of cultural digital content in online platforms across different groups. However, there is a lack of accessible data and information on this area. Online platforms such as Netflix, YouTube and TikTok often withhold detailed demographic data on users and content creators, including gender, geographic origin, content type and earnings – primarily addressing privacy concerns and competitive interests. The lack of standardized regulations requiring such disclosures reinforces this opacity, allowing platforms to control the extent to which they share information. This lack of transparency in user and creator demographics carries significant consequences for addressing disparities within the digital content landscape. Without access to such data, researchers, policymakers and advocacy groups face challenges in identifying and mitigating structural inequalities, limiting their ability to design effective support mechanisms for underrepresented groups. Nevertheless, there has been some analysis on content creators:[80] A survey from Adobe (2022), for example, indicated that men were more likely to monetize their content than women, even when accounting for the slight overrepresentation of male content creators in the survey. The monetization platform, Patreon, shared data indicating that the majority of its creators are located in Canada and the USA, followed by Europe, with only 6% in the Asia Pacific Region and 1% in the Middle East & Africa region (Patreon, 2022).

AI also reinforces stereotypes of cultural diversity in the digital realm. A study by Rest of World that analysed 3,000 images created using Midjourney revealed that AI systems reproduce Western-centric stereotypes. For example, images from using the prompt 'an Indian person' primarily depicted older men in traditional attire, while 'an American person' often showed young, light-skinned women (Kulesz, 2024). The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) highlights the necessity of ensuring access to diverse cultural expressions in AI-driven content distribution, addressing the risks of algorithmic homogenization and the biases embedded in the training datasets of these systems. The lack of transparency in AI systems contributes to biases that reinforce hegemonic cultural narratives. As highlighted in this UNESCO Recommendation, ethical considerations must be embedded throughout all stages of the AI system life cycle. Across the lifecycle, the initial training phase is crucial for the outcome algorithms of AI models, to the extent that some argue that AI algorithms can be considered as data-driven code (Harvey, 2021). This stage is critical the most critical in preventing bias and ensuring a diversity of worldviews in the resulting algorithm.

Another major risk to cultural diversity in AI systems may be what is referred to as model collapse. Currently, synthetic content is growing exponentially (text, images, videos, music created by AI) with a notable decrease in human-generated content. This trend is expected only to increase in the coming years and, as mentioned above, some experts say that it will not be long before most of the content on the web will be synthetic content. This will become problematic because of model collapse, which is contextualized as 'when an AI system is increasingly fed synthetic data instead of content originally created by humans, a phenomenon known as 'model collapse' can occur. This refers to a situation in which the AI begins to degenerate, losing its ability to generalize from its training and producing repetitive or highly similar outputs' (Kulesz, 2024).

Legal instruments will be increasingly useful as they not only address the auditability of algorithms but also extend to the transparency and accountability of AI training datasets. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) underscores the ethical imperative of transparency and understandability in both algorithmic processes and the datasets that inform them. It emphasizes the need for robust data governance strategies to continuously evaluate the quality of training data, including the adequacy of collection and selection processes. Member

[80] *The category 'digital content creators' may be broader than artists and cultural professionals as UNESCO defines it.*

States are encouraged to promote and facilitate the use of high-quality, diverse and lawfully sourced datasets for AI training and development to ensure cultural diversity in AI systems. This includes incorporating multilingual datasets, ensuring representation of diverse epistemologies and knowledge systems, and integrating data from historically marginalized communities to prevent cultural homogenization and bias. Furthermore, the Recommendation advocates for the creation of 'gold standard' datasets, including open and trustworthy data repositories that uphold ethical and legal integrity. It also stresses the importance of standardized dataset annotation, such as disaggregating data by gender and other relevant dimensions, to enhance transparency in data provenance and characteristics.

A critical but often overlooked aspect in AI governance in terms of cultural diversity is the issue of missing data. While discussions frequently focus on the misuse of data (such as privacy infringements) or missed opportunities in utilizing available datasets, the challenge of missing data remains significant. Large portions of the world remain data poor, a condition that limits their representation in AI systems. The failure to reflect the world's linguistic and cultural diversity has been linked to biases in AI-generated outputs, but it also represents a missed opportunity for communities that lack sufficient data representation to benefit from AI applications (UN, 2024c). A relevant example to tackle this issue is the Abundant Intelligences (n/d) project, an initiative led by Indigenous communities in Canada, which seeks to address the lack of Indigenous data representation in AI systems. Through the collection and structuring of Indigenous data, this project ensures that AI systems better serve Indigenous Peoples and reflect the cultural and epistemological diversity of these communities. Another example is the Te Hiku Media (n/d) Papa Reo project in New Zealand, which focuses on revitalizing the Māori language by collecting and processing linguistic data to train AI models capable of understanding and generating text in this language. Efforts to address these challenges involve the development and implementation of policies that facilitate the collection, annotation and integration of culturally diverse and underrepresented data sources into AI models.

Within this context it is essential, however, to remember that culture extends beyond cultural goods and services. In its broadest sense, culture encompasses the ways of life, values and distinctive dynamics of diverse communities and groups. Rather than existing as an abstract entity, culture is intrinsically linked to the specific contexts in which cultural life unfolds and evolves. As mentioned above, digital environments are now key contexts where cultural life takes place, and their relevance continues to grow. There is a global 'platformization' that standardizes the ways of socializing, communicating and participating in social debates as well as cultural practices. Cultural policies that aim to promote diversity, however, tend to focus primarily on the diversity of cultural expressions and representation, but do not address the characteristics specificities of digital spaces as context in which different cultures unfold. A pertinent example of technological standardization of culture can be found in social networks, most of which subjectively address us in the form of individual profiles. This assumes a conception of society in which individual atoms are connected through links that generate networks: this is a Western, modern and neo-liberal conception. However, for many other cultures, the basic unit of society is not individuals, but human groups, and we rarely see social networks that are structured on the principle of collective profiles. In order to ensure cultural diversity in the digital sphere beyond cultural representation, it is necessary to also promote technodiversity (Hui, 2020) – that is the design of technologies, platforms and interfaces of interactions that are adequate to the different cultural worldviews, lifestyles and value systems.

Some existing technologies are already developing in this direction: decentralized and community-based social platforms such as Scuttlebutt and Mastodon prioritize local communities over global algorithms, reinforcing digital autonomy and self-organization as opposed to traditional commercial platform models. Similarly, ShareChat, an Indian social media platform, was designed specifically for the country's linguistic and cultural diversity. ShareChat launched in 2015 with a unique focus on speakers of regional languages such as Hindi, Telugu, Bengali and Tamil. Features such as region-based content filters, local hashtags and trends aligned with festivals and cultural traditions have given a digital voice to previously underrepresented groups, reducing the gap between rural and urban users in the online social space.

Beyond social networks, collaborative digital tools that operate outside competitive market logics also foster technodiversity. For instance, the CoMuseum Project in Greece offers a collaborative museum archive

management system that emphasizes reciprocity over monetization, providing an alternative to digitalization models dominated by large corporations. Another example is Tibetan Wellness AI, developed in China and Nepal, which integrates principles of Tibetan medicine into digital health applications. This shows digital infrastructure can be designed to accommodate different cultural perspectives. Further still, ensuring technodiversity (Hui, 2020) in digital ecosystems is essential for safeguarding cultural diversity in a meaningful way – one that does not merely focus on representation but also on rethinking the very architectures of digital interaction in culturally inclusive ways.

## Regulating fair use and redistributing the value of cultural data in AI systems

Creators of original work are generally protected by the laws of intellectual property to guarantee them fair compensation for their work. The copyright law is a form of intellectual property that generally includes two aspects. Firstly, it is a moral right – this aspect protects the personal attribution of a work to an author, which gives the author the ability to choose when and how the work can be shown and to object to any intervention or modification that violates the integrity of the work. This moral attribution of authorship is non-transferable and never expires. Secondly, it is an economic right – copyright implies rights of use and reproduction of works of art, the right to make copies of the work, distribute them and to make derivatives of the original work. This aspect of the law deals with the economic dimension of the work, since the rights of use and reproduction can be transferred or sold and have a limited duration, depending on the relevant jurisdiction.

Following the Member States' reports on the action taken in response to the 1980 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist, data shows that a high proportion of Member States report having laws regulating intellectual property: 100% of Global North states reported having laws regulating intellectual property, compared to 89% of Global South states (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). However, widespread challenges exist in their implementation. 45% of Member States globally reported challenges in implementing intellectual property rights recommendations (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports).

**Figure 11. Member states reporting challenges relating to implementing intellectual property rights recommendations, by Global North/ Global South.**

(Global total n=64, Global North, n= 24, Global South, n=39)
Source: UNESCO, 1980 Recommendation periodic reports.

The emergence of numerous AI systems over the past three years, particularly generative AI, may be a critical factor in the challenges faced by Member States when implementing IP recommendations and laws. As mentioned earlier, this concern is echoed by the artists themselves: the Artist Rights Alliance (ARA) issued a letter signed by over 200 artists, criticizing the lack of fair compensation for the use and reproduction of their works by these systems. While training data for these systems can be gathered

from legitimate or paid sources, most of the data used to train large AI models today is obtained from the internet through web scraping techniques.[81]

Many copyright debates over AI training data focus on the kind of consent required from rightsholders. These laws typically require voluntary and explicit licenses, through which rightsholders transfer their rights of use or reproduction via a commercial or non-commercial agreement. Licensing is central to the business model of many cultural and creative industries, with various stakeholders expressing both readiness and capacity to license works for AI training. By late 2023, licensing agreements were already in place or being developed in sectors such as music, voice recordings and journalism. Public examples include deals between OpenAI and the Associated Press and Shutterstock; Getty Images with Nvidia and Bria; and, vAIsual with Rightsify (U.S. Copyright Office, 2025).

These trends towards a model of voluntary licensing have, however, faced significant barriers and criticism. This is because many experts argue that such an approach cannot meet the scale, diversity, or data types required for AI training. It would also be prohibitively costly, accessible only to certain developers and would be hindered by the practical difficulty of identifying and contacting all copyright holders. An example is Hugging Face, Inc., Franco-American company a that develops tools for building applications using machine learning. The companies states in the U.S. Copyright Office study and consultations: '[I]t is not currently feasible to seek opt-ins for already published data – especially as the majority of data under copyright on the web does not have an easily identifiable rights holder' (U.S. Copyright Office, 2025). Anthropic Initial comments: '[A] regime that always requires licensing ... would, at a minimum, effectively lock up access to the vast majority of works, since most works are not actively managed and licensed in any way'). R Street Initial says '[T]he costs associated with obtaining these licenses could make AI projects excessively expensive, thus impeding innovation and hindering industry growth ...' (U.S. Copyright Office).

To respond to the challenges mentioned above, opt-out models have been introduced, such as the EU's Text and Data Mining (TDM) Exception outlined in the Copyright in the Digital Single Market (CDSM) Directive. This model aims to provide copyright exceptions for AI developers while giving content creators the possibility to withhold permission for their works to be used in AI training. The UK has recently conducted a consultation to assess the possibility of introducing this type of exception. Some analyses and commentaries, such as those by IP expert Nicholas Caddick (2025), have been explicit in highlighting the legal challenges and problematic aspects of implementing opt-out solutions. According to Caddick, the proposed UK exception for Text and Data Mining (TDM) in AI training, is likely to breach the Berne Copyright Convention (WIPO, n/d). His legal analysis highlights two key concerns: firstly, requiring creators to actively reserve their rights introduces a prohibited formality under Article 5(2); and, secondly, the broad scope of the exception fails the three-step test in Article 9(2), as it is not a narrowly defined special case, could interfere with the normal commercial use of works and may unjustifiably harm authors' interests. Additional risks include procedural burdens, lack of clarity on compensation and disadvantages for those unaware of the opt-out mechanism (Caddick, 2025).

Some countries are exploring other kinds of legal frameworks for compensation. In Brazil, a proposed bill would require AI companies to compensate rightsholders for the use of their works in training, ensuring fair negotiation – either individually or collectively. It calls for proportional compensation based on the AI system's scale and potential market impact, while upholding contractual freedom (Federal Senate of Brazil, 2023, Article 65 of Bill 2338/2023). Extended Collective Licensing (ECL) is being considered as another statutory approach to facilitate AI training when individual licensing is impractical. Under ECL, a CMO licenses all works within a category unless rightsholders opt out, with terms negotiated in the market and some government oversight. A 2024 Spanish proposal for AI-related ECL (Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2025) was withdrawn after public consultations revealed that professionals in the culture sector believed it failed to safeguard their interests (Viñas, 2025). Views are divided: supporters see it as a flexible way to enable large-scale licensing and compensate past uses, while critics – especially rightsholder groups – argue that the opt-out system is burdensome and ineffective. The U.S. Copyright Office (2025) considers ECL a less intrusive alternative to compulsory licensing and suggests it may be appropriate if voluntary licensing proves insufficient.

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[81] *Web scraping is a technique used by software programmes to extract information from websites.*

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The problem, however, in determining whether protected work has been used to train AI models is that many developers do not make public the datasets used in the training process of algorithms: 'Midjourney, one of the early successful companies in the space of image generation, has not disclosed which datasets they use. Similarly, OpenAI does not always disclose the datasets used in their products' (Guadamuz, 2024). To effectively protect artists and cultural creators, ensuring they receive fair compensation for the use of their work and preserving their moral rights to determine where and how their works may be used, many policy recommendations require AI developers to disclose the datasets used to train their systems. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) emphasizes that Member States should establish clear requirements for AI system transparency and explainability to ensure the trustworthiness of the entire AI system life cycle. Complementing this guidance, the UN Secretary-General's Report on Governing AI for Humanity (2024c) asserts that data disclosure, albeit limited to key elements, is crucial for understanding the model and assessing legal risks. These recommendations advocate for a regulatory framework that integrates transparency, accountability and openness as foundational principles for AI governance.

Nevertheless, while requiring the disclosure of training datasets is a necessary step, it may not be sufficient. The intricate technical complexities of these systems mean that, even with this requirement in place, existing intellectual property laws can often be easily circumvented, leaving artists and cultural creators without adequate protection. Some datasets contain copies of entire works, and in this case existing copyright laws may be applicable, but this is not the case for all of them. There are numerous ways to collect and systematize data for datasets. Some of them contain only metadata of the original data, others only link to that data, i.e. they do not contain the data itself. For this reason, there are certain datasets that will make a complete copy of a work, while others will make only a temporary copy, which allows them to extract the necessary information (the metadata, or the links). This is the case, for example, of LAION (Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network), currently the largest dataset of text-image pairs. The final corpus of this dataset, which contains 5.8 billion single entries, consists exclusively of links (Guadamuz, 2024).

This means, even if a company publicly discloses the dataset used to train its AI system, protecting artists whose works are included in the dataset without compensation remains challenging if the dataset only contains metadata or links rather than copies of the works. It can be argued, however, that only a temporary copy of the work was created, so copyright law (especially in the USA and UK) offers no protection for such transitory copies if the work has no independent economic value in a technological process. Additionally, exceptions to copyright law often allow the use of data for research purposes without compensation, but it remains unclear whether such data can later be used for commercial purposes, especially given the commercial interests of universities and research centres. This underscores the tension between protecting creators and fostering innovation, two equally important objectives that can sometimes be in opposition. AI models do not store the data directly but rather contain statistical approximations (latent space) of it. The model does not retain or generate copies of specific works, meaning its output is not a direct infringement of copyright. Thus, models can function independently of the original dataset, generating results that are very difficult to consider copies or derivative works.

The limitations of existing copyright laws in dealing with the challenges brought about by AI systems make it imperative to explore new solutions. AI is prompting a redefinition of copying under copyright law — historically understood as a full and substantial reproduction — to align with today's technological context. As such, it is essential to promote innovations and update intellectual property laws to protect artists and cultural creators. For example, some experts suggest finding technical solutions to make explicit in the metadata of digital files whether the creators chooses to be part of algorithm training data or not (Guadamuz, 2024). Initiatives such as Partial Common Ownership (PCO, 2024), are exploring possibilities of another type of shared partial ownership between artists and cultural creators and decentralized distribution, using blockchain technologies. This will strengthen the links between cultural communities, enhance their autonomy, capacity for decision making and provide shared responsibility over the use and distribution of their works. To allow this, funding and supporting the search for innovative technical responses to the limitations of intellectual property laws should also be an important priority in the cultural and creative industries.

Existing intellectual property laws focus on the direct relationship between an individual and the works created by that individual. This is based on a modern paradigm of creation and artist, where the subject is seen as autonomous and the work as an original that reflects such autonomy and uniqueness. Although this model may encompass certain types of creations, it appears outdated in contemporary contexts. Models of creation and creativity are evolving with new technological possibilities, and AI presents a novel challenge. As noted in the preceding analysis, copyright laws emphasizing individual ownership exhibit significant limitations when applied to large AI models, where massive data aggregation produces outputs that blend human and machine capabilities.

As such, it is necessary to think beyond individual forms of compensation, as the cognitive value of data in these systems is a collective concern. It is not individual data that hold specific value in AI training processes, but rather the aggregation of large volumes of data. This data stems from the way contemporary cultural life is embedded in digital environments. As AI is becoming increasingly relevant in the world, it is setting a new axis of cognitive asymmetry. Therefore, governments are urged to rethink data ownership, in order to be able to capitalize on and receive a share of the economic value that their cultural data contributes to generate in the field of artificial cognition.

The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) refers to data as a resource to be shared and Member States should adopt a digital commons approach to data where appropriate. But it emphasizes this approach only for the interoperability of tools, datasets and interfaces of systems hosting data, and falls short in pointing out how to manage the economic benefits of data as a public resource. Some regional digital strategies, such as the European Commission's Digital Strategy (EU, 2022) and the Data Governance Act (EU, 2022) are already acknowledging data as a shared resource. While these documents promote the use of data for public benefit and general interest purposes, they do not explicitly refer to data as a common good, a term that would imply collective ownership and management. Instead, the focus is on establishing frameworks and conditions for data sharing and re-use.

The AI industry is currently a sector that generates enormous economic benefits, however, the role that society plays in the generation of data that trains these systems is not being recognized or compensated. International organizations, such as UNESCO, and regional and national digital strategies must be more specific in articulating how collective modes of data ownership and data as a public good can turn into economic benefits for society. This implies that cultural policies for the culture sector should offer a clear legal entity to cultural data both as digital cultural expressions and as data derived from cultural life (in a broader sense) that takes place in digital environments and should regulate how the derived cognitive and economic value can be managed and distributed. Thinking of data as a common good[82] can open the door to finding new and innovative ways of collective, rather than individual, compensation of the benefits related to AI. In this context, a tax on AI systems may be a solution, not to replace individual or collective intellectual property compensation mechanisms, but to operate in a complementary manner alongside them. Such a tax would only make sense if applied to AI systems that do not disclose the training data used to develop their models. If an AI system can demonstrate that it has lawfully acquired all its training data – meaning it has paid for any cultural goods subject to intellectual property rights – then such a tax would not be applicable. The funds raised by these taxes could then be redirected to the cultural and creative industries to compensate, in an indirect manner, the damage that this sector incurs in terms of job or income losses, or to financially support programmes and initiatives that ensure a just transition to AI (such as training programmes and infrastructure).

The specific mechanisms through which this fiscal measure is implemented must be carefully studied and collaboratively defined by experts across multiple disciplines, weighing its feasibility, potential risks and benefits. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need today to envision alternative ways of redistributing the economic value generated by digital commons, which are the product of our digitized cultures. Just as UNESCO has developed concepts with practical operational value for the protection of nature and culture – such as the notion of world heritage – we now need new concepts capable of collectively safeguarding culture as it unfolds within digital environments. Undoub-

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*[82] As mentioned in another footnote in the introduction of this chapter, cultural data as a common good refers to all the types of data mentioned above, insofar as they are not subject to intellectual property rights held by any specific rightsholder or when the rightsholder is not easily identifiable.*

tedly, implementing such an approach requires conviction, political will and the work of specialists, because it is currently an unexplored field. But the situation calls for experimentation and the implementation of new forms of compensation that are more collective and cross-cutting than those that currently exist. This tax on AI could also be beneficial in de-centralizing and de-monopolizing the technology sector, encouraging the emergence of new players of various sizes. The measure could also reinforce the social responsibility and controls to which AI systems must be subjected.

# Conclusions and key takeaways

- **Governments should prioritize public funding and cross-sector collaboration to address digital inequalities**, ensuring that access is not solely market-driven but aligned with democratic principles of digital sovereignty. This requires blended financing mechanisms, public-private partnerships, and targeted investments in underserved areas to bridge infrastructure gaps while maintaining cultural and decision-making autonomy.

- **Governments should integrate systemic measures into digital strategies to ensure the long-term discoverability of local cultural content.** This includes funding for content production, metadata standardization for better content management, and incentives for adherence to discoverability frameworks.

- **Digital platforms should disclose demographic data** (in a privacy-preserving manner) on content creators and users to support governments in fostering well-informed policymaking to address disparities in participation in digital cultural production. While legal frameworks usually already demand transparency in AI training datasets, it is essential to implement measures that ensure compliance with this ethical recommendation.

- **International organizations should establish clear standards for evaluating dataset quality**, enabling governments to hold AI developers accountable for the diversity and integrity of their training data. Also, as indicated in the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, Member States should contribute to the production of high-quality, diverse, and lawfully sourced datasets to safeguard cultural diversity in AI systems by providing multilingual and inclusive data that reflect diverse knowledge systems and marginalized communities, preventing cultural homogenization and bias.

- **Artificial intelligence and digital technologies should be leveraged to create innovative pathways for women content creators** to produce and distribute their artistic works, ensuring fair remuneration and protecting intellectual property rights while actively combating online harassment and gender bias in AI through diverse data sets and development teams, notably in emergency situations where their digital rights and freedoms are more at risk.

- **Policy frameworks should recognize technodiversity as a key aspect for protecting cultural diversity in the digital realm**, extending beyond the diversity of cultural expressions. This requires supporting the development of digital platforms and infrastructure that align with diverse cultural worldviews, lifestyles, and value systems.

- **Encouraging decentralized, community-based, and culturally adaptive technologies**, such as region-specific social networks and alternative digital tools, ensures that digital ecosystems give place to diverse cultural ways of life and forms of interaction.

- **Governments, cultural institutions, and international organizations should implement standardized policies for the digitization of cultural heritage**, ensuring ethical governance, community participation, and data sovereignty. This includes frameworks to prevent digital extractivism, strengthen communities', local or national control over cultural data, and promote interoperability for equitable access and responsible heritage management.

- **Governments must target youth, elderly, and marginalized communities in their digital literacy and upskilling programmes**, and integrate AI education into school curricula, support lifelong learning, and foster cross-sector partnerships to ensure equitable access to digital tools and opportunities and prevent digital divides. International support should be strengthened to assist low-income countries in promoting and implementing digital skills and upskilling programmes, ensuring their participation in the global digital cultural landscape.

- **Policymakers should work in close collaboration with the private sector and creative communities to establish mechanisms for identifying emerging AI-related skills needs** across the cultural and creative industries to be able to design well-informed policies in this area, as well as examining how bias (related to gender and other structural inequalities) in current AI tools can be eliminated or at least minimised.

- **Legal frameworks should be adapted to address the challenges AI poses to intellectual property rights.** Governments need to update copyright laws by reconsidering the traditional notion of copying, which no longer fully captures the ways AI systems process and generate content. Additionally, funding for innovative technical solutions, such as metadata consent mechanisms and decentralized ownership models, should be prioritized supported through cross-sector collaboration between the public sector, international organizations and the technological, cultural and creative industries.

- **Governments and international organizations should recognize cultural data as a collective common good** and establish regulatory frameworks that protect its cultural, economic, and cognitive value. Policies must ensure equitable governance of cultural data, preventing its unrestricted commodification while promoting fair and inclusive AI development in the culture sector.

- **International agreements and governments should explore new compensation models**, such as an AI tax based on dataset size and model commercialization. The revenue generated could be directed toward public funds to support the culture sector, mitigate income losses, and finance digital upskilling programmes for a just transition to AI-driven cultural and creative industries. A standalone goal for culture could ensure that policy mechanisms are put in place to redistribute value derived from cultural data, promoting systems of collective compensation for cultural contributions in the global economy.

- **Embedding cultural objectives in digital policies would not only safeguard cultural heritage and foster digital literacy in creative sectors but also ensure that digital innovations respect and amplify cultural diversity rather than erode it.** A stand-alone goal for culture in the Post-2030 Agenda could redefine the treatment of cultural data as a public good, promoting equitable access and the redistribution of the cultural, economic and cognitive value derived from cultural data, thereby fostering a more just and inclusive digital cultural ecosystem.

# Policy Brief
# *Catherine Magnant*

Head of Cultural Policy at the European Commission

## Leveraging digital technologies while preserving creative work and protecting creators

In a rapidly evolving landscape, it is imperative to recognize and harness the transformative potential of digital technologies, including AI, within and for the culture sector, while addressing the associated challenges and risks.

Digital technologies and AI are revolutionizing the creation, preservation, interaction and experience of arts and culture. AI tools are supporting the interpretation and reconstruction of cultural heritage. They can also relieve culture professionals from some tedious and monotonous tasks allowing them to dedicate more time to creative endeavours. Personalization and data analytics help accessibility and better engagement with audiences, and open new opportunities for creative companies. However, there are also serious concerns. These concerns pertain to jobs displacement, skills, revenue losses, biases, cultural and linguistic diversity and data sovereignty.

Cultural and creative content is the foundation upon which many digital platforms and Generative AI thrive. However, these platforms should not be built at the expenses of creators. On the contrary, it is essential to ensure the effective protection of creators' rights and payment for the use of their works in the digital environment. This must lie at the heart of preserving the value, integrity and sustainability of creative work.

The tremendous pace of technological progress also poses a range of important societal and ethical questions as to the place of humankind, the role and definition of culture and creativity in tomorrow's world.

Europe has undertaken significant steps in the responsible and ethical use of technologies. The European Union has established a robust regulatory framework that supports creators and cultural diversity. EU copyright law has set a standard for the use of creative content online, ensuring that creators are fairly remunerated in the digital space. The AI Act additionally marks a significant milestone balancing trustworthy and human-centric AI with innovation: it will ensure that AI systems are transparent and respect creators' rights. Moreover, the EU has mobilized important funding to support the digital transition of the cultural and creative industries. These investments foster access to cultural content, data sharing, skills development and innovation. For example, in the field of cultural heritage the European Commission is setting up a dedicated Collaborative Cloud and a Data Space to make the most of the advanced technology and data sharing for cultural heritage. The recently launched Alliance for Language Technologies is a large-scale effort to pool EU language data and build a comprehensive repository of high-quality language resources to preserve Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity, fostering technological excellence and leadership.

The European Commission has recently announced an ambitious plan for a European AI continent to shape the future of AI in a way that enhances Europe's competitiveness, safeguards and advances our democratic values and protects our cultural diversity.

As part of the plan, the Commission will build a large-scale AI data and computing infrastructure, increase access to large and high-quality data, boost the use of AI in strategic sectors including the cultural and creative industries, and strengthen AI skills and talents (including related initiatives to attract women and girls to education and training on AI). In parallel, the Commission will work on a dedicated approach to AI in the cultural and creative industries to ensure that AI enables and reinforces human creativity, and that it contributes to safeguarding European cultural and linguistic diversity.

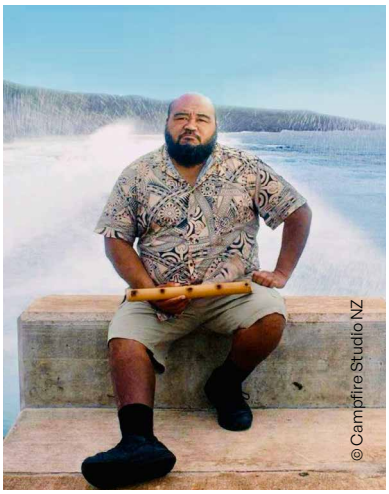
The EU and UNESCO, as long-standing partners, are united by shared values and a mutual commitment to advancing a human-centred digital transformation. Collaboration with governments, cultural institutions and international organizations is key to shaping inclusive policies that put people and culture at the centre. By jointly prioritizing culture, cultural diversity and digital innovation, we can ensure these tools serve as powerful drivers of inclusive and sustainable development, safeguarding the richness of cultural and linguistic diversity and enriching societies worldwide.

Cheza! Cheza students performing a dance. ©Francis Odhiambo

Chapter 3

# Fostering Culture and Arts Education

# Creative Voices
## *Tau'ili'ili Alpha Maiava*




Writer, director, and composer.

Akin to many Indigenous cultures within the Moana Pacific region, Sāmoa adheres to values and beliefs established by predecessors. A fundamental notion in Sāmoa is that the pathway to the future is rooted in the past – the future is considered as having already occurred. One such proverb, seu le i'a ae taga'i ile galu, translates loosely to 'be mindful of the strong waves when out fishing'. This saying from ancient Sāmoan fishing customs serves as a cautionary reminder for fishing expeditions to remain aware of both weather conditions and their catch. Another principle is aua le naunau ile i'a ae manumanu ile upega, indicating that while there is an abundance of fish in the sea, one must avoid overloading the net. Similarly, o le fuata ma lona lou reflects the idea that shortages are temporary and more resources will become available. These proverbs form an integral part of our living culture, offering guidance through wisdom imparted by elders and leaders over generations. This repository of knowledge, derived from ancestral experiences, provides direction for future generations in all aspects of life.

These sayings and others provide the foundation for the fale a'oga (house of learning), which I have established to share my practice of reviving traditional sound-producing instruments. This initiative integrates the cultural significance of this practice with the impact of climate change on the trees required to produce these instruments. This fosters a space that harmonizes various Sāmoan protocols, and incorporates other Moana Pacific cultures and their relationship with their soundscapes.

The term sharing is preferred over teaching, as our cultural practices are meant to be shared to enrich life encounters and experiences. For instance, what scholars have described as Moana Pacific art were, in reality, languages for communication with one another and the ancestral realm. The apparatus of devotion and feagaiga (relationship) continuance with ancestral deities was expressed through various creative forms such as chants, body marking, sound-producing instruments, performances, carving and vocal acknowledgments of realm honorifics. These knowledges were gradually replaced by belief systems that arrived on Moana Pacific shores prior to the colonial powers.

The revival effort begins with recounting the stories behind the instruments, including their purpose, current status and reasons for their condition. The resurgence work proceeds in phases to avoid detaching people from a way of life that is now unfamiliar. This process involves rebuilding the guilds that produce the instruments. The ability to play the instrument comes later, as mastering something that does not exist is challenging. For example, the violin might not have persisted over centuries if its production guild had ceased. Any plans for creative manifestations to continue as a practice must include cultural knowledge, storytelling and efforts to share not just the product but nature's role in its creation. Without this holistic approach, a nose flute would simply be bamboo with holes that make a whistling sound when air passes through.

E lē tau fa'amanatu se aganu'u e ola pea basically means that living cultures inherently sustain themselves without the need for external fostering or revival. This statement underscores the fundamental goal of any cultural revitalization effort, not as an endpoint, but as a journey to a future that has already been realized.

© Campfire Studio NZ

# Fostering culture and arts education

**Vanessa Achilles**[83]
Independent researcher
and facilitator

[83] *Kishore Singh, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, contributed valuable insights to the initial drafts of this chapter.*

# Overview

01. Culture and education are increasingly recognized as common goods and foundational pillars of sustainable development, reinforcing one another to foster creativity, resilience and inclusive, human-centred societies. In this context, the 2024 Framework for Culture and Arts Education provides a critical reference for shaping forward-looking, context-sensitive education policies that place culture and the arts at their core. Along with other contemporary educational contexts, the Framework embraces a broad understanding of culture – including tangible, natural and living heritage, cultural expressions and the cultural and creative industries. It underscores the role of culture and arts education in enhancing access, promoting quality learning and fostering appreciation of cultural diversity. It highlights the transformative potential of learning in, through and with culture to overcome divisions, deepen mutual understanding and support the safeguarding of heritage, with a particular emphasis on local and Indigenous cultures, languages and knowledge systems.

02. Across regions, many countries are attempting to integrate culture and the arts into both formal and non-formal education systems to enhance the relevance of content, promote inclusion and foster lifelong and life-wide learning. Educators recognize that culture and the arts can enrich a wide range of subjects – such as mathematics, science, geography and digital design – by embedding cultural and artistic elements into teaching in meaningful and contextualized ways. Cultural expressions, heritage sites and traditional practices serve as powerful entry points to deepen subject understanding, foster appreciation of cultural diversity and connect learning to lived experiences. Embedding these elements across curricula not only strengthens academic outcomes but also encourages sustained engagement with culture beyond the classroom, reinforcing its contribution to sustainable development and supporting the safeguarding of cultural heritage, including Indigenous knowledge systems and linguistic heritage.

03. Successfully strengthening culture and arts education requires inclusive partnerships and a lifelong learning approach that bridges education systems, cultural institutions and communities. Collaborative efforts – supported by enabling policies, sustainable funding and professional development – enhance the transmission of cultural knowledge, foster appreciation of diversity and expand access to relevant, participatory learning. Ensuring long-term impact also depends on the full recognition of community members and cultural actors as key partners in educational processes.

04. Investing in inclusive, lifelong learning for culture and creative professionals is essential to strengthening their economic resilience and enabling their full contribution to sustainable, creative societies. Well-designed training – whether through formal systems or community-based initiatives – supports more resilient career paths, empowers diverse talent and positions the sector to address global challenges more effectively.

05. Digital technologies and AI play an increasingly transformative role – expanding access to heritage and creative learning, while also raising complex challenges and opportunities related to cultural integrity, multilingualism, equity and the human-centred values of education. A balanced, ethical and culturally sensitive approach is critical to harnessing their potential while preserving the contextual quality and meaning of human creativity.

# Introduction

‘Culture and arts are the soul of our nation, reflecting the diversity and depth of our traditions, languages and artistic expressions. Integrating these elements into our education system not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters a deep sense of identity and pride among our youth’. This message from Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, India’s Minister of Culture and Tourism embodies the invaluable role of education for fostering culture and arts (UNESCO New Delhi, 2024).

In today’s world, marked by profound social fragmentation, cultural homogenization, climate change and widening inequalities, culture and arts education have never been more vital. They do more than transmit knowledge of heritage or artistic technique – they help individuals and communities build resilience, affirm their identities, spark creativity and strengthen social cohesion. These capacities are essential for navigating the complex challenges of the twenty-first century. It is in this spirit that the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education (UNESCO, 2024a) offers a timely response, charting a path toward inclusive, rights-based and culturally relevant approaches that harness the transformative power of culture and the arts.

India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 reflect a strong commitment to integrating culture and arts into education (India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; India, Ministry of Education, 2023). The NCF-SE elevates arts education to an equal curricular status, ensuring that students engage with artistic expressions while developing creativity, critical thinking and cultural appreciation. Interdisciplinary initiatives like Art-Integrated Learning, multilingual education and experiential programmes such as artists in residence promote innovative teaching methods and lifelong learning. Additionally, the incorporation of tribal and local knowledge bridges local wisdom and institutionalized education, fostering a culturally rooted learning experience. By embedding ethical values, heritage and artistic expressions into the curriculum, India presents a model for education that nurtures both creative potential and cultural literacy.

This forward-thinking policy approach to education in India is one example that aligns closely with the latest global good practices, including with the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education in particular. The Framework stresses the need for lifelong learning in culture and the arts within all types of educational settings and for placing these topics at the heart of education policies, strategies, curricula and programmes. This new framework recognizes that learning in, through and with diverse cultural expressions – especially local and Indigenous ones – is vital for overcoming divisions and fostering mutual understanding.

Culture and artistic expression hold both intrinsic and instrumental value. Beyond their aesthetic dimensions, they nurture critical thinking, empathy and civic participation, while inspiring innovative solutions for sustainable development. The Framework highlights that arts education is not merely an enrichment activity but a transformative force for human flourishing, cultural diversity and peacebuilding.

Yet, access to quality arts and cultural education remains deeply uneven. Significant disparities persist between the Global North and South, urban and rural communities, and dominant and marginalized cultures, depriving many of the benefits of creative learning and cultural participation. Addressing these inequalities is central to the Framework’s call for education systems that reflect cultural diversity and uphold cultural rights for all. Indeed, culture and all forms

of heritage and arts are not peripheral but central to achieving inclusive, quality and relevant education. Both education and culture are global public goods and fundamental human rights – essential and universally shared, to which everyone is entitled. Education aims at fostering individual empowerment and social progress. Cultural heritage and artistic creativity serve as a shared legacy that shapes identities and values. Together, education and culture form foundational pillars of human development, reinforcing each other to promote creativity, as well as resilient, just and sustainable futures.

In advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNESCO stresses the strategic role of both education and culture by recognizing them as a global public good and inalienable human rights. From fostering inclusive and quality education (SDG 4) to supporting gender equality (SDG 5), sustainable cities (SDG 11) and peaceful societies (SDG 16), culture and arts education are key to building sustainable and cohesive futures.

Many contemporary educational contexts, including the Framework, have adopted a broad understanding of culture, that embraces tangible, natural and intangible cultural heritage, cultural expressions, as well as the cultural and creative industries. Therefore, culture and arts education encompass here the teaching and learning of all creative expressions such as visual arts, music, dance, theatre and literature, as well as the study of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It also encourages the integration of the cultural and artistic content and methods in all educational disciplines.

The UNESCO 2021 Futures of Education report Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education proposes that 'curricula should emphasize ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning that supports students to access and produce knowledge while also developing their capacity to critique and apply it' (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Culture and arts education plays a vital role in transforming curricula by fostering creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and intercultural understanding as reiterated by several surveys[84] conducted among educators from all over the world (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2023; UNESCO & ICHCAP, 2021; UNESCO, 2021b; UNESCO, 2024k; UNESCO, 2024l).[85] [86] It spans formal, non-formal and informal learning environments, enabling individuals of all ages, genders and backgrounds to engage meaningfully with their own and others' cultural heritage. As a lifelong learning process, gender-responsive culture and arts education promotes personal growth, social cohesion and the appreciation of cultural diversity (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2023). In an interconnected world, rooting education in local contexts and inclusive values – while promoting respect for other cultures – fosters empathy and cross-cultural understanding. This reduces fear and conflict, promotes social cohesion and contributes to building more just and resilient societies. Reciprocally, integrating culture and the arts prominently and consistently into learning environments can spark greater interest and engagement from the learners, ultimately contributing to their safeguarding and continued relevance.

Drawing on a non-exhaustive list of recent examples from around the world, this chapter explores how policies and initiatives have been implemented to harness the benefits of strengthening the connection between culture and education. It also examines the current challenges and gaps in this field and puts forward a set of recommendations to address them.

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*[84] The WAAE Report for the Development of the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education was conducted in 2023. It compiles answers from 1361 educators from 113, two-thirds of them arts educators, one quarter general educators providing arts education in primary schools and the balance from the non-formal sector. Over 56% of respondents believe that the main objective of art and culture education is to develop artistic skill development that boosts creativity and innovation.*

*[85] The UNESCO survey Teaching and Learning with and about Intangible Cultural Heritage in Asia and the Pacific was conducted in 2019. It compiles 775 answers from 21 countries in Asia-Pacific. Over 80% of respondents acknowledge that learning with living heritage is beneficial for students. None believe it is not beneficial.*

*[86] The UNESCO survey Teaching and Learning with Living Heritage: Pilot Survey on the UNESCO ASPnet Schools in the European Union was conducted in 2019 among the UNESCO ASPnet schools in the 28 Member States of the European Union, before the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Union on 31 January 2020. It compiles answers from 250 primary and secondary schools.*

# Bridging culture and education: global commitments to enrich learning and promote respect for cultural diversity

Group of young children in their creative arts and crafts classes at school

It is increasingly recognized that education must not only equip learners with academic skills, but also cultivate cultural understanding, diverse creative expressions and a sense of belonging. This recognition is reflected in a growing number of global frameworks and declarations – including the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education (2024) introduced above – that call for the integration of arts and culture within broader educational and lifelong learning agendas and the systematic and strategic linking of culture and education as mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development.

Numerous international normative instruments now provide a solid framework to encourage and guide countries in connecting culture and arts with education. Because they are legally-binding instruments, conventions create obligations for state parties that ratified them, such as adopting relevant policies and measures. In several of the UNESCO Conventions, these obligations include provisions to safeguard and promote culture in education. In particular, the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education enshrines the fundamental principle of non-discrimination and equal opportunity in education, ensuring that the right to education for communities at risk of being marginalized –including because of their cultural background[87] – are respected (UNESCO, 1960). In turn, the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property highlights the importance of education in raising awareness about and mitigating the negative impact of illicit trafficking (UNESCO, 1970, art. 5 and 10).[88] Under the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the state parties shall endeavour by all appropriate means, and in particular by educational and information programmes, to strengthen appreciation and respect by their people of the cultural and natural heritage (UNESCO, 1972, art. 27). The World Heritage Education Programme, targeting both youth and educators, is one of its flagship programmes. This emphasis is also strongly reflected in the World Heritage Capacity-Building Strategy (WHCBS). Similarly, the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage recalls the importance of public education in its field of implementation (UNESCO, 2001b, art. 22). Education is also central to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which calls on States Parties to take appropriate measures to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage (ICH and also called living heritage). Safeguarding includes ensuring its transmission, including through formal and non-formal education. (UNESCO, 2003, art. 2.3 and 14) (UNESCO, 2018).[89] Since 2017, UNESCO has been working intersectorally with culture and education actors to implement projects, activities and other initiatives related to safeguarding living heritage in formal and non-formal education.[90] As of 2024, 78% of reporting Member States in the Global South and

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[87] *The Convention refers to discrimination done on the basis of race, colour, language, religion or birth among other factors.*

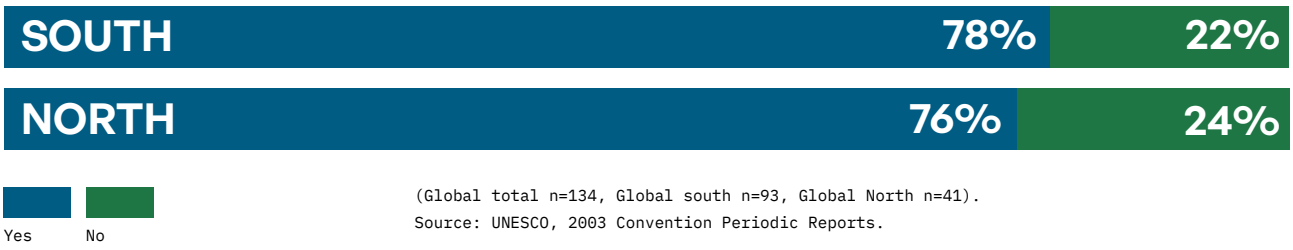
[88] *Result framework outputs 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 of the 1970 Convention.*

[89] *Core Indicators 4, 5, 6 and 12 of the Overall results framework of the 2003 Convention regard Transmission and education and Policies as well as legal and administrative measures: No. 4 – Extent to which both formal and non-formal education strengthen the transmission of ICH and promote respect for ICH; No. 5 – Extent to which ICH and its safeguarding are integrated into primary and secondary education, included in the content of relevant disciplines and used to strengthen teaching and learning about and with ICH and respect for one's own and others' ICH; No.6 – Extent to which post-secondary education supports the practice and transmission of ICH as well as study of its social, cultural and other dimensions); and, No.12 – Extent to which policies as well as legal and administrative measures in the field of education reflect the diversity of ICH and the importance of its safeguarding and are implemented.*

[90] *The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted the Safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage through formal and non-formal education as a funding priority twice, once in 2017 for 2018-2021 (Decision 12.COM/6 at https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/12.COM/6) and then in 2021 for 2022–2025 (Decision 16.COM/12 at https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/16.COM/12). An evaluation of the funding priority was carried out by UNESCO's Internal Oversight Service in 2021 and is available in Annex D. of the Evaluation of UNESCO's action in the framework of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; UNESCO, 2021 (IOS/EVS/PI/200) at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380015?2=null&queryId=2c4a5731-c4a2-4ff4-bfe3-884155eb8fee*

76% in the Global North have adopted policies or legal measures in education to ensure recognition of, respect for, and enhancement of intangible cultural heritage (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). The 2005 Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions encourages educational and awareness-raising measures, to promote creativity and the understanding of the value of diversity through professional training and institutionalized education programmes (UNESCO, 2005, art. 10; UNESCO, 2019).[91]

**Figure 12. Member States reporting policies and/or legal and administrative measures for education established to ensure recognition of, respect for and enhancement of ICH, or to strengthen transmission and practice of ICH, by Global North/Global South.**




(Global total n=134, Global south n=93, Global North n=41).
Source: UNESCO, 2003 Convention Periodic Reports.

In addition to legally binding conventions, UNESCO and other international organizations have adopted a range of declarations and recommendations that, while not legally enforceable, carry significant moral and normative weight for State Parties. These instruments encourage governments to integrate cultural and arts education into their policies and practices. The 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist calls on states to promote respect for artistic creation by strengthening arts education from an early age (UNESCO, 1980). Building on this, the 1982 Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies emphasizes the role of education in transmitting national and universal cultural values and the need to stimulate interest for and appreciation of art and intellectual creations (UNESCO, 1982).

Further reinforcing this perspective, the 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel highlights higher education's role in advancing and preserving cultural knowledge (UNESCO, 1997). The 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity affirms the right to quality education that respects cultural identity, by promoting linguistic diversity, cultural awareness in education and the integration of traditional pedagogies to enhance learning and knowledge transmission (UNESCO, 2001a). Finally, the 2015 Recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of museums and collections, their diversity and their role in society clearly identifies museums as essential spaces for lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015, art. 2, 3 and 12).

Recent international frameworks have consistently reaffirmed the critical role of culture in transforming education systems. The 2022 MONDIACULT Declaration stresses the importance of context-relevant education, incorporating cultural heritage, history and traditional knowledge to enhance learning outcomes and cultural diversity awareness (UNESCO, 2022f). This perspective is echoed in the 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development, which recognizes the role of arts and cultural education in fostering creative learning, social belonging and appreciation of cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2023e).

The message has also been reinforced through consecutive United Nations Resolutions on Culture and Sustainable Development since 2017, most recently in Resolution A/RES/78/161 (2023), which have reaffirmed that culture enriches education and lifelong learning while supporting the transformation of educational systems to foster a creative and adaptive workforce (United Nations, 2023).

The Pact for the Future (2024) further acknowledges the need to blend scientific, technological and traditional knowledge systems, fostering cultural preservation and sustainable development (United Nations, 2024). Its annexed Declaration

[91] *In particular the areas of monitoring 1 and 8 of the monitoring framework of the 2005 Convention.*

for Future Generations promotes the protection of cultural diversity, heritage and intergenerational knowledge transfer to ensure future generations' cultural sustainability, while fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue. These frameworks, along with commitments to integrating Indigenous and traditional knowledge with science and investing in inclusive lifelong education, reinforce the role of culture in shaping sustainable and equitable learning systems.

At the regional level, frameworks such as the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance (African Union, 2006) and the African Union Agenda 2063 (African Union Commission, 2015), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Strategic Plan for Culture and Arts 2016-2025 (2016), or the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Cultural Action Plan 2015–2020 (2015), the New European Agenda for Culture (European Commission, 2018), implemented through the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 (Council of the European Union, 2022), or the 2025–2026 Programme-Budget of the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (2024) also acknowledge the importance of connecting culture and education.

While these normative tools offer a valuable framework, their implementation is an ongoing process. Countries are encouraged to organize multi-stakeholder consultations to assess current policies in relation to culture and arts education and discuss future ones. However, despite significant global efforts such as the two World Conferences on Arts Education (Lisbon 2006 and Seoul 2010), multi-sectoral collaboration requires further encouragements and efforts (2010).

The adoption in 2024 of the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, marked a significant milestone in advancing the global agenda for culture and arts education. The Framework proposes five concrete strategic goals supported by a comprehensive implementation strategy: (i) access, inclusion and equity in and through culture and arts education; (ii) contextual, quality, lifelong and lifewide learning in and through culture and arts education; (iii) appreciation of cultural diversity and the capacity for critical engagement; (iv) skills to shape resilient, just and sustainable futures; and, (v) institutionalization and valorisation of culture and arts education ecosystems (UNESCO, 2024a). Through this Framework, ministers of education and of culture jointly committed to building a future where culture, the arts and education, acknowledged as public goods, are integral to the promotion of peace and sustainable development.

This extensive set of international tools and instruments reinforces the vision of education and culture as interconnected human rights. But to truly support cultural and arts education, a stronger cooperation between the education and culture sectors is essential. Moreover, multi-sectoral coordination among all relevant sectors, including public and non-public stakeholders, can improve policy development and monitoring, ensuring that cultural learning remains a central pillar of education worldwide.

# Cultivating cultural diversity and pluralism through education

## Embedding culture and arts in formal and non-formal education[92]

The benefits weaving arts and culture to into core learning to support competencies such as creativity, empathy, critical thinking and intercultural understanding are increasingly being recognized. Culturally responsive pedagogies, multilingual resources and recognition of diverse knowledge systems are key to making education relevant and accessible to all learners. In line with the Framework, this includes both heritage-based approaches (e.g. local traditions, crafts, music) and

[92] *The article uses the definition of the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2011), which can be consulted in the Annexes – Glossary: formal education, non-formal education, informal learning, and vocational education.*

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contemporary creative practices (e.g. media arts, design, digital storytelling).

But many cultural and artistic practices also flourish outside of formal institutions – in homes, communities, youth organizations, cultural centres, museums, libraries and digital spaces. Non-formal education thus provides critical opportunities to engage learners of all ages – especially those marginalized or outside traditional schooling – in cultural participation, identity exploration and creative development. Community-led workshops, festivals, mentorships with artists and intergenerational knowledge-sharing are all valuable platforms for sustaining cultural heritage and promoting social inclusion.

Furthermore, as rapid societal developments – including technological developments – impact how culture and arts are transmitted, the home and communities are no longer always the primary spaces for passing down cultural and artistic skills and knowledge. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognizes this and underscores the role of formal and non-formal education in ensuring the viability of intangible cultural heritage (Articles 2.3 and 14), an approach already implemented in many countries (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). Numerous states have identified that living heritage is being transmitted through both formal and non-formal education, highlighting the potential for schools – and educational institutions and programmes, in general – to become central spaces for intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and innovation. Integrating living heritage, as well as other expressions of culture and arts into schools can make educational content and methods more relevant to learners, inspire innovative practices by drawing on holistic, lived forms of heritage transmission and strengthen the connection between schools and their communities. With a shift towards emphasizing quality, relevance and collaboration with different actors, educational institutions have the potential to play a greater role in this process, offering new avenues for cultural expression and engagement (Brighenti, 2024).

Yet, education systems around the world are grappling with a range of persistent challenges, including among others disparities in access to quality education, underfunding, a shortage of qualified teachers because of inadequate training or unsatisfactory working conditions, lack of relevant or overcrowded curricula and a strong emphasis on standardized testing that can lead to some groups of students being pushed out of the system (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). These systemic issues inevitably constrain the space and resources available for culture and arts education. For this type of education to be effective and widely adopted, several enabling conditions must be in place. These include high-level commitment from both the culture and education sectors, adequate funding, responsive curriculum design (including curricula that embrace cultural content), culture and arts-based pedagogies, relevant and nuanced teacher training, appropriate learning resources and infrastructure that reflects the diversity of learners' cultural backgrounds and expressions. Furthermore, digital technologies offer new tools for expanding access to arts and culture and fostering the integration of culture and education, but they must be deployed equitably and ethically (GEM Report, 2023). To achieve all this requires policy alignment and institutional support.

It is also crucial to approach culture with respect and depth, steering clear of superficial engagement or the commodification of various forms of heritage. To ensure meaningful representation and sharing through the education systems, it is essential to involve members of the concerned communities in the design and delivery of programmes. This is done either by bringing them to the schools or by bringing students to them, ensuring their voices are heard and their heritage is represented in ways that are respectful and empowering – especially when it comes to the heritage of the less visible communities. Furthermore, stronger connections between schools and communities, between ministries of education and culture, and between artists and educators can help dismantle silos and ensure more holistic learning ecosystems. This also means promoting community arts partnerships and supporting flexible, lifelong learning pathways that validate cultural competencies gained outside the classroom.

## Enriching primary and secondary general curricula with culture and arts education

In many countries, culture and the arts are taught as specialized subjects in primary or secondary schools. The WAAE global survey of arts educators from 113 countries conducted in 2023 revealed that over 60% of them work in primary and secondary schools, as well as in early childhood education centres (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2023). Similarly, UNESCO Creative Cities report a high degree of engagement in this area, with 87% indicating that education institutions at various level – primary, secondary or tertiary – offered curricular programmes on culture and creativity between 2019 and 2022 (UNESCO, n.d.b) (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). Notably, 58% of countries also report teaching intangible cultural heritage as a stand-alone subject in primary and secondary schools (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). These results suggest that many formal education systems incorporate culture and arts, even though it may be done with very different perspectives, teaching styles and content at the different levels of education. The primary objective of these activities is to foster artistic skill development and nurture creativity, with common approaches including teaching visual arts, music and drama as foundational forms of artistic expression.

**Figure 13. UCCN Member Cities that have ensured that primary, secondary and/or tertiary education institutes offer curricular programmes related to culture and creativity (2018-2022), by Global North/ Global South.**

(UCCN Member Cities/Member States: Global total n=109/48, Global North n=69/26, Global South n=40/22.)
Source: UNESCO Creative Cities Reports.

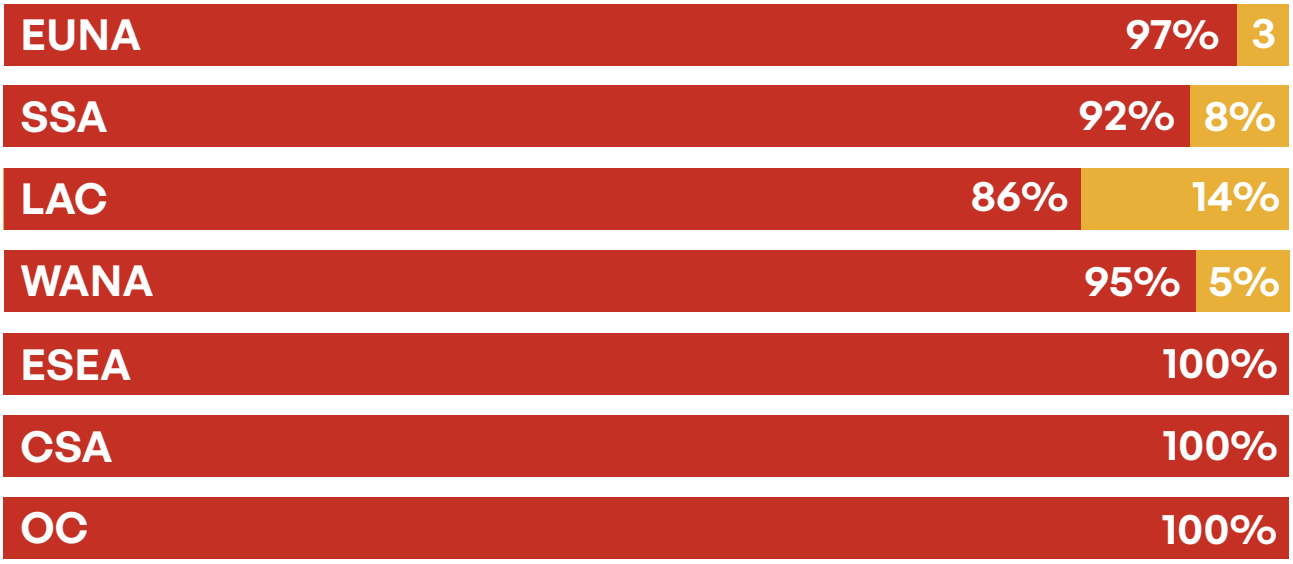
Building on these traditional methods, a key pedagogical innovation has emerged: the integration of the arts into STEM education, resulting in the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) approach. This interdisciplinary model encourages creativity among students with scientific and technical inclinations (El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024). One notable example is Native Girls Code, an award-winning programme based in Seattle, USA. It empowers Native American girls aged 12 to 18 by blending computer coding with traditional Indigenous Knowledge. The initiative addresses gender disparities in science disciplines while promoting leadership, cultural identity and STEM proficiency – culminating in student-created websites, videogames and digital storytelling tools (Na'ah Illahee, n.d.). Similarly, in Australia, Victoria University has partnered with Footscray High School to create a Community STEAM programme. This initiative aims for pre-service teachers to foster culturally safe classrooms and the decolonization of education by actively engaging students with Indigenous Knowledge and practices (Victoria University, 2021). Such examples illustrate the potential of STEAM education to become a powerful vehicle for inclusion and cultural relevance, while advancing transformative learning in science and technology.

Beyond fostering creativity, the integration of culture and the arts in schools plays a vital role in supporting holistic human development. As illustrated in Figure 14, the majority of countries report that their national curricula encourage respect for and reflection on intangible cultural heritage within local communities. This approach aligns with the objectives of the 2003 Convention (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). Further supporting this trend, the 2023 WAAE survey revealed that arts educators are increasingly incorporating broader educational goals into their teaching. Specifically, 9.5% of respondents reported integrating elements of Education for Sustainable Development, 7.9% addressed cultural diversity and 8.6% promoted social inclusion in their lessons (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2023).

**Figure 14: Member States reporting that school students are taught to respect and reflect on the ICH of their own community or group, through educational programmes and curricula, by regional group.**

(Global total n=138, Europe and North American States n=39, Sub Saharan Africa States n=38, Latin American and Caribbean States n=28, West Asian and North American states n=22, Eastern and South-eastern Asian States n=5, Central and South Asian States n=4, Oceanian States, n=2).
Source: UNESCO, 2003 Convention Periodic Reports

**Figure 15. Member States reporting that school students are taught to respect and reflect on the ICH of others, through educational programmes and curricula, by regional group.**




(Global total n=129, Europe and North American States n=39, Sub Saharan Africa States n=37, Latin American and Caribbean States n=22, West Asian and North American states n=20, Eastern and South-eastern Asian States n=5, Central and South Asian States n=4, Oceanian States, n=2).
Source: UNESCO, 2003 Convention Periodic Reports

However, while these statistics indicate that many countries are striving to integrate culture and the arts into their educational programmes, they do not fully reflect the scope or effectiveness of these efforts. For example, Figure 15 shows that Latin America and the Caribbean report slightly lower figures compared to other regions – a disparity that is difficult to interpret. This may be less a sign of limited commitment and more a result of differing definitions and understandings of culture and the arts within national education systems.

Moreover, the quality and depth of culture and arts education vary widely across regions. For example, the pilot phase of implementation of the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators, including 10 Member States,[93] found that in lower secondary education, the proportion of instructional time allocated to these subjects ranged from 7% to 76%, with an average of 43% (UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators). Such variation likely reflects differences in national educational priorities as well as the diverse ways in which culture and the arts are conceptualized and implemented within curricula.

Heritage education in particular faces implementation challenges.[94] Only 21% of countries estimate that their heritage education programmes are conducted systematically and effectively (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). This figure is likely to reflect mostly initiatives connected specifically to heritage sites, as it is drawn from reporting under the World Heritage Convention. A further challenge stems from the fact that the most commonly reported activity – visits to World Heritage sites, demands substantial logistical planning and financial resources, making frequent implementation difficult.

So, while many education systems worldwide are making meaningful efforts to integrate culture and the arts into curricula, disparities in implementation, depth and access reveal ongoing challenges. Addressing these gaps will be essential to ensure that all learners benefit equally from the transformative potential of this approach.

One effective way to strengthen culture and arts education is by explicitly embedding it within national curricula, ensuring its visibility not only in learning objectives but also in the time and autonomy granted to schools for its implementation. Here are some examples of interesting policies from around the globe supporting its teaching. In Bangladesh, the 2021 National Curriculum Framework introduced arts and culture as a subject at the secondary level, aiming to foster a generation that is creative, tolerant and self-reliant (Bangladesh National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2021). The subject is allotted over 50 hours annually and consultations are ongoing to align its implementation with the UNESCO Framework on Culture and Arts Education (2024). In Indonesia, the 2022 Merdeka Curriculum offers schools greater flexibility to integrate local cultural content – such as traditional arts and practices like batik making[95] – into their teaching (Indonesia, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, n.d.). It emphasizes local wisdom, cultural heritage and project-based learning as key components of students' personal growth. Kenya's latest competency-based curriculum (2024) includes creative activities all through pre-primary and primary school and proposes an art and sport sciences track with fine arts, music, dance, theatre and film in senior school (Kenya Institute of curriculum development, n.d.). In 2024, New South Wales (Australia) implemented a reformed visual arts syllabus for Years 7 to 10 (Australia, New South Wales Government, 2024). This curriculum emphasizes art-making, as well as critical and historical studies, including mandatory content on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Portugal has released a National Plan for the Arts (2019–2029) that promotes social change by mobilizing the educational power of the arts and heritage in the lives of all citizens (Portugal National Plan for the Arts Executive Committee, 2021). The government of Chile issued two recent policies on artistic education (2024–2029) and heritage education (2024–2029) that can guide curricular adjustments (Chile, Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio & Ministerio de Educación, 2024). These examples showcase the multitude of ways countries can integrate arts and culture education, adapting their strategies to fit their unique educational landscapes.

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*[93] The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators' First phase of implementation (2021-2022) included 12 countries and 14 cities. However, data was only available for 10 countries at the time of conducting this analysis.*

*[94] Heritage education is generally understood as a discipline in which learners study about heritage sites, often but not always those listed as World Heritage, history and traditions of their own or other cultures, ecology and protection of biodiversity, with the objective to better understand and appreciate cultural and natural heritage and to foster awareness, commitment to preservation and safeguarding, as well as intercultural dialogue.*

*[95] Batik is a hand-made dyeing technique using wax resist.*

However, not all countries have policies that explicitly support culture and arts education or all of its dimensions. Two surveys focusing on intangible cultural heritage reveal that the main obstacle teachers face in incorporating these themes into their classrooms is the lack of clear or adequate references in national curricula (UNESCO & ICHCAP, 2021; UNESCO, 2021b).[96] In contrast, in the same surveys, only a small number of teachers identified low student interest as a barrier, suggesting that the issue lies more with systemic support than learner engagement.

In summary, while numerous countries have taken steps to incorporate culture and the arts into their education systems, their successful implementation hinges on how clearly and consistently these elements are embedded in national curricula and textbook development. For teachers to confidently and effectively integrate culture and arts into their teaching, curricula must offer both clear guidance and sufficient flexibility. This means articulating precise learning objectives, allocating adequate instructional time and providing autonomy for locally relevant adaptations. Furthermore, textbooks, as an essential part of enacted curricula, are also crucial for promoting cultural diversity, pluralism and inclusion by employing inclusive language, representing diverse identities and integrating human rights (UNESCO, 2017).

## Arts education in vocational secondary schools

As part of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET),[97] vocational education is designed for learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a particular occupation or trade (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2011). Some of these programmes focus on culture and the arts, preparing students for careers in these fields. In France, for example, at the secondary level, two technological baccalaureates focus on the arts: one in Design and Applied Arts and another in Theatre, Music and Dance (France, Ministère de l'Education nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, n.d.). The latter is jointly managed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, serving as a strong example of intersectoral collaboration. Although enrolment remains relatively low, completion rates are high, over 97% (L'Étudiant, 2024).[98] In Mexico, the Centro de Educación Artística (Artistic education centre - CEDART) Luis Spota Saavedra is one of 12 CEDARTs across different parts of Mexico. It offers a high school programme that integrates general education with courses in five artistic disciplines: dance, music, theatre, visual arts and literature (Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL), n.d.). While not designed to train professional artists, the programme provides a rigorous curriculum for higher education in both the arts and humanities. Germany proposes programmes specialized in music (Deutsches Musikinformationszentrum, n.d.). Türkiye has established the Fine Arts High Schools for students interested in painting and music (Türkiye, Ministry of National Education, 2018). Ecuador offers a supplementary high school diploma in the arts – commonly known as art schools – which runs parallel to general education and allows students to specialize in dance, music and visual arts. In addition, a technical high school diploma in the arts is available, offering specializations in music, painting, ceramics, sculpture, graphic arts, graphic design, woodworking and carving (Ecuador, Ministry of Education, n.d.). Both programmes prepare students for entry into the labour market, while the supplementary diploma also provides access to tertiary-level studies.

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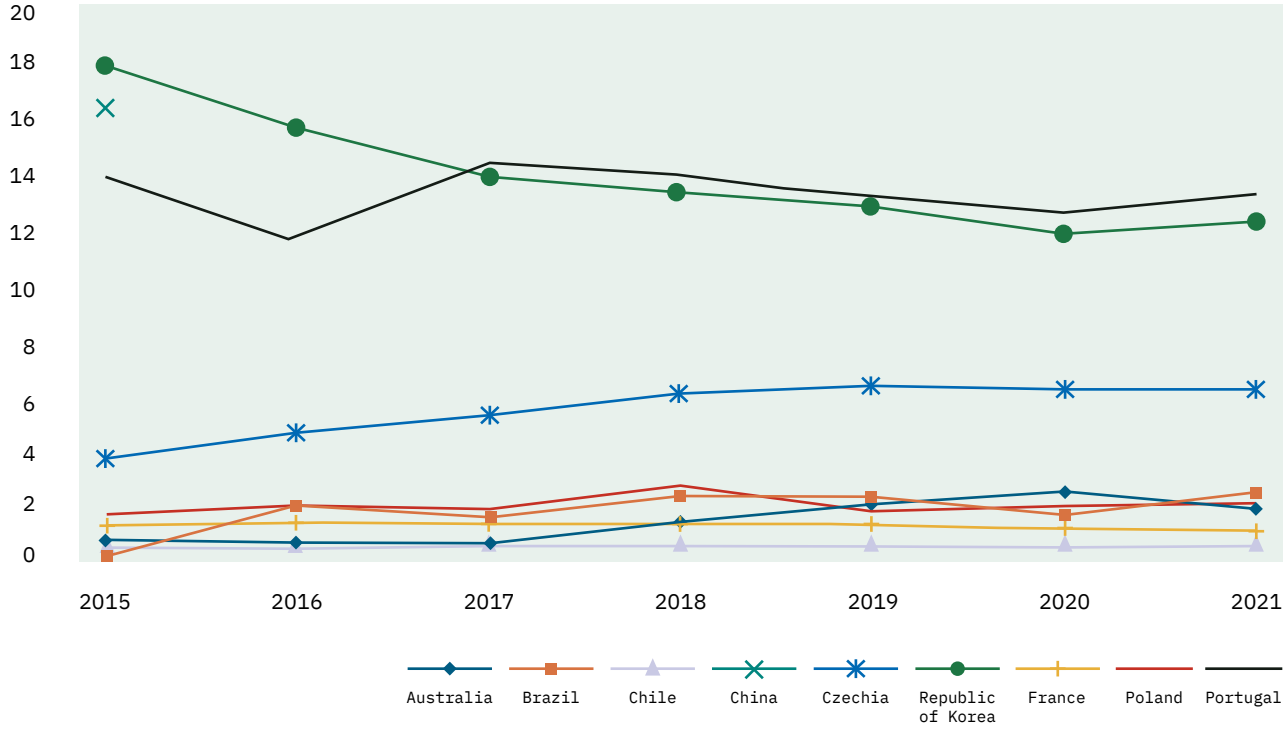
*[96] In the European survey of 2021, 40% of teachers cited the absence of ICH in the curriculum the main reasons for not incorporating it into their lessons; only 3.81% of teachers cited the lack of student's interest. In the Asia-Pacific survey of 2021, 33% of teachers cited the absence of intangible cultural heritage in the curriculum as the main reasons for not incorporating it into their lessons. 3.81% of teachers cited the lack of student's interest.*

*[97] Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is understood as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods. TVET, as part of lifelong learning, can take place at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels and includes work-based learning and continuing training and professional development which may lead to qualifications …'*

*[98] https://www.letudiant.fr/resultat/bac-techno.html In 2023, the overall admission rate for all technological baccalaureates was 89.8%, whereas the pass rates for the two arts-focused programmes were notably higher at 97.4% and 97.1%, respectively. In 2024, 1,727 students earned a baccalaureate in Art and Design – down from over 3,000 in 2018 – while fewer than 200 completed the Theatre and Dance programme.*

These national models illustrate the diverse ways secondary-level vocational education integrates the arts across contexts. It remains challenging to compare actual enrolment rates because the way subjects are grouped varies between countries. Overall, according to a cross-continental data comparison, the percentage of students in upper secondary vocational schools for the arts is relatively low and shows little fluctuation (El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024; see figure 16).

**Figure 16. Percentage of students in upper secondary vocational schools specializing in arts and humanities in 9 countries.**




Source: Data from OECD Education Statistics and China Bureau of Statistics, as cited in El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024. (https://mondiacult2025.com/digital-library/)

In short, while enrolment in vocational and technical programmes focused on the arts and culture remains relatively modest worldwide, the diversity of national approaches highlights the recognition of these fields as a viable and structured vocational pathway.

## An innovative approach: teaching and learning through culture and arts

Teaching and learning through culture and arts involves using the latter as a tool or method to explore various other subjects. Rather than viewing arts and culture as discrete subjects, this approach positions them as dynamic tools for learning across the curriculum and for cultivating values, skills and knowledge in ways that are engaging, inclusive and meaningful. For example, craft patterns or local architecture can help people understand geometric concepts, knowledge about traditional agricultural practices link to geography or biology, music connects to the properties of sounds in physics, and heritage sites reflect geographic, historic and societal contexts. As such, there is significant potential for integrating culture and arts into curricular or extra-curricular activities. These elements can serve as gateways to teaching subjects in a contextualized and engaging way. This approach leverages cultural and artistic expressions as vehicles and tools to enrich learning, connecting them directly to lessons to enhance both subject comprehension and students' awareness and appreciation of cultural values. This not only supports academic outcomes but also fosters interest in culture

beyond the classroom, thus helping to safeguard it. For instance, although intangible cultural heritage is still mainly taught as a stand-alone subject, it also supports the learning of other disciplines in at least 45 countries (2003 Convention Periodic Reports).

A number of examples demonstrate that all school subjects can be taught using this approach and that every form of heritage or artistic expression can contribute to at least one subject. These include platforms like the UNESCO Clearinghouse for Living Heritage and Education, Google Arts and Culture, Smithsonian Learning Labs, or the Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM (UNESCO, n.d. a; UNESCO & Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2024; Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM, n.d.; Smithsonian Learning Lab, n.d.; Google, n.d.). In Canada, several Toronto secondary schools offer CyberARTS, a multidisciplinary integrated arts and technology specialized programme (Toronto District School Board, n.d.). Since 2019, several UNESCO projects in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific successfully tested a comprehensive methodology to integrate intangible cultural heritage into school activities (UNESCO, ICHCAP and APCEUI, 2022; UNESCO, 2021a; UNESCO Bangkok, 2015). Toolkits and other teaching and learning supports produced by these projects include hundreds of examples of lesson plans and activities in a wide range of subjects from primary to secondary levels. As part of these pilots, a school in Greece explored the music genre Rebetiko to discuss gender stereotypes through the songs' lyrics in literature. To do this, students learnt dance steps in physical education and developed an app to teach dancing in ICT (UNESCO, 2021d). Students and teachers responded enthusiastically, prompting further collaboration between the Ministries of Culture and Education to apply the methodology more widely across schools and regions. By 2024, training sessions, case studies and dissemination events had reached hundreds of educators, inspiring them to develop more lessons connected to local practices and reflecting growing interest in culture-based education (Greece, Ministry of Culture, 2024; UNESCO, 2023f). Another example is the World Heritage in Young Hands Kit, introduced in 1998 and currently under development for a new version of the toolkit. It takes an interdisciplinary approach to involve teachers across curricula and incorporate world heritage as a way of delivering core subjects and transverse themes (e.g. identity, tourism, environment, culture of peace). As such, it explores transversal themes and global challenges through the lens of world heritage.

Arts are also a powerful pedagogical tool to challenge gender norms, benefiting society but also the quality of the arts themselves. The gender dimension of arts education involves examining how gender shapes access, participation, representation and outcomes in both formal and informal learning contexts. For example: Who studies and teaches art? How do curricula reflect (or ignore) women and gender-diverse artists? Do educational practices and content challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes?

Teaching with or through culture can also help bring cultural minorities more exposure within educational settings by incorporating their practices into learning experiences. Two UNESCO pilot projects on teaching and learning with intangible cultural heritage have demonstrated this. In Belgium, one school organized a multicultural exhibition that revealed an unexpected cultural diversity among students. In Nepal, teachers designed several lessons around the intangible cultural heritage of the Tamang ethnic group, engaging classes primarily composed of Newar students (UNESCO, ICHCAP and APCEUI, 2022). By incorporating contextualized heritage expressions into teaching, such initiatives bring school education beyond the dominant cultural model, offering more inclusive and locally relevant content that reflects diverse identities and lived experiences. This approach strengthens the principle of co-creation between the educators and the learners, as the latter will feel empowered to share their cultural practices with their peers. This can be effectively combined with a whole-school approach, which implies collective and collaborative action by all members of the school community to enhance student learning, behaviour and well-being, and the overall learning environment.

Learning through culture and heritage also offers a grounded way to address social and environmental challenges, connecting education with local culture and creativity. For example, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network promotes climate change education through a wide range of awareness-raising activities and creative workshops that often incorporate local traditions (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). Member cities have fostered collaboration between educational institutions and environmental organizations, organizing school competitions, community projects and events focused on sustainability. These initiatives cover urban issues such as

waste management, green technologies and innovative solutions to environmental problems. In Sydney, a UNESCO City of Film, the Film By programme by NSW The Arts Unit equips teachers and students with filmmaking skills to share their own narratives, including environmental stories. The programme features festivals, workshops and teaching resources that integrate film into the curriculum – highlighted by the 2023 edition's celebration of a short film addressing the issue of littering (Australia, New South Wales Government, n.d.; Australia, New South Wales Government, 2023). These initiatives, situated at the crossroads of creativity, heritage and environmental awareness, provide an engaging and impactful means of involving students in sustainable development efforts.

These examples illustrate the increased acknowledgement of the powerful potential of integrating culture and arts into the broader educational framework – not as an isolated or additional subject, but as a dynamic and relevant approach to advancing multiple learning goals. Showcasing and exploring more cases where arts and culture intersect with different school subjects and themes such as environmental awareness, gender equality, or digital literacy, will inform how such approaches align with existing education priorities. It is essential to reinforce the idea that cultural and artistic education is not just a generic programme, but a meaningful way to enrich and enhance broader educational and societal objectives while safeguarding cultural expressions.

Students from Saraguro, Ecuador.

## Mother-tongue education and multilingualism as a gateway to cultural awareness

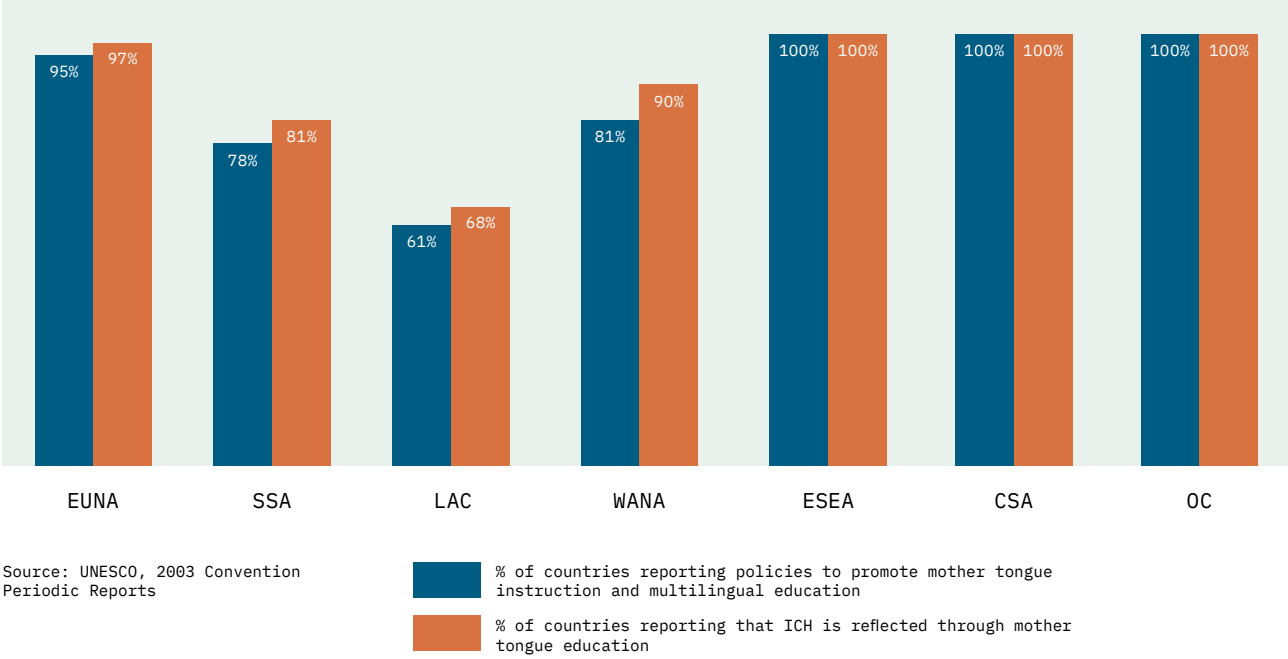
Language is a key aspect of cultural identity and a fundamental medium of education. Many languages, including those of Indigenous Peoples, are endangered. The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) highlights the urgency of preserving and revitalizing these languages (United Nations, 2019; UNESCO, n.d. d).

Mother-tongue education, especially at young ages, holds a unique role in supporting effective learning and conveying cultural values, especially for communities whose language differs from that of the majority population. Multilingualism empowers learners from different cultural backgrounds to fully take part in society. It fosters mutual understanding and respect for one another and helps preserve the wealth of cultural and traditional heritage that is embedded in every language around the world. It is the stepping stone for cultural awareness, which is the basis for appreciation of cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2022e).

Globally, around 40% of people lack access to education in a language they speak at home, often because national education systems remain dominated by colonial languages, an issue that has clear negative impacts on learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2025d; UNESCO, 2025). The challenge is particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa, where up to 80% of children do not speak the language of instruction at home (UNESCO, 2025d). Similar challenges have recently emerged in regions like Europe, North America, Oceania and the Arab States due to increased immigration. Over the past decade, there has also been a slight decline in early-grade instruction in learners' home languages (UNESCO, 2025d).

At least 116 out of 135 countries (86%) report that living heritage is reflected through mother-tongue education and 109 out of 134 (81%) have policies promoting it (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). However, some of these policies may refer to national languages, which are often the mother tongue of the largest population group, explaining the discrepancy in statistics. It is interesting to note that despite regional disparities, there is a strong correlation between having such policies and implementing mother tongue instruction in schools.

**Figure 17.**
**Mother-tongue instruction: policies and respect of ICH, by regional group.**




Source: UNESCO, 2003 Convention Periodic Reports

The emphasis on mother-tongue education and multilingualism within education and cultural policies is evident across various countries and regions. In Canada, the Assembly of First Nations supports reconnecting fluent elders with schools and enhancing teacher training to support Indigenous language revitalization (Assembly of First Nations, 2022). In the Caribbean, Saint Lucia has released a language policy and plan to ensure that students are proficient in both Kweyol and English, supporting bilingual literacy from an early age (Saint Lucia, Department of Education, Innovation and Gender Relations, 2022). Meanwhile, India's 2020 National Education Policy places strong emphasis on mother-tongue and regional-language instruction, recommending their use as the medium of teaching until at least Grade 5 and preferably up to Grade 8. The policy reinforces linguistic and cultural diversity through the continued three-language formula and highlights the need for quality bilingual resources, experiential learning and adequate teacher support. However, the imposition of Hindi as one of the compulsory language fuels debates in some states (India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

The Regional Action Plan for Africa calls for gradually integrating Indigenous languages into public education (African Indigenous Peoples Network, 2022). South Africa has made significant efforts to promote linguistic heritage and equitable access to education by recognizing 11 official languages in its education system. And while the initial 2002 Language Policy for Higher Education faced challenges, a revised framework now requires institutions to promote multilingualism by adopting and ensuring language support for all students, with further emphasis in the National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (2021–2030) (South Africa, Ministry of Education, 2002; South Africa, Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020).

The Latin America and the Caribbean regions have been notably active in advancing Indigenous bilingual education, with more than 17 countries implementing such programmes since as early as 2000, albeit with varying models and levels of progress (United Nations Children´s Fund (UNICEF), 2021). Recognizing that nearly half of the children enrolled in early childhood education programmes do not receive instruction in their home language, Guatemala's 2024–2028 national policy sets a strategic objective to address this gap. The policy prioritizes strengthening teacher training in multiple Indigenous languages and expanding access to intercultural bilingual education at the pre-primary and primary levels. This ensures all children have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue from the earliest years of schooling (Guatemala, Secretaría de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia -SEGEPLAN, 2024).

A similar effort has been made in Cambodia's Multilingual Education (MLE) Action Plan (2019–2023), which seeks to expand inclusive, equitable and sustainable MLE programmes for Indigenous Peoples – especially children – by improving access to quality education rooted in their mother tongues, cultures and traditions and by fostering collaboration between Indigenous communities and key stakeholders (UNESCO, 2025c).

Such progress is positive. However, studies conducted post-COVID highlighted that despite efforts made by the government and civil society to organize distance learning and distribute educational materials, students speaking minority languages were significantly disadvantaged (United Nations Children´s Fund (UNICEF), 2021).

While anchoring mother-tongue education and multilingualism in plans and strategies is essential, equally important is monitoring implementation to ensure learners truly benefit from them and gain access to actual culturally-contextualized education. This requires sustained investment in teacher training, curriculum development and community engagement – particularly in marginalized regions – so that linguistic rights are not only recognized on paper but realized in practice, fostering equitable, inclusive and culturally affirming learning environments for all.

## Empowering educators through capacity-building activities on culture and arts education

Quality education relies on good teachers, whose primary function is to ignite a love for learning and nurture the creative potential of young minds. This is only possible when all teachers – regardless of the subjects they teach – are provided with adequate and safe working conditions, including manageable class sizes, fair and timely salaries, and supportive school environments. Such conditions are essential not only for teacher well-being and retention, but also for ensuring that learners receive high-quality instruction. These needs are just as critical for those involved in culture and arts education, who often require additional time, space and flexibility to foster creativity and cultural expression. Teachers play an indispensable role in shaping culture and arts education, particularly through curriculum implementation. However, for them to be truly effective, they must be trained not only in pedagogy but also in the intricate relationship between school, society and culture, and have access to relevant pedagogical resources.

Globally, it is estimated that 44 million additional primary and secondary teachers are needed to meet SDG 4 – to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO & the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). Teacher shortages affect both the Global North and the Global South. Specific data on arts teachers across general, technical and professional education systems is scarce in most countries, but some studies highlight a widespread shortage of qualified educators in this field, especially in the Global South (El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024). The Global Status of Teachers 2024 report, however, estimates that teacher shortage for the art subject is moderate, with more acute challenges in Africa and North America and the Caribbean (Education International (EI), 2024). Several countries – including Argentina, Egypt, India, South Africa, United Kingdom and the United States – require arts teachers to hold a university degree in the arts, supplemented by teacher training (El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024). El Salvador, for example, recently established a qualification system for music teachers in non-formal education, ensuring better training and standards in this field (El Salvador, 2020). Yet, the quality of training varies between countries: a global survey conducted by the World Alliance for Arts Education in 2023, covering 113 countries revealed that less than a third of arts educators had received specialized in-service training or formal training in artistic disciplines (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2023).

Some countries attempt to address this shortage by offering short-term training for teachers from other disciplines, and for artists and culture professionals to qualify them for arts instruction, though such initiatives remain limited and lack sufficient incentives. In technical and vocational education (TVET), arts teachers are typically drawn from TVET graduates or a few higher education alumni, with minimal recruitment from skilled practitioners like craft masters, developers, or technicians. Overall, the pathways to becoming an arts teacher remain narrow and insufficient to meet the sector's needs.

A lesson on Rembrandt's Paintings. © Iryna Varanovich from Pexels.com.

Several governmental and non-governmental initiatives support pre-service and in-service training in arts education to enhance teachers' competencies. For example, the New Mexican School initiative (2024), a collaboration between Mexico's Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), the National Center for the Arts (CENART) and UNESCO, engaged nearly 500 teachers in rethinking arts teaching methodologies. The initiative promotes interdisciplinary approaches and aesthetic experiences with a focus on community and social change, fostering critical and creative thinking among students (UNESCO, 2024c). In Egypt, Reframing Heritage Education in Egypt (RE-HeEd) has created a generation of qualified Egyptian specialists in heritage education and the development of teaching materials on that subject. It proposes several degrees targeting pre-service and in-service schoolteachers as well as employees of the education and culture institutions (Re-HeEd, n.d.). Kuwait's Al Sadu Society and the Ministry of Education launched the Train the Trainers in The Art of Weaving programme, selected for UNESCO's Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (2022). Over 60 art teachers were trained, and more than 30,000 students have since benefited from learning this traditional craft (UNESCO, 2022a).

A few countries also strive to integrate culture and arts education into teacher training programmes. In Bangladesh, as arts and culture now part of the national curriculum through secondary education, teacher training programmes incorporate innovative pedagogical approaches to integrate culture education into various subjects.

It is important to distinguish between training teachers specialized in arts and culture, as detailed above, and equipping teachers of other disciplines to incorporate arts and culture into their pedagogy. In 2023, the Ukrainian NGO Democracy through Culture organized training for teachers in 15 schools, including 10 members of the UNESCO Associated Schools Network. The initiative enabled teachers to integrate living heritage in their school activities, helping students affirm their cultural identity despite adversity. This project demonstrated the power of culture in strengthening social cohesion, even in emergency contexts (Democracy through culture, 2023; UNESCO, 2023c). In the USA, the Local Learning team supports educators in integrating folklore and local art forms into curricula. Their professional development workshops have trained over 250 educators, folklorists and artists in leveraging community-based art forms to enhance learning (Local Learning, n.d.). So far, these initiatives often rely on teachers who voluntarily seek training, providing them with methods and tools to integrate culture and arts into their teaching. The latter anticipate that this approach will foster deeper connections with their students, creating more engaging and inspiring learning environments that resonate on both a personal and cultural level.

But despite promising initiatives worldwide, the shortage of qualified arts educators and limited training opportunities continue to hinder progress. To fully realize the potential of arts education, culture and arts must be systematically integrated into teacher training programmes, both as subjects and pedagogical tools, to ensure broader, more inclusive pathways into the profession. This includes not only expanding access to formal qualifications and in-service training, but also recognizing and valuing the expertise of community-based practitioners, artists and tradition bearers. Policies must go beyond pilot projects and voluntary efforts to provide sustained support, career incentives and institutional recognition for those teaching with and through culture and the arts.

## Empowering educators by providing pedagogical resources

The availability of appropriate pedagogical resources is crucial to support teachers' work. UNESCO, for example, has developed toolkits, audio-visual materials and online courses to help educators incorporate art and culture into their classrooms (UNESCO Bangkok, 2022; UNESCO, ICHCAP, APCEUI, 2022a). The World Heritage in Young Hands Educational Resource Kit for Teachers has been used since 1998 by educators worldwide and exists in over 40 language versions (UNESCO, n.d.c). An updated version is under development, including e-learning courses for teachers and students. The UNESCO clearinghouse on living heritage and education compiles a selection of tools and case studies focusing on the use of living heritage both as an educational subject and pedagogical tool (UNESCO, n.d. a). A detailed methodology has been developed in the guide Teaching and Learning with Living Heritage: A resource Kit for Teachers to help teachers develop content tailored to their classroom' context (UNESCO, 2021a; UNESCO, ICHCAP and APCEUI, 2022). The guide for teachers on Arts for Transformative Education highlights various initiatives supporting arts education in the UNESCO Associated Schools Network. It equips educators with tools to integrate culture and the arts into classrooms, fostering creative expression and intercultural understanding (UNESCO & Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2024). Thematic guides, such as the Living with Water, Heritage & Risks: An Educator's Toolkit for Global Citizenship, provides educators with content, tools and lesson ideas to help their students gain an awareness of the culture-nature connection in heritage conservation (APCEUI and SEAMEO, 2019).

However, these efforts have yet to be institutionalized on a larger scale. To have a meaningful impact, pedagogical resources must not only be developed but also made accessible in multiple languages and adapted to diverse cultural and educational contexts. Materials that are linguistically inclusive and culturally relevant enable educators to better connect with their students and ensure that the content resonates locally. Hence, it is equally important for teachers to be equipped with the methodologies and skills needed to develop such contextualized materials themselves. Wider dissemination is also necessary, through national education platforms, teacher training programmes and local networks, to move beyond isolated use and embed these tools into everyday teaching practices. Only through such inclusive and strategic approaches can the full potential of culture and arts education be accessible to teachers and classrooms around the world.

## Exploring education priorities connected to culture and arts

Several global education priorities align with and can be supported by culture and arts education. Some examples of approaches include Global Citizenship Education (GCED), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Peace Education, Education for Intercultural Understanding and Socio-Emotional Learning. The goal of these is equity and inclusion, creativity and innovation, well-being and mental health, as well as decolonizing and localizing education, which are all essential to fostering dialogue, mutual respect and understanding. Each approach fosters transformative learning, encouraging students to engage with diverse perspectives and develop empathy, critical thinking and a sense of social responsibility. Therefore, these education approaches can serve as effective entry points for integrating culture and arts education into existing curricula and programmes, as illustrated in some of the examples below.

UNESCO partnered with Arigatou International through its Ethics Education Fellowship Programme in East Africa, focusing on transformative pedagogies to foster cultural diversity and social cohesion in Kenya, Mauritius and Seychelles. The initiative has leveraged the powerful intersection of culture and education to cultivate mutual understanding and respect among people of different cultures, religions and beliefs (Arigatou International, n.d.). The UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) DICE (Digital Intercultural Exchange) project has connected students and teachers from different countries and cultural backgrounds. This goal was to engage in peer-to-

peer dialogue on global issues related to peace and sustainable development, fostering collaborative learning, social-emotional skills and appreciation of cultural diversity (UNESCO MGIEP, n.d. b).

To approach these global education priorities effectively, teachers require specialized training, as well as continuous professional development. Peru offers an example of this, with their curriculum of initial teacher education that offers a component in the social sciences and active citizenship. (Peru, Ministerio de Educación). In 2025, the National Pedagogical University, in collaboration with the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Knowledge of Colombia, launched a diploma programme aimed at enhancing artistic practices in music and dance as essential tools for promoting peace, social justice and intercultural dialogue. The programme trained 1,368 teachers, artists, trainers and cultural knowledge holders across the country, with the goal of strengthening local initiatives focused on the artistic and cultural expressions of each region (Colombia, Ministerio de Culturas, 2025). Worldwide, 62 countries have measured that Global Citizenship Education is relatively well mainstreamed in teacher training as part of the monitoring of the SDGs and specifically SDG Target 4.7.1 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2020). While this existing data shows positive results, it only refers to a third of all the countries worldwide.[99] Many teachers can also access online or in-person training through platforms such as the MGIEP's website, the GCED Online Campus – where 15% of the courses offered focus on arts and culture- or the Earth Charter Initiative (UNESCO MGIEP, n.d. a; Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU), n.d.; (Earth Charter, n.d.).

Embedding culture and arts within broader educational frameworks – such as GCED, ESD and Peace Education – not only makes integration more feasible but also amplifies the transformative power of education in building inclusive, just and peaceful societies. By aligning arts education with these global priorities and supporting teachers through adequate training, contextualized resources and institutional backing, education systems can ensure that all learners benefit from rich, culturally grounded learning experiences. This, in turn, strengthens the role of education in safeguarding cultural diversity, promoting sustainable development and nurturing active, empathetic global citizens.

To conclude this section on empowering educators, it is clear that teachers are the cornerstone of effective and inclusive culture and arts education. Their ability to inspire, guide and contextualize learning experiences is vital to nurturing students' cultural identity, creativity and critical thinking. However, this potential can only be fully realized if teachers are adequately supported – through decent working conditions, relevant and accessible training, and high-quality, contextualized resources available in multiple languages. Countries need to take inspiration from successful initiatives and build on the wealth of existing resources to strengthen both pre-service and in-service teacher development. Importantly, global education priorities, such as Global Citizenship Education, offer strategic entry points for integrating culture and arts education into existing curricula. When teachers are equipped to engage with these interconnected priorities, they are better positioned to foster transformative learning environments that promote empathy, dialogue and inclusive values, and promote culture and arts education.

Furthermore, there must be a focus on teaching for transformation, not transmission. Empowering educators in this domain means equipping them not only to teach about culture and the arts, but to teach through them – as creative pedagogical approaches that promote critical thinking, empathy, cooperation and problem-solving. Teachers must be supported to view the arts as a way to engage with global challenges such as climate change, inequality and conflict, helping learners connect abstract issues with their lived realities and cultural contexts. But despite growing recognition of the value of arts and culture in education, many teacher education programmes give limited attention to these areas. The Framework therefore calls for the systematic integration of culture and arts education in pre-service teacher training, ensuring all future educators, not only arts specialists, are confident and culturally competent, in in-service professional development, offering continuous learning opportunities and exposure to new tools, media and pedagogies, as well as in peer learning and

[99] *To calculate this indicator, multiple criteria are assessed and combined into a single score ranging from zero to one, where a score of one indicates that Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development are fully integrated into teacher education. All but one of the 62 countries score above 0.5, with more than half exceeding 0.9. (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, n.d.), .*

collaborative platforms, where educators can co-create curricula with artists, cultural practitioners and community leaders. Finally, the role of teachers as agents of change and cultural mediators, bridging school, community and global issues must be strengthened.

# Strengthening culture and arts education through partnerships and lifelong learning

Collaboration between education and cultural institutions and connected sectors, areas of intervention and populations – such as economy, tourism, sports, health, inclusion, youth, women and Indigenous Peoples – is essential for enriching culture and arts education and fostering appreciation for cultural diversity. Artists, heritage practitioners and culture professionals bring valuable knowledge, offering diverse perspectives that enhance learning experiences. As for the tourism sector, it can play a complementary role by offering hands-on experiences and showcasing cultural heritage in ways that extend classroom learning into real-world contexts, while supporting both cultural education and local development through collaborations with sustainable and community-based tourism initiatives. International frameworks, including UNESCO Conventions, emphasize the involvement of multiple stakeholders in cultural education, highlighting the role of communities, civil society and heritage institutions in promoting cultural awareness.[100] This section looks more specifically at possible collaborations between education institutions, communities and cultural institutions.

## Bridging between education institutions and communities

Many countries estimate that there is a high level of community involvement in culture and arts education. This involvement is crucial as community members possess profound knowledge of their cultural environments and artistic practices, including their meanings and significance. Their active participation in education initiatives ensures that this knowledge is transmitted respectfully, thereby minimizing the risk of superficial or inappropriate representation within learning environments.

In particular, 98% of Global North countries and 90% of Global South countries have identified heritage institutions, NGOs and local communities active in educational initiatives related to living heritage (2003 Convention Periodic Reports). However, while these figures demonstrate the importance of partnerships, there is still limited data on the long-term impact and sustainability of such collaborations. In addition, over 85% of responding educators called for strengthened collaboration with artists, cultural practitioners and institutions (World Alliance for Arts Education, 2023).

Several initiatives showcase successful models of school-community partnerships, either linked to curricular or extra-curricular activities. In some cases, community members come into the school to participate in some cultural or artistic activities or classes visit the community. In other cases, the school is inseparably integrated into village life.

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[100] *The States Parties to the 1972 Convention shall endeavour, in so far as possible, and as appropriate for each country to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes (Art. 5). Furthermore, the Operational Guidelines stipulate that the target of capacity building includes practitioners, institutions, and communities and networks (para. 213). States Parties are encouraged to develop educational and capacity building programmes that may promote sustainable and inclusive economic benefits for local communities and Indigenous Peoples (Operational Guidelines para. nd. 214bis). The 2003 Convention emphasizes the participation of communities, groups, and individuals in safeguarding efforts (Art.15). The 2005 Convention highlights the fundamental role of civil society in protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions (Art. 11), including regarding capacity-building in specific domains linked to the implementation of the Convention (Operational Directives p. 47).*

Efforts are also being made to connect with community members more systematically, as part of the school curricula. In Australia, for example, the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council's latest strategic plan (2021–2026) highlights for the first time since the Council was established the importance of promoting Aboriginal culture through school education. The engagement of community elders with primary and secondary school curricula is expected to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indigenous traditions, knowledge and heritage (Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, 2021).

Similarly, Austria's IKE goes ASPnet project (2022) fostered collaboration between heritage bearers and secondary school teachers to develop lesson plans incorporating traditional knowledge. The initiative demonstrated the value of such cooperation. It also underscored the importance of clear communication, realistic expectations and adequate financial and logistical support to ensure meaningful and sustainable partnerships. Without these elements, teacher-bearer collaborations risk falling short of their goals and failing to deliver lasting impact (Österreichische UNESCO-Kommission (Hg.), 2024).

These examples demonstrate the potential of school-community partnerships to enrich culture and arts education through meaningful engagement with local knowledge and practices. While collaboration is widespread, ensuring its sustainability requires dedicated support, clear frameworks and stronger integration into school systems. These partnerships are mutually beneficial: communities gain a valuable opportunity to transmit and safeguard their cultural and artistic knowledge – often knowledge that teachers themselves may not possess – while schools benefit from richer, more relevant and grounded learning experiences. Strengthening such partnerships through long-term commitment, appropriate resources and mutual respect can transform education into a shared cultural endeavour rooted in community life.

## The role of cultural institutions in lifelong learning

Beyond formal education, a range of institutions like museums, libraries, community spaces where living heritage is practiced and cultural associations play a vital role in informal and lifelong learning. This type of learning connects with everyday life, covering all ages, settings and learning formats to address diverse needs throughout a person's life. By offering flexible, interactive and innovative educational programmes, cultural institutions can engage diverse audiences to reflect on their own culture or that of others while complementing learning that takes place in educational institutions.

## Educational programmes in institutions

Despite varying figures across the world, museums are particularly well positioned to raise awareness about culture and the arts (UNESCO). Many employ education officers who lead programmes on site, in schools and in the local communities. For instance, Mexico reports 523 museums and heritage sites running education initiatives, while Romania documents 113, representing 4.1 and 5.9 properties per million inhabitants, respectively (UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators). Institutions in places with an international or national recognition – such as UNESCO World Heritage properties, Creative Cities and European Capital of Culture –often leverage this status to support relevant educational activities and strengthen public engagement with their cultural heritage (UNESCO, n.d.f; UNESCO, n.d. b; European Commission, n.d.). Furthermore, tourism-driven institutions such as interpretive centres, heritage trails and local festivals also act as informal educational settings, helping to cultivate appreciation for cultural diversity among both tourists and residents.

Examples from around the world illustrate diverse approaches cultural institutions take to enhance learning. Mexico has immersed youth in their city's heritage through interactive workshops, through Mi barrio mi patrimonio (My district, my heritage) in Puebla (a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network since 2022, and a World Heritage property – Historic Centre of Puebla) (Ayuntamiento de Puebla, n.d.). Another example

is Romania's Astra Museum, which hosts the children's Olympics of Traditional Artistic Crafts (UNESCO, 2023d). In South Africa, Iziko Museums operates 11 museums and has a dedicated education department, offering curriculum-linked school programmes and a travelling 'museum on wheels' to reach under-served communities (Iziko Museums of South Africa, n.d.).

## Innovative strategies for reaching marginalized groups

Existing structures can also use partnerships to increase access and inclusion of otherwise disadvantaged learners. The project Radio Education: Promotion of Learning through Radio in Isolated Areas of Pakistan, launched by UNESCO and Radio Pakistan in 2024, uses Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) to integrate tangible and intangible cultural heritage, global citizenship education, education for sustainable development and environmental awareness in its educational content to boost learning and access for communities and youth in remote areas of the country (UNESCO, 2024d). Spain's State Museums and Archives implement accessibility measures, including adapted reading guides, touch stations, mobility and sign language interpreters (Spain, Ministerio de Cultura, 2023a; Spain, Ministerio de Cultura, 2023b). Türkiye's Ministry of Culture and Tourism collaborated with various partners to develop a heritage education platform offering teachers and students interactive digital resources from cultural institutions and sites. The platform enhances learning accessibility, including materials recorded in sign language (Türkiye, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021).

## Connecting culture to global challenges and dialogue

Cultural institutions can also build on their culture and arts programme to raise awareness about key development themes. An example of this is Germany's BUGA23 Symphonic Garden, where visitors engaged with nature through music, connecting environmental awareness with artistic expression (Deutsche Bundesgartenschau Gesellschaft, 2023). In Kenya, the Kitale Film Week proposes a Film in Education Programme: partnering with schools and local organizations and reaching out to thousands of students, it uses film to explore themes like climate change, cultural heritage and social justice in order to promote empathy, critical thinking and inclusion – especially through accessible formats such as subtitles and sign language (Kitale Film Week, 2025). In other settings, education through culture can open a dialogue to foster social cohesion: the multi-partner UNESCO project Pathways to social cohesion and intercultural dialogue (Tejiendo Culturas, 2024) demonstrated how culture can be a powerful tool to strengthen integration between migrant, refugee and host communities in Peru. This was achieved through community projects in different educational settings, ranging from music training in traditional instruments of migrant and host communities, to art exhibitions (UNESCO, 2024e).

## Policy and institutional enablers

Strong policy frameworks at local and national levels support cultural institutions in their educational mission. At the local level, 94% of UNESCO Creative Cities report policies backing cultural education, covering funding, infrastructure, accessibility and curricular enrichment (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). National governments also play a vital role: Armenia's 2023–2027 Cultural Strategy supports museum education via exhibitions and workshops (Armenia, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, 2023). Since 2022, Estonia's Cultural Backpacks programme allocates funding to ensure all primary students have access to cultural experiences linked to school curricula. (Estonia, Ministry of Culture, n.d.).

Some countries choose to create dedicated departments to oversee the inclusion of culture and arts in their education system. This is the case of the Ghana Cultural Education Unit mandated to preserve the Ghanaian cultural heritage (Ghana Education Services (GES), n.d.). Uruguay has established National Cultural Centres across its territory to decentralize cultural development and promote local artistic expressions. Implemented by the National Directorate of Culture in partnership with local administrations and education partners, these centres aim to improve cultural accessibility and circulation while integrating national and international artistic initiatives (Uruguay, Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2022). Although these results cannot be extrapolated to the rest of the world, it is fair to believe that an enabling policy environment contributes to the large number of institutions offering awareness-raising or learning programmes.

## Professional development for institutional effectiveness

For institutions to remain effective, their staff must be trained in education and audience engagement. Organizations like the International Council of Museums (International Council of Museums (ICOM), n.d.) and Ibermuseos offer workshops and strategic support to build educational capacity and inclusion (Ibermuseos, n.d.). Ibermuseos' 2020–2023 plan focused on strengthening the social role of museums, especially to reach historically excluded groups (Ibermuseos, 2020).

## Overcoming challenges to sustain impact

Despite significant efforts to strengthen cultural education through partnerships, challenges persist. Many institutions, particularly museums, faced severe financial constraints during the COVID-19 crisis, reporting reduced capacity to deliver programmes (UNESCO, 2021c).[101] Ensuring adequate recognition and access to funding for partner institutions and individuals is crucial for the effective design and implementation of culture and arts education programmes. This highlights the need for supportive policies, sustainable funding mechanisms and advocacy campaigns that elevate the valorization and role of cultural education and emphasize its wide-reaching impact. Moreover, while numerous examples demonstrate the benefits of cooperation in expanding learning opportunities, there remains a critical gap in assessing the perspectives of contributing partners. The lack of systemic coordinated data collection, indicators and long-term impact evaluations on partnerships limits the ability of countries to refine and sustain these collaborations effectively. Furthermore, the governance structure, logistical and financial constraints can create additional obstacles – particularly when education and cultural institutions fall under separate ministries or departments. To address these challenges, dialogue between education and cultural partners is vital for a sustainable approach to cultural education and arts institutionalization.

[101] *Survey conducted in 2021, with answers collected from 56 countries. 50% of respondents identified a reduction in grants.*

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# Nurturing talent, expanding skills: engaging, educating and professionalizing the cultural and creative industries

## Creating the new generations of culture enthusiasts and creators

Engaging people in culture and arts, youth in particular, is essential for fostering future generations of cultural practitioners, professionals and consumers of cultural goods, services and content. Efforts must be made to ensure the participation of all communities in the full breadth of culture and the arts – both the traditions they inherit and those from other cultures they encounter. Policies and initiatives must cultivate a deep respect for one's own cultural expressions and identity, and foster an appreciation for the artistic contributions of others to enrich a diverse and inclusive cultural ecosystem. Around 90% of UNESCO Creative Cities, for example, have developed policies to support youth integration into the cultural and creative industries, which demonstrates a widespread commitment to this goal (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports).

One of the most effective visibility strategies to increase participation involves organizing festivals, heritage weeks and cultural months. Examples of this are the heritage festivals in several cities in New Zealand, European Heritage Days and Zimbabwe's Cultural Month. Typically spearheaded by governments in collaboration with sectoral partners, these events incorporate learning opportunities through workshops and informal knowledge sharing (Christchurch City Council (New Zealand), n.d.; Wellington Heritage Festival Trust, n.d.; European Heritage Days, n.d.; National Arts Council of Zimbabwe, n.d.). Such celebrations foster a strong sense of community ownership, cultural pride and inclusive public engagement.

Another strategy is offering young people financial incentives to access cultural experiences and products. Examples of this include France's Pass Culture, launched in 2021, provides a curated selection of cultural activities and a spending credit for 15–21-year-olds. Similar initiatives, such as the Kulturpass (Germany), IDNYC (USA), culture vouchers for primary and secondary school students and teachers (Slovak Republic), Italy's 18App and the new Carta Cultura and Carta del Merito, and London's Young Barbican Programme (UK). These grant discounted or free entry to cultural spaces, thereby nurturing long-term engagement with the arts (pass Culture, n.d.; Kulturpass, n.d.; City of New York, n.d.; Council of Europe, n.d.; Italia, Ministero della Cultura , 2024; City of London, n.d.). By reducing financial barriers, these programmes make culture more accessible and help embed cultural participation into young people's everyday lives.

Cultural participation is further enriched by youth centres, which provide spaces for artistic expression, workshops and performances. Ahead of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Arts Council Tokyo launched creative projects that became the foundation of the Tokyo FESTIVAL, which integrates youth-driven cultural programmes into the broader artistic landscape (Tokyo Tokyo Festival, n.d.). The Rwanda Heritage Hub, a joint initiative of ICCROM and the Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy has been established as a knowledge and training centre that focuses on the promotion of cultural heritage and cultural and creative industries as sectors for youth employment and job creation (ICCROM, n.d.). These initiatives not only foster creativity and cultural engagement but also support skills development and open up economic opportunities for young people.

Beyond consumption and participation, some initiatives also encourage young people to actively contribute to cultural and natural safeguarding. The World Heritage Volunteers (WHV) Initiative, under UNESCO's World Heritage Education Programme, mobilizes youth to engage in awareness raising and conservation activities at World Heritage properties or sites on the Tentative Lists. Organized by NGOs and institutions, these projects promote collaboration among stakeholders, local communities and volunteers, reinforcing cultural stewardship. Participation in the campaign has surged post-COVID-19, reflecting renewed enthusiasm for heritage protection (UNESCO, 2024g.).

**Table 2. Youth participating in Conservation Activities for World Heritage Sites and sites in Tentative Lists.**

| Year | Number of action camps projects | Number of participating World Heritage sites and sites inscribed in tentative lists | Number of organizations involved | Number of participating countries |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | 68 | 62 | 55 | 36 |
| 2020 - 21 | 55 | 55 | 49 | 32 |
| 2022 | 58 | 55 | 44 | 29 |
| 2023 | 74 | 67 | 58 | 33 |
| 2024 | 81 | 77 | 64 | 38 |

Source: UNESCO, World Heritage Volunteers Initiative. (https://whc.unesco.org/en/whvolunteers/)

Recognizing that learning is a lifelong process that takes place across diverse settings, policies and programmes aimed at children and young people outside formal education are essential for fostering cultural appreciation and inspiring future careers in the arts. These initiatives are especially impactful when they create opportunities for intergenerational exchange, allowing youth to engage with adults from whom they can draw inspiration and benefit from shared experiences. By supporting such diverse learning pathways, the culture sector not only secures its own sustainability but also empowers the next generation to contribute actively to its evolution.

## Nurturing future creatives through tertiary education in culture and arts

Higher education in culture and the arts – including TVET programmes – is a significant pathway to becoming a professional or to upgrading skills in these domains. Tertiary education institutions worldwide offer a wide range of cultural disciplines including theoretical courses (e.g. music theory and composition); hands-on classes (restoration of works of arts); traditional skills (e.g. handicrafts); state-of-the-art technologies (engineering drawing and design); and, interdisciplinary disciplines (art subject). An analysis of the 2022 global course data from the World Higher Education database shows that 15.3% of all higher education courses are connected to culture and creative industries. The proportion of courses offered follows income trends, with low-income countries proposing 11.2% of their courses in this field while the percentage goes up to 17.1% in high-income countries (BOP Consulting 2024 / WHED, 2024).[102] This is likely to be explained by the fact that in low-income countries, fewer students will pursue tertiary education,[103] especially in the cultural and creative industries where they are more likely to enter the workforce early and learn on the job.

[102] *Higher education data © International Association of Universities (IAU), supplied in 2024.*

[103] *School enrolment in tertiary education was 79.35% in high-income countries in 2020, compared to 9.36% in low-income countries.*

In most countries, women are more likely than men to be enrolled in tertiary education courses overall (UNESCO, 2025b). This trend is reflected in the culture and arts fields in Europe, where women accounted for 64.6% of all students enrolled in culture-related studies in 2022, significantly outnumbering their male counterparts (European Union, 2024). Further analysis is needed to measure specific participation worldwide and to examine how this high participation translates into professional opportunities.

While fewer classes are offered than in programmes related to business or STEM, new curricula in arts the ongoing development of arts and culture curricula reflects strong academic interest and the field's growth potential. This is the case in Morocco, where culture and humanities are taken into account in the new roadmap for higher education (Morocco, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Communication, 2024), and the number of new programmes in Visual Arts and Design has increased in several countries such as Egypt, India and South Africa (El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024). In others, higher education institutions are establishing connections that support both heritage safeguarding and community livelihoods. In Argentina, the University of Catamarca has implemented a TVET programme focused on traditional local loom weaving techniques. Its first cohort has supported over 300 students – primarily women artisans from communities across the province – with 144 of them certified, thus enhancing their livelihoods through the acquisition of a specialized degree (UNESCO, 2024m). But the number of available courses does not necessarily reflect how the education system caters to creatives. Nor do these statistics encompass subjects or TVET programmes through incubators and creative hubs that train and support creatives in running efficiently a cultural or creative business to secure their living (e.g. marketing, accountability, management, etc.). Also, some of the courses may be part of other programmes that are not designed for the cultural and creative industries (e.g. information technology, software engineering, etc.) and can reach a broader audience.

Looking more specifically at tertiary programmes targeting creatives, 78% countries report tertiary institutions and university education degrees in the arts and CCIs sectors. Despite regional disparities, at least two-thirds of the countries in each region offer such an opportunity (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Despite the range of programmes available, aligning degree selection with individual expectations and skills remains a significant challenge for students. In France, art and culture schools can be integrated after the high school diploma baccalauréat, as well as through parallel admissions after a 2-, 3- or 4-year tertiary course in another field and through dual apprenticeship. Higher artistic education is offered by a network of 150 partner institutions in the fields of visual arts, performing arts, audio-visual, design, heritage and architecture. To help interested students orient themselves adequately, the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research and Innovation, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the National Association of Art Schools (AndEA) partnered to launch a rich information portal and an information guide (Campus France, n.d.; France, Ministère de la Culture, 2024). This type of guidance not only equips students with the tools to identify the educational path that best aligns with their interests and aspirations, but also provides a clear and comprehensive overview of the diverse opportunities available across the cultural and artistic fields.

The existence of degree programmes does not guarantee that graduates will automatically transition into the professional workforce. Employment and entrepreneurial opportunities are generated by the economy – they are not restricted to positions in the culture and education industries. Indeed, a degree does not guarantee the availability of jobs or successful entrepreneurial initiatives. OECD data from 2021 suggests that cultural and creative workers tend to hold higher academic qualifications, with 62% of them holding a tertiary degree, compared to 40% of the general workforce across the member countries of the Organization. This figure hints that in high-income countries, culture professionals are more likely to be formally educated, but it does not reflect their competencies in specific cultural fields, or whether the skills they acquired through formal education are appropriate for the market's needs (OECD, 2022).

A useful effort has been made by some tertiary institutions to develop connections with the professional workforce, a method very widespread in the TVET. For instance, in Barcelona, Spain, several institutions such as the Nou Barris Technology Institute (videogames and virtual reality), the Institute of Performing and Audio-visual Arts, the EMAV (Municipal Audio-visual School), the Massana Design School and the Bau

School offer students direct contact with cultural and creative industry organizations in order to improve their job placement (Institut Nou Barris, n.d.; Escola de Mitjans Audio-visuals, n.d.; Escola Massana. Centro de Arte y Diseño, n.d.; Bau College of Arts and Design, n.d.). Germany has a strong commitment to academia-industry partnership, for example, with their dual studies system give students an equal proportion of academic and industry-based training. This approach is available in numerous sectors, including in diverse craft fields (Fjeldsted, 2019) and media, etc.. In addition to gaining hands-on experience, students often receive financial compensation during their training and significantly enhance their chances of securing employment with the company where they completed their practical placement (Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks (ZDH), n.d.).

Higher education institutions can also embrace interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, incorporating cultural and artistic subjects into non-cultural curricula, to enrich the research process and cultivate a generation of future professionals capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to propose solutions to the complex challenges of today's world (UNESCO, 2022h).[104] Notably, the UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks contribute significantly to advancing reflection on a wide array of topics. Almost 200 institutions, out of some 1,000 UNESCO Chairs, research themes connected to culture and arts and as diverse as Education and Afro-Hispano-American culture (Universidad Afro-Americana de África Central, Equatorial Guinea), Creativity and Sustainable Development in Rural Areas (Peking University, China), or Digital Technology Design with Indigenous People (Namibia University of Science and Technology, Namibia). By mobilizing the expertise of higher education and research institutions – particularly through North-South partnerships – they foster interdisciplinary dialogue, collaborative research and innovative training approaches. These networks act as think tanks and bridge-builders between academia, civil society and policymaking. Their activities help enrich teaching programmes, encourage the development of new curricula and promote inclusive and culturally rooted education systems.

In sum, while a wide array of tertiary education programmes in arts and culture are available across the globe, more effort is needed to ensure they are aligned with the realities of the cultural and creative industries, including the ever-changing opportunities and challenges introduced by digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Strengthening connections between educational institutions and the professional world can improve graduate employability and entrepreneurial potential. Encouraging regular skill-gap assessments would help tailor curricula to the evolving needs of the sector, while the collection of gender-disaggregated data can support inclusive and equitable policy development. Making higher education more responsive, inclusive and market-relevant is essential to unlocking the full potential of cultural and creative professionals.

## Empowering creatives: building careers, boosting culture and driving sustainable growth

The CCIs are powerful drivers of economic growth and social transformation, however, many artists and culture professionals struggle to secure sustainable livelihoods. To unlock the industry's full potential, cultural and artistic careers must be professionalizes and upskilled by strengthening both technical expertise and essential business skills, enabling culture professionals to navigate an evolving market successfully. Lifelong learning opportunities not only support individual career development but also position the arts and cultural domains as a force for addressing broader social and economic challenges.

A key aspect of this professionalization and upskilling effort is ensuring equal opportunities for all, particularly for women, who continue to face barriers in the industry. Globally, 77% of countries – 84% in the Global North and 73% in the Global South – report having implemented policies to support women as artists, culture professionals and creative entrepreneurs (2005 Convention Periodic

[104] *Interdisciplinarity describes a mode of knowledge production that focuses on coordination and interaction between different disciplines to both advance knowledge and action. Transdisciplinarity aims at moving beyond disciplinary boundaries.*

Reports). These measures include capacity building in cultural production and business management, student entrepreneurship programmes, and partnerships with educational institutions. Furthermore, financial, promotional and networking support initiatives have been introduced to foster greater inclusion. While the increasing number of such policies reported under the 2005 Convention reflects growing attention to gender issues, more disaggregated data is needed to assess progress, identify persistent challenges and develop targeted solutions for a more equitable creative economy.

### Sharpening the technical skills of culture and arts professionals

Intergenerational learning – such as the master-apprentice model – has long served as a foundational method for transmitting cultural knowledge and artistic skills through hands-on mentorship and close personal guidance. Today, these traditional approaches are complemented by short-term programmes, courses and workshops offered by educational institutions, NGOs, community centres, private providers and online platforms. These learning opportunities provide avenues for skill-building, re-skilling and lifelong learning, while also helping to strengthen forms of mentorship and practice-based transmission. Often aligned with industry associations and creative sectors, these programmes equip participants to enter or advance in the job market, so that their technical knowledge remain up-to-date and relevant.

Continuing professional development courses are a widely-adopted way for culture professionals across all disciplines in the arts and culture sector to refresh their knowledge and acquire new skills. Among museum professionals, this is the most common and prevalent form of capacity building (2015 Recommendation Periodic Reports). Colombia alone has referenced over 100 training programmes in the field of tangible and intangible heritage (UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators). Capacity-building programmes for culture and creative operators in the field of culture are offered in at least 94 Creative Cities (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). For example, the Learning Landscapes regional initiative has been implemented by UNESCO through its Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe in partnership with Interpret Europe. The goal is to train heritage interpretation trainers and staff of managing bodies of selected UNESCO designated sites – including World Heritage properties, Biosphere Reserves and Global Geoparks – to develop and experiment the value-based heritage interpretation approach, thus transforming these sites into 'learning landscapes' (UNESCO, 2024h). The International Centre for Underwater Archaeology in Zadar, Croatia, provides short-term courses in underwater archaeology and restoration of underwater finds. These programmes are designed for students and professionals from around the world seeking to enhance their skills and expertise in the field (International Centre for Underwater Archeology in Zadar, n.d.). These diverse and widespread capacity-building initiatives demonstrate a strong global commitment to strengthening the skills and knowledge of culture professionals in these fields.

Specialized institutions also produce guides to support educational institutions in assessing and developing their programmes. For example, in Malaysia, the Think City Institute has launched two online courses based upon the UNESCO Competence Framework for Cultural Heritage Management over the last three years (UNESCO Bangkok, 2021; Think City Institute, 2022b; Think City Institute, 2022a).

However, this training does not fulfil the needs from culture and arts professionals. For instance, in the field of tangible heritage only about a third of the reporting Member States worldwide estimate that the services provided by their agencies or institutions have adequate capacity to protect, conserve, present and manage World Heritage properties, with only high-income countries exceeding this threshold (57%) (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). This disparity may be partly since almost half of the listed World Heritage properties are located in Europe and North America, where most countries fall within the high-income category. These statistics underscore the urgent need not only for professional training in the sector but also for systemic identification of the specific skills that are lacking for effective site management and for the management of cultural heritage in all forms. Tailored training programmes must be developed to address these gaps, particularly in areas such as research on world heritage issues, where only 13% of the reporting Member States estimate having the institutional capacity to conduct research

specifically for World Heritage issues (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).

These deficiencies may be explained by the fact that specialized capacity building is rarely conceived from a strategic perspective. For instance, only 13.7% of the State Parties report having an effectively implemented national training/educational strategy to strengthen capacity development in the field of tangible heritage conservation, protection, presentation and management. Furthermore, 36.3% report having such strategies but with some deficiencies in its implementation (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).

Major technological changes have also led to the creation of entirely new professions in the cultural and creative industries: online art market specialists, digital fabrication specialists using 3D printers, etc.. To take one example, the rise of the video game industry has generated strong demand for game artists, which has resulted in the development of specialized training programmes. In India, the Media and Entertainment Skills Council (MESC) responded to this need by issuing Qualification Packs that define the standards and requirements for training game artists. Today, several training programmes across the country align with these standards, equipping students with the skills needed for emerging careers in the digital arts sector (Media & Entertainment Skills Council, n.d.; El Husseiny, White Paper on Culture and Education for Jobs, Skills and Creativity, 2024). At the same time, the emergence of new editing tools for film and music has significantly transformed traditional roles in the cultural and creative industries, creating a growing need for updated skills and competencies. In some regions, for instance in Africa, the educational programmes currently available are inadequate and limit the ability of professionals to grow (UNESCO, 2021f). In this context, private sector actors are often among the first to offer training in emerging and innovative fields, thanks to their agility and responsiveness. One example is the Triggerfish Academy – an initiative by a leading African animation studio – which provides free online courses in animation and related disciplines, delivered by experienced industry professionals (Triggerfish Academy, n.d.). However, despite the dynamism of these emerging training paths and professions, they risk reproducing existing gender imbalances. With women accounting for only 35% of STEM graduates – fields closely linked to technology-driven careers – they are less likely to access these opportunities (UNESCO). The next section highlights targeted programmes supporting women more specifically, however, the broader sector would benefit from more inclusive policies and expanded training pathways.

While diverse and innovative technical training programmes exist, they do not fulfil the needs in technical human resources for the culture and arts sector, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. These shortfalls are exacerbated by the lack of strategic frameworks for training delivery and by unequal access to emerging opportunities, especially for women. To meet the evolving demands of the industry and support sustainable careers, more coherent, inclusive and forward-looking training strategies are needed, those which are tailored to local contexts and grounded in clearly-identified needs.

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## From passion to prosperity: equipping creatives with entrepreneurial and supporting skills to sustain livelihoods and development

In addition to maintaining the core expertise of their professions, culture and arts professionals benefit from acquiring complementary skills that help them navigate everyday challenges. These include for instance competencies in business management, networking, media literacy and an understanding of global issues relevant to their cultural and creative work.

The lack of entrepreneurial skills is a very common challenges mentioned by artists and culture professionals. To respond to this, institutions such as incubators or creative hubs specifically-designed to support creatives in developing their businesses regularly organize workshops or short courses, in-person or online, to support the industry. Many programmes specifically target persons in vulnerable situations: creatives in countries with limited education opportunities, women and Indigenous Peoples. These programmes are designed to bridge the gap between creative practice and business proficiency, enabling artists to

sustain and grow their careers effectively. Professional training and development programmes have become even more important since the COVID-19 pandemic to help culture and creative professionals remain agile and develop the skills and knowledge they need to adapt to market changes and difficult circumstances. However, most events and workshops are short term and reach only a limited group of self-motivated participants.

A variety of statistics indicate that this type of lifelong learning is implemented in most countries. For instance, up to 83% of countries reporting on their implementation of the 1980 Recommendation on the Status of the Artist indicate that they have capacity-building policies and measures to help artists monetize their work (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). This figure rises to 93% among the UNESCO Creative Cities concerning capacity-building training for cultural educators and operators. A possible cause may be because local administrations have close connection and more frequent exchanges with the local culture professionals on their needs (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). Arts councils often offer this type of programmes, for example, Entrepreneurship for Creatives, Artists and Cultural Managers in Malta, Creative Leadership in the United Kingdom, Montana Artrepreneur Programme in the United States, Arts Acceleration Programme in Singapore or the Creative Industries Business Summit in Zambia.

Several initiatives underscore the power of collaboration and networking – across public and private institutions, countries and individuals – in achieving meaningful capacity-building outcomes. For instance, since 2019, the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) in the USA has been empowering women in over 100 countries by providing knowledge, networks and resources to launch and grow businesses, including in the field of culture. A 2021 evaluation revealed the positive impact of this mentoring process, with 74% of its graduates having higher earnings and 29% able to hire new staff (Academy for Women Entrepreneurs, n.d.). Similarly, creative hubs, such as CANEX.Africa promoted by the Afreximbank, also anchor capacity building in active and strategic networking in addition to tailored courses (CANEX.Africa, 2024). One of the latest projects by Business and Arts South Africa, the three-year BASA Debut Programme, was launched in collaboration with government and private partners to help creatives grow their businesses. Starting with 450 participants – nearly 40% of them women – the programme concluded with an intensive phase that incubated 24 startups into sustainable enterprises (Business and Arts South Africa (BASA), 2024). Meanwhile, in the Caribbean, the UNESCO Transcultura has accompanied over 3000 culture professionals, half of them women, through an ambitious programme that fosters entrepreneurship and expands access to regional and international markets (UNESCO Havana, 2024).

Media and information literacy[105] is a crucial competence for everyone, including professionals in the culture and arts industry. Developing this skill enables individuals to critically evaluate online content, mitigate the risks of misinformation and safeguard against online abuse. As highlighted in the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2023, fostering media and information literacy is essential to ensure equitable and informed participation in the digital environment. For example, in response to the widespread tendency among social media content creators to share information without verifying its accuracy,[106] the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas launched a free online course aimed at helping digital content creators and journalists become trusted voices online. The overwhelming response – over 9,000 participants from 172 countries – highlights the global demand for strengthening media literacy and credibility in the digital space (Knight Center, 2024). Enhancing media literacy is also one of the components of the Türkiye's Women's Empowerment Action Plan (2018–2023), coordinated by the Ministry of Family and Social Services in collaboration with other ministries, which outlines policy measures to enhance women's participation in the information and media sectors. The plan also emphasizes vocational training and skills development to boost women's employment, offering programmes in databases, software development, network technologies, digital marketing, gaming and application design and information security, with the goal of increasing the presence of qualified women in the digital economy (Türkiye, 2021).

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[105] *Media and Information Literacy enable people to engage critically with information, navigate the online environment safely and responsibly and ensure there can be trust in our information ecosystem.*

[106] *In a survey of 500 digital content creators in 45 countries, the majority (62%) of the respondents admitted to not verifying the accuracy of information before sharing it with their audiences.*

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Lifelong learning is an approach that enables professionals in culture and the arts industry to develop skills and competencies that not only enhance their individual livelihoods but also integrate their practices with broader environmental, social and economic challenges. This enables them to engage meaningfully with societal issues while sustaining their careers. For example, through non-formal and informal education channels, a 2021–2022 project in Thailand explored how safeguarding living heritage can serve as a catalyst for addressing local issues (Thailand, Ministry of Education. Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education, 2022). In one community, efforts to preserve the tradition of preparing local sweets led to a thoughtful redesign of their packaging – now showcasing local stories, cultural identity and the preparation method. Beyond enhancing product appeal and strengthening the community's source of income, this initiative also helps challenge the province's media-driven image of violence, promoting a richer narrative. When the knowledge exchange is embedded within community-driven initiatives, it is more effective in advancing the development objectives of that community. The Irebe eco-crafts cooperative in Rwanda exemplifies this dynamic by concurrently promoting women's empowerment through vocational skill development, thus preserving Indigenous craft traditions and fostering environmental sustainability (Irebe, n.d.). On a broader scale, with the adoption of the Jubail Commitment to Climate Action in Learning Cities in 2024, UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) pledged to strengthen lifelong learning for climate action by integrating traditional knowledge and diverse cultural perspectives into local strategies (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2025). These examples illustrate how lifelong learning, when rooted in cultural relevance and community engagement, becomes a powerful driver for inclusive, sustainable development.

In sum, inclusive lifelong learning – ranging from entrepreneurship and media literacy to community-based initiatives – builds economic resilience among culture and arts professionals and empowers them as key contributors to addressing global challenges and shaping more sustainable, creative societies. Globally, capacity-building efforts are being made available through a wide array of non-formal and informal channels. In countries where institutionalized TVET systems or dedicated bodies for artists exist, training opportunities are often easier to identify and better coordinated. However, in many contexts, the fragmentation of capacity-building initiatives – between public and private institutions and across formal, non-formal and informal modes of delivery – creates barriers for artists seeking relevant, coherent educational pathways. Moreover, the short-term nature of most training programmes, which often only reach a small group of highly self-motivated participants, limits both scalability and lasting impact. Investing more systemically in the professional development of cultural and creative actors is essential to building more resilient career paths, empowering a broader range of talent and unlocking the sector's full contribution to sustainable development.

## Embracing the digital leap: educating for a safe future in the arts and culture sectors

The digital revolution is advancing at considerable speed, bringing profound societal transformations that are reshaping both the education and culture sectors. It presents unprecedented opportunities for expanding access, fostering creativity and enhancing professional development (as discussed in Chapter 2 on culture and digital technologies). However, the advance of digital technologies also introduces significant challenges including access disparities, gaps in digital literacy, preserving cultural authenticity and meaning, ensuring the quality of content and truthfulness of information, cybercrime, online harassment, privacy and data protection, excessive dependency on technology. Given its increased utilization – particularly by younger generations – digitalization and AI must be addressed at both political, strategic and operational levels to ensure sustainable and inclusive futures for culture and arts education (UNESCO, 2023a).

## Digital technologies: tools to learn with, tools to learn about

Digital technologies are transforming culture and arts education, providing innovative ways for the public to engage with both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. As dynamic educational tools, they enable interactive experiences, enhance knowledge sharing, with cultural institutions and sites and expand options for appreciating of heritage. Hybrid learning models that incorporate creative coding, 3D printing and other digital tools are reshaping the possibilities of arts education. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2023 underscores the role of digital technologies in expanding access to education, promoting inclusive learning environments and equipping learners with the digital and creative skills necessary for cultural participation in the twenty-first century.

While collections were already being digitized prior to the pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis significantly accelerated this development. Digital communication technologies became an essential bridge between educators, artists, culture professionals and learners around the world. In response to confinement measures and limited in-person engagement, large-scale digitization initiatives rapidly expanded, allowing museums, libraries and cultural institutions to showcase their collections through online platforms and immersive virtual experiences. This evolution has dramatically broadened their educational impact, reaching those unable to attend in person. A recent global survey by the University of Glasgow (United Kingdom) highlights the success of this approach, revealing that 79% of respondents are interested in using digital technology – and 77% in virtual reality – to access cultural collections that would otherwise remain out of reach (University of Glasgow, 2025).

AI is playing an increasingly important role in culture and arts education, enhancing learning through personalized recommendations, automated content creation and interactive tools. For example, in 2023, 900,000 people participated in the Rijksmuseum's online experience Closer to Johannes Vermeer, a popular virtual exhibition. Separately, the museum has also developed an AI-powered platform that analyses historical artworks.[107] This tool helps students and researchers create their own galleries, explore artistic techniques, study colour palettes and trace influences across different periods. These innovations make arts education more accessible and engaging, while supporting deeper learning and creative exploration (Rijksmuseum, n.d.).

To maximize the potential of these new technologies, educators should be supported and trained to enhance the content of their courses regarding cultural and artistic domains. Additionally, they should be made aware of the ethical and political dimensions of technology use, including AI-generated content, copyright, inclusivity and sustainability (Selwyn & Nemorin, Thematic White Paper: Culture and arts education in the digital: Navigating the opportunities and risks, 2024).

## Bridging the digital divide for equitable access and skills development

While digital technologies promise broader participation in cultural and artistic learning, disparities in access to digital resources and infrastructure persist. Around 2.6 billion people (32% of the global population) still lack internet access – 1.8 billion of whom live in rural areas – and 60% of primary schools, half of lower secondary and a third of upper secondary schools remain unconnected (GEM Report, 2023; Azoulay, 2025). Where connectivity exists, digital skills vary dramatically: in Brazil, for instance, only 31% of adults possess basic digital skills – twice as many in urban compared to rural areas – and with a ninefold gap between top and bottom socioeconomic groups (GEM Report, 2023). The content available online is predominantly concentrated in a limited number of languages, excluding marginalized non-dominant knowledge systems.[108] This raises particular concerns with AI, as it learns from this available content and will

[107] *https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/tell-your-story*

[108] *UNESCO White Paper: Culture and Arts Education for Quality, Contextual Education*

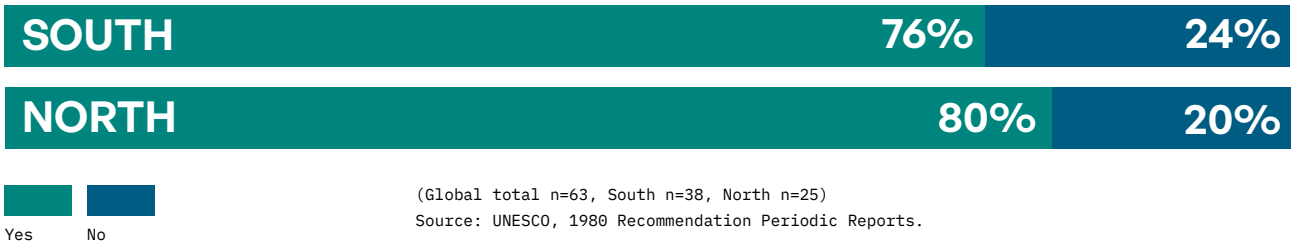
exclude cultural expressions that are not digitally represented, resulting in biases. Many regions, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa,[109] face significant barriers due to limited internet connectivity and inadequate technological infrastructure (World Bank Group, 2024), as highlighted in Chapter 2 on culture and digital technologies. Addressing these gaps requires targeted investments in digital infrastructure, tools, policy frameworks and inclusive learning strategies. According to the GEM Report's PEER profiles, 90% of UNESCO Member States aspire to develop national digital-skills frameworks and 54% have already established digital skills standards for students and teachers – though coverage varies from only 25% in Sub-Saharan Africa to 80% in Europe and North America. Additionally, 77% of low-income countries include school connectivity in their national plans and policies, marking a strong commitment to bridging the digital divide (UNESCO, 2023a). Numerous UNESCO Member States and Creative Cities who submitted reports (over 78% and 92% respectively) have already taken measures to enhance the digital skills and competences of culture professionals and several initiatives exemplify efforts to bridge these divides (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports; 1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports).

**Figure 18. UCCN Member Cities that have implemented measures and/or initiatives in school curricula and/or lifelong learning, to enhance digital competencies and skills of cultural and creative professionals and the population in general, by Global North/Global South.**

(UCCN Member Cities / Member States: Global total n=109/48, Global North n=69/26, Global South n=40/22)

Source: UNESCO Creative Cities Reports

**Figure 19. Member States reporting trainings and/or educational programmes that enable artists to deepen their knowledge and skills in the field of new digital technologies, by Global North / Global South.**




(Global total n=63, South n=38, North n=25)

Source: UNESCO, 1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports.

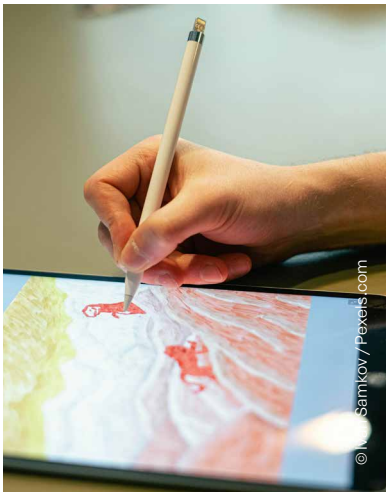
The DigiCulture project, aimed at improving digital competencies and social inclusion for adults in the cultural and creative industries, has provided free online courses in multiple languages to over 24,000 individuals in Europe. Recognized for its impact, the DigiCulture project was selected as a Good Practice Example for adult education under the Erasmus+ EU programme (DigiCulture, n.d.). Similarly, the TVET programme Africa Digital Media Academy (ADMA) in Rwanda incorporate digital media skills to enhance employability in fields such as 3D animation, filmmaking and programming. In 2019, ADMA celebrated the graduation of its first all-women intake, with a programme focusing on photography, video production and multimedia storytelling (Africa Digital Media Academy, n.d.). Since 2023, five SIDS in the Pacific – Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu – have initiated a reflection, with the support of UNESCO, on how to harness the internet and digital tools for economic and social development. As part of this initiative, artists and musicians have received training in creating and selling

[109] *According to the World Bank databank, with data from the International Telecommunication Union, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 37% of individuals and only 28% of women had access to internet, compared to 97% in North America (country data from 2019 to 2023).*

digital art online, enabling them to reach global audiences directly without relying on intermediaries in other countries (UNESCO, 2024e).

Museums, libraries and cultural institutions are also leveraging digital technologies to expand their educational mission. Large-scale digitization projects, such as the Pacific Virtual Museum Pilot Programme, have enabled broader access to Pacific cultural heritage by bringing together over 900 institutions worldwide to create a digital repository of more than 500,000 cultural items. Such initiatives illustrate the potential of digital platforms to make cultural content widely accessible while fostering greater public engagement (National Library of New Zealand, Te Puna Matauranga, National Library of Australia, n.d.). In this way people with disabilities and those unable to visit national museums and galleries can also experience the significant works of their culture, strengthening national identity and social cohesion.

Yet, as underlined in Chapter 2, efforts to enhance access should not come at the expense of content quality or the respect for cultural and intellectual property rights. Bridging the digital divide in the arts and culture sector must go hand in hand with the development of inclusive regulatory frameworks that uphold the rights and identities of all communities. Clear, enforceable policies are essential to safeguard consent, ensure fair compensation and prevent the misappropriation or exploitation of creative content – particularly that of marginalized and Indigenous groups. Without such measures, efforts to bridge the digital divide risk reproducing existing power imbalances and eroding the very diversity that these technologies seek to amplify. To ensure these protections are meaningful in practice, culture and art professionals must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to understand and navigate existing and emerging regulatory landscapes.




## Digitalization and lifelong learning in the creative economy

Digital platforms have revolutionized the way artistic knowledge and practice are shared, making lifelong learning more dynamic and accessible. As part of lifelong learning, non-formal and informal learning spaces, such as Skillshare, Domestika, YouTube and TikTok, Edx or Coursera have become widespread venues for artistic education, allowing artists to reach new audiences, diversify their income streams and experiment with emerging technologies. Moreover, AI and virtual reality technologies are opening new avenues for innovative training and collaboration, which offer opportunities for immersive and interactive learning experiences (Selwyn and Nemorin, 2024). However, there are still significant differences in terms of ICT development, access and use between different geographical regions.

However, these technological advances also raise ethical and political considerations (highlighted in more detail in Chapter 2). The increasing reliance on AI-generated content prompts discussions about intellectual property rights, inclusivity, creativity and sustainability. Creatives need to acquire new skills to navigate these new processes and protect themselves. Moreover, the dominance of standardized digital education models risks marginalizing local artistic traditions and cultural narratives (Mistry and Boix Mansilla, 2024). To counteract these effects, institutions must promote context-sensitive approaches to digital learning that respect cultural diversity and support cultural and creative industries in developing their own digital strategies.

## Gender and inclusion in digital cultural education

Women working in the cultural and arts sector remain underrepresented in leadership roles, have reduced access to public funding and receive less visibility for their work compared to their male counterparts (UNESCO, 2022d). This divide continues into the digital space – particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where women are still 15% less likely than men to use mobile internet (World Bank, 2025). And low levels of digital fluency – the extent to which people embrace and use digital technologies – are likely to constraint the capacity of women to access education and new digital economy opportunities (Accenture, 2016). Digital cultural education for women remains an imperative to bridge the

gender gap in emerging technologies and move towards greater inclusion and opportunities for women in digital creative fields.

Various initiatives have been launched to build women's capacity and encourage them to develop their networks in order to support their professional growth. In the Republic of Korea, the Women Open Tech Lab actively promotes the participation of women in technology through workshops, research groups and exhibitions, advocating for feminist approaches to digital learning (Woman Open Tech Lab, n.d.). In Serbia, the 1000 Women initiative has empowered women in rural areas by equipping them with digital and entrepreneurial skills, leading to the employment of over 1,600 women in the cultural industry since its inception in 2017 (UNESCO, 2022b.). A UNESCO Digital Creativity Lab initiative (2022–2023) focused on improving digital skills among women in Central Asia's cultural and creative industries, particularly in cinema, music and cultural event organization. Addressing challenges such as limited infrastructure and low digital engagement, the project identified key skills gaps in digital skills. It also emphasized the need for more outreach and the creation of accessible online learning platforms in Russian language to equip culture professionals with essential digital competencies (UNESCO, 2021e); Selwyn & Nemorin, Thematic White Paper: Culture and arts education in the digital: Navigating the opportunities and risks, 2024).

In addition to equipping participants with valuable skills, these programmes also play a crucial role in increasing the visibility of women within the culture and arts sector. However, many of these initiatives are led by CSOs and remain limited in scope and duration. To ensure a lasting and systemic impact, it is essential for governments and institutions to design inclusive digital education strategies that go beyond short-term interventions. These strategies should explicitly address structural gender inequalities and aim to provide equitable access to digital tools, training and opportunities for all creative professionals.

## The role of policy and ethical considerations in digital cultural development

At the global level, UNESCO's Open Roadmap for the Implementation of the 2005 Convention in the Digital Environment provides guidance for countries and stakeholders, recommending digital skills gap audits, targeted training programmes and the transformation of cultural institutions into learning spaces for digital literacy (UNESCO, 2020). The Global Digital Compact, annexed to the Pact for the Future, has advanced the concept of 'equitable digital environment for all' to overcome the digital divide and prevailing inequities. It encourages governments to ensure that AI fosters diverse cultures and languages (United Nations, 2024).

Furthermore, the 2021 UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, adopted by all 193 Member States, calls on countries to promote AI education for both young people and for professionals of the education and culture sectors whenever appropriate. At the same time it assessed the impact of AI technologies to ensure they do not contribute to the concentration of cultural markets in the hands of a few actors or the erosion of linguistic diversity (UNESCO, 2022c). The Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research supports countries to implement immediate actions, plan long-term policies and develop human capacity to ensure a human-centred vision of these new technologies (UNESCO, 2023b).

At the implementation level, Belgium provides a pioneering example of a structured approach to digital cultural policy. Its Policy Framework for Digital Culture is built on a three-pronged strategy: (i) infrastructure development; (ii) access to digital content for all; and, (iii) digital maturity through knowledge dissemination and leadership development. The Decree on Cultural Education and Creative Economy has also been amended to emphasize digital literacy as a key component of cultural education (Flanders Department of Culture, Youth and Media, n.d.) (Belgium, 2021). The African Union Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030) encourages the development of locally-relevant informal education materials and the use of radio and TV for the improvement of informal education levels (African Union, 2020). Kenya's National ICT Policy supports the creation and dissemination of digital content that preserves local languages, knowledge and culture. By making such content more accessible online, it aims to inspire Kenyan

people, in particular creators, to learn and produce unique works. The policy also includes plans for a certification programme to strengthen the gaming industry (Kenya, Ministry of Information, Communications and Technology, 2019).

Despite the proliferation of digital initiatives, long-term policies guiding a sustainable approach to digitalization in the culture and arts sectors remain in their early stages. Many national digital strategies fail to incorporate the specific needs of cultural and creative industries, leaving institutions and professionals without clear frameworks for navigating digital transitions.

## Towards a more inclusive and sustainable digital future

Increased accessibility to culture and arts education through digital technologies has considerable potential for expanding creative opportunities, fostering economic sustainability and making cultural participation more inclusive. However, the currently unregulated development of digital technologies risks reinforcing existing inequalities or undermining the richness and transmission of artistic traditions and cultures. Given the rapid pace of technological change, it is therefore essential to continuously assess the actual added value – or potential drawbacks – of emerging digital tools in educational contexts.

To build a sustainable digital future for the culture and arts sector, policymakers and institutions must prioritize investment in digital infrastructure and literacy programmes to ensure equitable access to digital resources for all learners. This effort should be complemented by the availability of diverse and locally relevant digital content that respect cultural diversity and allow educators and learners to engage meaningfully with their heritage and that of others. Additionally, lifelong learning initiatives that integrate both formal, non-formal and informal digital education should be supported while fostering continuous skill development in an evolving digital landscape. Addressing ethical concerns related to AI, copyright and inclusivity is also crucial to ensuring responsible digital cultural practices. Furthermore, targeted policies must be implemented to enhance the capacities of women and marginalized groups in digital cultural and creative industries, promoting a more inclusive and representative culture sector. By taking a balanced approach – one that embraces innovation while safeguarding cultural diversity – digitalization can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing culture and arts education, empowering artists and cultural practitioners and professionals and fostering a more inclusive and sustainable creative economy.

# Recognizing culture as a standalone development goal post-2030

At the 2022 MONDIACULT Conference, UNESCO Member States issued a resounding call for the recognition of culture as a global public good and urged for the inclusion of a stand-alone goal on culture in the post-2030 sustainable development agenda (UNESCO, 2022f). This demand stems from growing recognition that culture is not only a key enabler of sustainable development but also a fundamental pillar in its own right – crucial for fostering inclusive, resilient and cohesive societies.

In the current Sustainable Development Goals, in addition to an explicit reference to cultural and natural heritage in Target 11.4, culture is implicitly embedded in Target 4.7 of SDG 4 on education, which commits to ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. Among others, this includes the appreciation of cultural diversity, global citizenship and culture's contribution to sustainable development. UNESCO's interpretation of SDG 4 has emphasized the role of culture and the arts in advancing quality education, particularly through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and mother tongue-based learning.

However, while SDG 4 acknowledges the value of culture, this recognition remains limited in scope and inconsistent across targets and indicators. Culture is largely treated as a secondary enabler rather than a central dimension of development

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policy and measurement. As a result, its transformative role in education – especially in promoting creativity, identity, inclusion and critical thinking – is not fully realized within global monitoring frameworks.

A stand-alone goal on culture would allow for a more robust and systematic integration of cultural dimensions into education and other development areas. The requirement of a standardized UNESCO Fields of Study definition would allow the creation of explicit targets and indicators for culture and arts education. This would ensure that arts education, heritage-based learning and cultural participation are not only visible but also measurable and resourced. Such a goal would reinforce cultural rights and inclusion, promoting education in learners' mother tongues, culturally relevant and contextual curricula and the safeguarding of Indigenous Knowledge systems – especially for marginalized communities.

Moreover, recognizing culture as an essential component of lifelong learning would elevate informal and non-formal education spaces – such as museums, libraries, cultural centres and heritage sites – as legitimate and impactful arenas for learning. This would strengthen the visibility of the contribution of communities, institutions, or networks – that reflect individuals' identities and aspirations and help embed flexible, identity-based learning opportunities into existing learning systems. A culture stand-alone goal would also promote intersectoral collaboration, encouraging alignment between education, culture and labour policies to support holistic and locally grounded learning pathways. Finally, by positioning cultural learning as foundational twenty-first-century skills, a stand-alone culture goal would help unlock the full potential of education systems to foster empathy, creativity, critical thinking and civic engagement – skills essential not only for individual fulfilment but also for social cohesion and democratic processes. In sum, embedding culture more meaningfully in the sustainable development framework through a dedicated goal is not only timely – it is necessary. It would ensure that culture is no longer peripheral but central to building a more inclusive, creative and sustainable future.

# Conclusions and key takeaways

Culture and arts education is grounded in a robust international normative framework – comprising international conventions, declarations and recommendations – but effective implementation remains a dynamic and ongoing effort.

As demonstrated by numerous examples across regions, countries are increasingly embedding culture and the arts into formal, non-formal and informal education systems. These efforts enrich the relevance of education, foster lifelong and lifewide learning in and through culture and the arts, strengthen connections between cultural identity and learning, and contribute to building a holistic and inclusive learning ecosystem that reflects the richness of diverse cultural and artistic expressions. For instance, initiatives that emphasize the transmission of heritage – including Indigenous Knowledge systems, local traditions and linguistic diversity – are emerging as essential components of culturally responsive education. These actions support inclusive societies and sustainable development by anchoring learning in the lived experiences and cultural contexts of communities.

Efforts have been made to advance intersectoral collaboration, sometimes reaching the highest levels of government. These have contributed to the development of curricula, pedagogical tools and methods, and capacity-building initiatives involving a range of learners from youth to teachers. Such initiatives have also played a role in supporting the professionalization of the culture and arts actors, helping them to maintain relevant skills, adapt to evolving educational and cultural contexts, and enhance their livelihoods.

Local governments have also played a key role in driving these initiatives. The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), for instance, offers an important platform for integrating culture, creativity and education in ways that resonate with local priorities and identities. Empowering cities and local stakeholders bridges the gap between global policy aspirations and localized, culturally grounded learning practices. Moreover, a wide variety of community-based and peer-led learning systems – developed by artists, tradition bearers and local cultural actors – continue to enrich education through everyday interactions.

Despite this progress, significant gaps – often undocumented – persist. These include the non-systematic implementation of culture and arts education policies, the temporary and project-based nature of many initiatives, and the fragmented and often under-resourced capacity-building efforts, particularly in the informal sector. In many cases, efforts to professionalize cultural actors remain inconsistent or unsupported in long-term strategies. Furthermore, the lack of alignment in data categories and frameworks makes it difficult to conduct systematic monitoring and evaluation, hindering evidence-based policymaking and sustained investment.

At the same time, digital technologies and artificial intelligence are reshaping the landscape of cultural and creative learning. While they offer expanded access and new possibilities, they also raise urgent questions about cultural integrity, multilingualism, equity and the human-centred values of education. A balanced, ethical and culturally sensitive approach is essential to harness their benefits without compromising the contextual richness of human creativity.

With culture and education increasingly recognized as global common goods – and culture acknowledged as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development – there is a growing responsibility to elevate culture and arts education as a catalyst for inclusive, sustainable and human-centred transformation. In this context, the 2024 UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education provides a critical reference for shaping forward-looking, context-sensitive policies that enhance access, foster inclusion, promote quality learning and deepen appreciation of cultural diversity and the safeguarding of heritage, in all its forms, across all educational settings. Building on the Framework's implementation strategy, the following recommendations aim to support the realization of this ambitious goal:

- **Encourage countries to review and strengthen their legal and moral commitments to recognizing culture and education as common public goods and fundamental human rights,** and to implement concrete initiatives that support culture and arts education. As the realization of these commitments is an ongoing process, national-level normative action should be intensified. Regular review and assessment of existing policies, curricula and programmes should be used as a process to evaluate their impact, identify gaps and strategmeically guide improvements that ensure the full and effective implementation of these commitments.

- **Strengthen multistakeholder dialogue and cooperation through the development of effective communication and coordination mechanisms that value and cultivate inclusive, long-term partnerships across the culture, education and other relevant sectors.** These mechanisms should involve all pertinent government and non-government actors – including institutions, individuals, communities and the private sector – and create environments conducive to sustained collaboration. They should promote knowledge exchange, mutual learning and ensure that the perspectives, needs and expectations of all stakeholders are meaningfully integrated into the design, implementation and evaluation of culture and arts education initiatives.

- **Plan for the long-term, strengthen institutionalization and allocate sufficient resources,** in particular financial resources, to ensure the sustainability and lasting impact of policies and initiatives supporting culture and arts education, including capacity-building, development of educational materials, policy development and monitoring, research, data collection, infrastructure and fostering the involvement of diverse stakeholders from the cultural, heritage, educational and other sectors.

- **Encourage research and the development of robust and systematic data collection and monitoring mechanisms in the field of culture and arts education.** Prioritize evaluating the impact of existing policies and actions to identify potential gaps and challenges in their implementation, assess their effectiveness and inform necessary adjustments while considering both international benchmarks and national needs. In particular, countries, with UIS support, should adopt a clear definition of culture and arts education according to the International Standard Classification of Education fields. This would help develop a standardized approach to quality data collection and consistent reporting. All data should be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and other relevant factors to identify and address the specific needs of groups at risk of exclusion from the education system, particularly those affected by barriers related to their language or cultural background. These

efforts are essential to support inclusive and evidence-based policymaking and practice within the culture and arts education ecosystem.

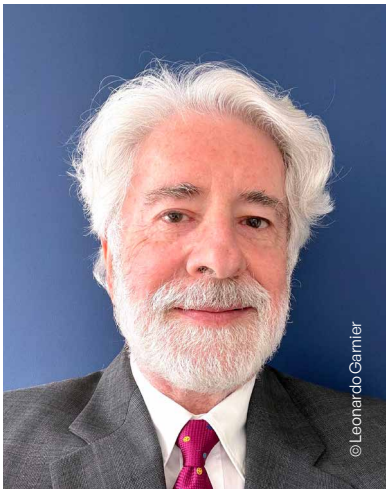
- **Design and establish a centralized system or platform for the systematic documentation, dissemination, and accessibility of a comprehensive range of policies, initiatives, and practices that advance multicultural and multilingual culture and arts education.** This platform should showcase effective policies, programmes and innovative projects, while also promoting the transparent sharing of less successful initiatives. Such an inclusive approach to knowledge exchange will enable stakeholders across sectors and regions to gain a nuanced understanding of effective strategies and challenges encountered, thereby guiding them in the development and refinement of their own policies and initiatives.

- **Acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of educators, both within educational institutions and beyond, including in cultural institutions and communities.** Recognize the critical role they play in conveying a wide range of cultural and artistic perspectives and practices, contributing to the development of creativity, critical thinking, as well as empathy and mutual understanding on individuals across all stages of life, from early childhood to adulthood. It is thus essential to **diversify the pool of educators,** with a particular focus on the inclusion of women, minorities and underrepresented groups, ensuring that all voices, knowledge systems and experiences are reflected in the educational process from early childhood to adult education. **Value their contribution to fostering a creative, diverse, pluralistic, tolerant, resilient society,** where education serves as a catalyst for inclusion and mutual understanding.

- **Rethink and expand opportunities to build the capacity of all educators and culture professionals** to promote meaningful ways to learn about, with and through culture and the arts. Design higher education and training to equip them with the skills that are relevant to and aligned with the context-specific psychological, social and economic needs, including the needs of the employment market, entrepreneurial opportunities in the creative economy and the need to safeguard heritage in all its forms. Ensure that these programmes actively address entrenched inequalities – such as those related to gender or ethnicity – to prevent such disparities from being perpetuated within cultural and employment systems.

- **Adopt a mindful approach and ethical standards in harnessing digital technologies for culture and arts education,** taking into full account both the transformative opportunities they present and the potential risks they entail. This includes strengthening digital and media literacy among education and culture professionals to foster a creative and ethical use of digital tools and AI and to ensure that all actors are equipped to navigate this evolving landscape and recognize content that is harmful to children and youth development. Efforts should also focus on addressing infrastructure inequalities which lead to exclusion of vulnerable individuals and underserved communities. Digital strategies must be designed to respect and promote cultural diversity and inclusion, encouraging the development and use of educational platforms that reflect diverse cultural expressions and languages. To achieve this, it is crucial to build on existing frameworks and instruments and to support impact research that can guide digital transformations that meaningfully contribute to culturally rich and inclusive education systems.

# Policy Brief
## *Leonardo Garnier*




Former Minister of Education of Costa Rica

## Learning how to enjoy, appreciate, understand and express ourselves through art

Education must prepare individuals for life in a comprehensive sense. We must educate not only for an effective, useful and practical participation in the world of production, commerce and consumption, but also for leading a full and meaningful life that stems from solidarity, active citizenship, selfless affection and responsibility towards the natural environment and climate justice.

We want students to learn what is relevant and to learn it well: every person needs to acquire and develop the knowledge, sensitivity and scientific, mathematical, historical, social, communication and language skills that life in society demands. All this is essential, but it is not enough. To the education that prepares for the pragmatic search for 'the true' and 'the useful', we must always add the education that forms for the transcendent search for 'the good' and 'the beautiful': an education in ethics and aesthetics as fundamental – and never finished – criteria of human coexistence.

Regarding arts education, our goal must be to achieve at least four major objectives. First, students must learn to enjoy art – simply to relish it. Saying this may sound easy, even obvious, but we have become so accustomed to making students suffer through art classes and to comply with rigid and repetitive assignments, that it is not always easy to return to that simple goal of learning to feel what was created to be felt deeply.

Secondly, we must complement enjoyment with appreciation. Appreciating art incorporates elements of valuation, criteria of quality and taste that, while not rigid or absolute, should enable individuals to assess the qualities of artworks and distinguish, within each genre, why certain artistic expressions may be more, or less highly regarded than others. Here, what matters is not just the enjoyment or emotional impact of the art, but the evolving criteria by which we evaluate and appreciate each artistic object or process.

Thirdly, students must learn to understand art in a twofold sense. On one hand, they must understand the technical and conceptual elements of the artwork: from the specific techniques used to create it to the scientific and technological aspects behind a certain colour tone or brightness, body movements, the balance of a sculpture, or the timbre of a musical phrase. On the other hand, understanding art also relates to the historical context of the piece and its creator, inevitably connecting us to the individual and social, political and cultural factors surrounding and explaining the work. While these factors do not dictate how each person interprets a piece, they do frame the many social processes that give an artwork its identity at the time of its creation – and the many meanings it may hold depending on the historical moment in which we encounter it.

Finally, in active and participatory education, it is not enough for students to enjoy, appreciate and understand art. We aim for more: we want all of this to enable individuals to express themselves artistically – to paint, recite, sing, dance, or write

whatever they want, or what they need to express. The goal is not for every student to become an 'artist' in the traditional sense – a virtuoso of a specific medium or instrument – but for each person to dare and be able to express their interests and concerns, their passions and anxieties, their likes and frustrations, their emotions and reasoning through artistic forms. In doing so, they aim to move others rather than convince them, because if art seeks anything, it is precisely that: to move others.

Aesthetics and the arts constitute vital elements of any education that aspires to be meaningful for life and for human coexistence and for our individual and collective identity.

Gallo & Gavilan tapestries. © Mestiz.

Chapter 4

# Enabling an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem and driving economic development

# Creative Voices
## *Mo Abudu*

Founder and CEO of EbonyLife Group

## Enabling a sustainable economic ecosystem for culture

The CCIs are among the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, generating significant employment and contributing to GDP. However, their full potential remains untapped due to systemic barriers, particularly for women in leadership roles. Despite their immense contributions, women in CCIs still face gender pay gaps, limited access to funding and underrepresentation in decision-making positions. Addressing these disparities is not just a moral imperative but an economic necessity, as diverse leadership fosters innovation and resilience.

One of the key challenges in achieving gender equality in CCIs is access to financing. Women-led cultural enterprises often struggle to secure investment, limiting their ability to scale and sustain their businesses. To bridge this gap, targeted funding mechanisms and mentorship programmes should be implemented, ensuring that women have equitable opportunities to thrive as entrepreneurs and leaders in the sector. Policies promoting gender-responsive budgeting and equitable access to financial resources will be crucial in fostering a balanced cultural ecosystem.

Alongside this, the formalization of creative businesses – particularly micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) – is essential for economic sustainability. Many cultural enterprises operate informally, leading to job insecurity and a lack of social protection for cultural workers. Governments must create policies that incentivize formalization by providing tax benefits, grants and business development support. By strengthening the infrastructure for creative entrepreneurship, we can ensure that culture professionals receive fair wages and stable employment opportunities.

Cultural tourism and heritage preservation are also fundamental to a thriving cultural economy. While heritage sites and cultural landmarks generate substantial economic benefits, they must be managed sustainably to prevent over-commercialization and degradation. Policies should encourage responsible tourism, so local communities can benefit economically, while maintaining the integrity of their cultural heritage. This approach will contribute to long-term economic sustainability while preserving the authenticity of cultural assets.

Global trade policies must also reflect the unique nature of cultural goods and services. With digitalization transforming the creative landscape, there is a growing need to protect cultural data and digital cultural goods. Strengthening intellectual property rights, ensuring fair compensation for artists in digital markets and promoting the export of cultural products through preferential trade agreements will help sustain the global cultural economy.

Looking ahead, a sustainable cultural ecosystem requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, private investors, cultural organizations and local communities. By fostering inclusive policies that champion gender equality, financial accessibility and global trade protections, we can unlock the full economic potential of culture as a driver of sustainable development.

Mo Abudu & Crew. Photo: Kola Akinsolugba. © Mo Abudu

# Enabling an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem and driving economic development

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# Overview

01. The CCIs are a major part of the global economy, providing millions of jobs, contributing to gross domestic product (GDP) and gross value added (GVA), and enabling nations and regions to diversify their economies and provide pathways for creative talent and enterprise. Many of the CCIs are catalyzed by digital technologies, extending their reach and footprint, reducing barriers to entry and fostering interdisciplinary and international collaboration. However, inequality of access to such technologies, weak regulation and enforcement, and the rapidly evolving nature of these technologies mean that opportunities for participation are uneven. But overall, by amplifying cultural heritage and generating new products, services and experiences, the CCIs contribute to collective well-being and sustainable development.

02. The economic contribution of the CCIs is often underestimated, with challenges in effective measurement, high levels of informality and the persistent difficulty of effective intellectual property management. These issues compromise efforts to position culture as a contributor to a more inclusive and productive economy and foundation of sustainable development.

03. The CCIs operate as part of a mixed economy or ecosystem, not as a classic industry. They are incredibly diverse, extending across all art forms, and are nourished by informal and voluntary activities, supported by a mix of state, NGO and private contributions (in finance and other enablers such as infrastructure and regulation). As a consequence, the CCIs require sophisticated policy support that enables diverse cultural expressions to flourish, facilitates fair and inclusive access to cultural work and creative jobs, and opens the way for innovation and growth.

04. The CCIs generate spillovers or crossovers across the economy, as well as through their contribution to well-being, cohesion and pride. They play a central role in heritage protection, promotion and rejuvenation, support the growth of cultural tourism and input to innovation processes in product and experience design, creative urbanism and tackling climate emergency. The CCIs provide a vector for sustainable development, helping humanity tackle global challenges.

05. The CCIs provide opportunities for economic inclusion in every global region – through diverse cultural expressions, every community has the potential to participate. However, in practice, the CCIs also reflect inequalities, especially for women, minorities and people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. There are very significant barriers to equal participation in cultural activities, especially for formalized creative enterprises. The potential of the CCIs is also held back by persistent challenges such as the precarity of creative work, censorship and self-censorship, and structural racism and sexism. Without dedicated efforts to tackle inequality, the CCIs will underperform and their contribution to sustainable development will be weaker.

# Introduction

This chapter highlights the critical role of the economic dimension of culture in advocating for its inclusion as a stand-alone goal in the next Sustainable Development Agenda. Recognizing culture within the SDGs is essential, as it contributes significantly to sustainable and human development outcomes, including economic growth, social cohesion and youth engagement. The chapter underscores that culture, through both heritage and creativity, is a dynamic driver of innovation and central to fostering inclusive and resilient societies. It also addresses the evolving governance of culture, shaped by institutional innovations, shifting political priorities and the integration of CCIs into national agendas, including connections to wider cultural elements such as cultural heritage. By linking culture to economic diversification, social resilience and environmental sustainability, the chapter demonstrates that any sustainable development framework must place culture at its core.

Over the past two decades, cultural policies have evolved significantly to reflect culture's role in sustainable development. Key milestones involve all UNESCO cultural conventions, including the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. To varying degrees, these emphasized culture's importance in addressing societal challenges such as social inclusion, economic inequality, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

## A mixed economy for culture?

One significant evolution in cultural policy paradigms is the shift in many regions from subsidy-based approaches to more market-oriented strategies. These seek to unlock the economic contribution of culture and facilitate public-private partnerships for financing and development. This is often driven by the ambition to establish the CCIs as catalysts for growth and providers of employment, based on the assumption that culture is a vector for a more diverse and productive economic base. More broadly, this policy agenda is also shaped by the rather more nebulous construct of the creative economy, which positions culture at the heart of a wider embrace of creativity as the basis for a more knowledge-intensive and innovation-fuelled economy. The CCIs are thus positioned as catalysts of spillover effects across the economy, in addition to their more intrinsic value. This policy transition, which foregrounds the economic value of culture and assumes an industrial model for culture, carries with it two main assumptions:

- First, that culture must deliver and demonstrate economic value for it to be a policy priority;
- Second, that cultural organizations and enterprises should be capable of developing business models that generate economic value and thus should not rely entirely or even substantially on public subsidy.

However, these assumptions warrant reconsideration. It is clear that culture is a major contributor to the global economy (covered by this chapter) and that many cultural organizations have shown success in diversifying income streams and generating profit. Yet, much of the culture sector requires a blend of public subsidy, in-kind support and some private finance and revenue to stay resilient without necessarily achieving growth. Given the precarity of creative work, inequality of opportunity and high levels of informal practice, it is reductive to assume the market can sustain

Carnaval de Barranquilla, Colombia. © oscargarces / Shutterstock.com*

culture across all its forms. This is because a diverse, inclusive and impactful culture sector is driven by a combination of factors rather than maximizing profit alone. Moreover, diverse cultural expressions contribute to a healthy and inclusive civil society, considering culture as a public good. This underpins any approach to economic development, because an economy is dependent on engaged, healthy, productive people.

Correspondingly, cultural activities will always require subsidization and support so they can develop sufficiently to generate economic value, if this is the goal of the participants, such as artists. By establishing a stand-alone goal for culture, inclusive and resilient economic development can be viewed as a positive outcome of a healthy culture sector, which is supported by committed policy that prizes culture as a foundation for a myriad of outcomes, including those associated with the economy.

This chapter considers these issues, as well as others, to understand the rationale for policies connecting culture to economic development. It describes an ongoing reality that culture is more likely to thrive with diversity via a mixed economy model. This is based on a blend of funding and financial mechanisms, with public sector investment still essential given the social and intrinsic values of culture as a public good and foundation for sustainable development.

## Powering participation – culture as a catalyst for sustainable development

A notable trend in cultural policy is participatory action, driven by initiatives that emphasize culture's role in fostering social inclusion and diversity. This approach, covered in Chapter 1, underscores how citizens' active participation in cultural activities acts as a catalyst for enhancing civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion. This is an important principle for ensuring economic development through culture remains equitable, inclusive and thus sustainable. While participatory practices have long been promoted in international legal frameworks (such as UNESCO's Culture Conventions) since the 1950s, participatory approaches have significantly grown in recent years. Evidence of this global trend is seen in policies advocating co-creation, community-driven projects and stakeholder engagement in cultural decision-making processes. Recent examples include the widespread adoption of participatory governance models for cultural heritage, particularly for intangible heritage, as promoted by the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the use of participatory budgeting for cultural projects in various regions. These developments highlight a growing recognition of the broader social benefits generated by cultural policies and the need for inclusive policymaking to reflect diverse voices and experiences in a rapidly changing world.

Integrating culture into the SDGs has become a key aspect of contemporary cultural policy, despite the absence of a stand-alone goal for culture within the SDG framework. However, the implementation of SDGs has revealed gaps in addressing culture's potential to drive sustainable development. Progress has often been fragmented, with cultural initiatives often limited to isolated actions rather than systemic integration across all goals. This highlights the need for a stand-alone goal for culture in the post-2030 agenda, which would provide a clear framework for leveraging culture's transformative power. A dedicated SDG would ensure culture is prioritized in policymaking, thus supporting its role in promoting ecological sustainability, economic inclusivity, gender and social equity on a global scale.

Ensuring the economic sustainability of culture sectors goes beyond market-based strategies: it requires addressing the working conditions and rights of artists and culture professionals, and tackling the significant inequalities across global regions. While market-driven approaches have expanded revenue streams, they also risk commodifying culture and marginalizing non-commercial expressions. At the same time, while digitalization has accelerated the distribution of creative content, shortening supply chains and enabling content to appear in a range of markets, precarious working conditions, particularly in the digital realm, remain a key concern. The challenges concern fair remuneration, copyright and social protections, and monetizing digital content – now produced and consumed in large quantities. Frameworks such as the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist (1980) and initiatives by the International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasize the need for policies that secure economic and professional rights

for cultural workers. Additionally, the principles of fair pay and ethical consumption have recently become an increasingly frequent subject of public debate, driven by the activities of associations, unions and creative guilds.[110]

Building resilient and sustainable culture sectors requires the alignment of international frameworks with local policies to balance cultural diversity and economic resilience on both local and global scales. There remains a persistent imbalance in opportunity – driven by factors such as geography, access to resources, regulatory environments and financial capacity. These disparities affect the global circulation of cultural goods and services, as well as access to cultural resources and opportunities within and between countries. Such inequalities are deeply rooted in systemic discrimination and structural barriers, which continue to exclude marginalized, underrepresented and other vulnerable groups from fully participating in cultural life. Addressing these inequities is essential for fostering social inclusion, equity and the broader objectives of sustainable development.

# The economic development role of culture

This section of Chapter 4 explores the economic ecosystem of culture. Wherever possible, data at the city or national level has been included, however, significant data gaps remain. The dichotomy between the Global North and Global South, as used in this report, reflects both broader analytical trends and the uneven availability of disaggregated data across regions.

## Culture's contribution to GDP and the labour market

Culture operates as a multifaceted system where economic and cultural values are deeply intertwined. Recognizing this is essential to understanding its unique contribution to sustainable progress. From the arts and entertainment to design, tourism, heritage and museums, cultural activities contribute significantly to job creation, GDP growth and overall prosperity. The CCIs account for a significant portion of global GDP, with variations across different regions and income levels. The CCIs are estimated to contribute 3.39% to global GDP,[111] highlighting their significant economic impact worldwide (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Table 3 provides an overview of the contribution of CCIs to GDP in different regional groups, showcasing considerable disparities across regions.[112] Eastern and South-eastern Asia report the highest regional share at 4.11%, driven by robust CCIs in countries such as China and the Republic of Korea. Oceania follows closely at 3.50%, reflecting an integration of traditional and modern cultural economies. In contrast, data was only available for just one country in the Central and Southern Asia region, indicating a lack of representative data for this region. Europe and Northern America, regions with long-established cultural infrastructures, report a mean of 2.66%, while Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean both show similar contributions of 2.51%, and Western Asia and Northern Africa record a share of 2.48%. These figures emphasize the uneven development of the CCIs worldwide, underscoring the need for improved data collection and targeted investment to bridge regional gaps and fully realize the sector's economic potential.

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*[110] The principles of fair pay and ethical consumption in the CCIs are often grounded in international frameworks promoting decent work, transparency, and sustainability. According to UNESCO and the International Labour Organization (ILO), fair pay includes adequate and timely remuneration that reflects the true value of creative work, while ethical consumption emphasizes informed choices that support fair labour practices, cultural diversity and environmental responsibility.*

*[111] Estimated contribution of the CCIs to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.*

*[112] It is important to note that the figures represent unweighted means of all Member States for which data is available, without accounting for the size of the economies reporting. There are also variations in how the mean is measured, which points to the importance of adopting common measurement tools. Consequently, the global mean share of 2.74% does not represent the total share of the global economy generated by the CCIs.*

MOCHAKK at Plaza de España Sevilla, Spain © Photo: Sergio Parra

**Table 3. Mean share of cultural and creative industries in gross domestic product (GDP), by regional group.**

| Regional Group | Share of GDP (%) |
|---|---|
| Central and Southern Asian States | 0.30 |
| East Asian and Southern Asian States | 4.11 |
| Europe and Northern American States | 2.66 |
| Latin America and the Caribbean States | 2.51 |
| Oceanian States | 3.50 |
| Sub-Saharan African States | 2.51 |
| Western Asia and Northern African States | 2.48 |
| **Global mean** | **2.74** |

Source: UNESCO, 2005 Convention Periodic Reports.

The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators pilot countries show significant variation in the GDP contribution of private and formal cultural production. This refers to market-based cultural activities carried out by individuals, businesses, or organizations operating within the formal economy – those which are officially registered, regulated and included in national accounts. These activities transform inputs, including labour, goods and capital, into remunerated cultural goods and services within recognized cultural domains. Among the pilot countries, Portugal leads with 5.7%, followed by the Philippines (4.1%) and Burkina Faso (3.3%), while countries like Mexico (3.0%), Costa Rica (1.9%) and Viet Nam (0.6%) report lower shares.

Urban centres further highlight the transformative power of the CCIs, with Beijing, Chengdu and Ouagadougou contributing 11.0%, 10.9% and 10% to local GDP,[113] respectively (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports, UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators). Cities like Shenzhen (7.6%) and Nanjing (6.6%) emphasize the role of strategic investments and localized policies in fostering growth and innovation, showcasing urban areas as key hubs for cultural production and consumption (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports).

The employment impact of the culture sector is also significant: in 2025, the CCIs represented a mean share of 3.55% of employment in the 61 countries for which there is available data (2005 Convention Periodic Reports / Eurostat, 2023).[114] This percentage is slightly higher in the Global North, where CCIs jobs account for approximately 3.67% of total employment, compared to 3.39% in the Global South (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). This employment encompasses a wide range of activities, from traditional arts and crafts to digital media and entertainment.[115]

[113] *Local GDP estimates can be difficult to estimate as production factors outside the urban limit may intervene.*

[114] *Mean share of employment for the 61 countries for which there is available data.*

[115] *Estimates of cultural employment usually include both a) everyone who works in CCI (e.g. an accountant in a theatre), and b) people in cultural jobs who work in non-cultural sectors (e.g. a designer working in a company that manufactures bathroom fittings).*

**Table 4. Mean number and share of CCI employment in UCCN Member Cities, by regional, income and Global North/Global South groups.**

| | Mean number of cultural employees per 100,000 inhabitants | Mean share of total city employment |
|---|---|---|
| EUNA | 11,470 | 5.8% |
| ESEA | 2,758 | 2.9% |
| LAC | 2,032 | 3.4% |
| OC | 1,893 | 4.3% |
| WANA | 897 | 8.7% |
| HI | 8,506 | 4.6% |
| UMI | 2,867 | 5.6% |
| LMI | 2,254 | 2.7% |
| NORTH | 8,305 | 5.0% |
| SOUTH | 2,792 | 4.4% |
| **Global average** | **6,627** | **4.9%** |

Source: UNESCO Creative Cities Network

**Average number of cultural employees**, UCCN Member Cities/Member States: Global total n=45/24, Europe and North American Cities/States n=22/12, Latin American and Caribbean Cities/States n=4/3, West Asian and North African Cities/States n=2/2, East and South. east Asian Cities/States n=11/5, Oceanian Cities/States n=6/2, High Income Cities/States n=30/15, Upper Middle Income Cities/States n=12/7, Lower Middle Income Cities/States n=3/2, Global North n=32/16, Global South n=13/8.

**Share of total city employment**, UCCN Member Cities/Member States: Global total n=29/19, Europe and North American Cities/States n=16/9, Latin American and Caribbean Cities/States n=3/3, West Asian and North African Cities/States n=1/1, East and South-east Asian Cities/States n=7/4, Oceanian Cities/States n=2/2, High income Cities/States n=19/12, Upper Middle Income Cities/States n=9/6, Lower Middle Income Cities/States n=1/1, Global North n=21/12, Global South n=8/6.

Table 4 highlights regional disparities in CCIs employment among UNESCO Creative Cities. Europe and Northern America (EUNA) show a mean of 11,470 employees per city and the highest share of employment at 5.8%, reflecting mature cultural economies supported by robust policies and infrastructure. However, there are variations in the methodology of capturing data and on the reliability of employment data given the significant informality of the sector. Again, this points to the need for a unified approach to measurement and data capture. Eastern and South-eastern Asia (ESEA) report 2,758 employees and 2.9%, indicating growing but less formalized creative sectors (UNESCO Creative Cities Network). Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) follow a similar trend, with 2,032 employees and a 3.4% share, while Oceania (OC) shows 1,893 employees and 4.3%, suggesting a strong presence of CCIs in smaller urban economies (UNESCO Creative Cities Network). Notably, Western Asia and Northern Africa (WANA) exhibit the highest proportional employment at 8.7%, despite a modest average of 897 employees, underscoring the sector's importance in smaller labour markets (UNESCO Creative Cities Network).

These disparities highlight the need for region-specific strategies to formalize and expand CCIs, addressing infrastructure gaps and maximizing their potential as key drivers of inclusive urban economic development. The gaps in cultural statistics and the use of different methodologies may distort regional and

national comparisons. This shows the importance of strengthening cultural data collection and management to ensure a cohesive approach to evidence-based policymaking and international benchmarking.

## Navigating the global exchange of cultural goods and services

Trade agreements that recognize the special status of cultural goods and services are vital for promoting cultural exchange. Many countries have signed or are negotiating agreements that provide preferential treatment for cultural goods, making it easier to move them internationally and boosting their economic value. Often these approaches include provisions for protecting intellectual property rights, which are crucial for ensuring that creators and cultural practitioners receive fair compensation for their work. However, global trade remains inherently unequal, with cultural trade reflecting these broader disparities. Dominated by monopolies and supply chains controlled by a few powerful players, the current system often undermines the negotiating power of countries in the Global South, perpetuating imbalances which favour established economies and first movers. Cultural trade is frequently overlooked in broader trade negotiations, exacerbating its marginalization. Furthermore, with a major part of cultural trade now existing in the realm of 'invisibles' – such as digital content and services – however, this trade remains underregulated and poorly documented.

Ongoing digital transformation has significantly reshaped the exchange of cultural goods and services, making them more accessible through platforms like streaming services and online marketplaces. While these developments provide new revenue opportunities for artists and cultural entrepreneurs, they also bring substantial challenges. Streaming platforms dominate the value chain for music, capturing a disproportionate share of revenue and perpetuating value gaps. Their prevailing revenue-sharing systems tend to favour the most well-known artists, leaving smaller or independent creators at a disadvantage. This market concentration undermines diversity and fair remuneration across the sector. A further issue is the way digital platforms facilitate illegal trafficking of cultural goods, with nations struggling to keep up with the rapid and fleeting process of promoting and distributing illicit and often stolen cultural products.

In the case of physical cultural goods, local aggregators and international intermediaries dominate transactions. A positive outcome of this is that these sites can contextualize products through videos of artists in their community, thereby increasing value. Conversely, they can also be exploitative, taking large percentages of sales and intellectual property rights.

Further challenges include widespread copyright infringements, the disruption of traditional business models and exploitative practices such as buy-in contracts that erode creators' rights. Moreover, there is a clear gender gap in intellectual property system: research by WIPO found that far fewer women than men use the intellectual property systems. As a result, women are less protected and rewarded as creators and innovators, which in turn reduces their incentive to create. The WIPO report summarises this, saying 'all the available information suggests that women lag behind their male counterparts in the creative industries' (WIPO, 2018).

The rise of artificial intelligence intensifies these issues, enabling the unauthorized use of creative works and posing new threats to intellectual property. Governments and cultural policies must address these market failures through robust regulatory frameworks, equitable revenue-sharing mechanisms and targeted support for smaller creators.

High-income regions like Europe, Northern America and Eastern Asia dominate cultural trade through relatively robust export strategies and advanced digital infrastructures, leveraging cultural assets to secure favourable trade agreements and expand global influence. In contrast, emerging regions and in particular rural areas, face challenges such as limited resources and infrastructure but show growing efforts to develop cultural exports, particularly in crafts and a range of heritage-driven products.

Preferential treatment agreements play a vital role in sector development, with 83% of Global South countries reporting benefits compared to 14% in the Global North (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). These measures help boost cultural exports, create

jobs and diversify economies, providing opportunities for the Global South to access new markets and enhance the visibility of their cultural products. However, rising global tariffs threaten these gains.

Melanesian Arts and Cutlure Festival in Vanuatu

## Cultivating community-based sustainable cultural tourism

Driven by interest in heritage, arts and traditions, cultural tourism integrates deeply with culture through varied forms such as heritage tourism, creative tourism and sustainable tourism policies. The increasing diversification of cultural tourism offers pathways towards more inclusive and sustainable economic development, but there is significant room for innovation and progress in this field. Heritage tourism focuses on cultural and historical sites and museums, while creative tourism emphasizes participatory experiences like workshops. Sustainable tourism models seek to address challenges like overtourism, heritage and environmental degradation, promoting practices such as off-season travel and visitor limits at fragile sites.

In 2023, cultural tourism across 250 cities generated an estimated $752.2 billion from overnight visitors, both domestic and international (BOP Consulting, 2025). Unsurprisingly, China and the USA – the world's two largest economies – led cultural tourism spending, largely driven by their substantial domestic markets. Tourism's economic impact is shaped by complex supply networks connecting transport, accommodation, restaurants, cultural venues, museums and artisanal workshops. However, these networks must balance economic benefits with cultural preservation and environmental protection, requiring strategies that include local stakeholders in planning and prioritizing sustainable practices to also protect and enhance cultural assets. This includes attention to gender dimensions in cultural tourism, where women are disproportionately more likely to operate in informal roles without security and where the risks of exploitation are most pronounced and under-policed.

Sustainable cultural tourism is a crucial avenue that enables culture to drive sustainable and inclusive economic development. Related tourism strategies work to safeguard cultural heritage and foster creativity for current and future generations, while nurturing economic growth and promoting social inclusion through genuine empowerment in decision-making. Countries have adopted various strategies to promote sustainable cultural tourism, including heritage management plans, training for local communities and the implementation of policies to encourage responsible tourism practices. For example, World Heritage sites typically follow specific guidelines to manage tourist activities, preserving their cultural, natural and historical significance while maximizing economic benefits. Awareness campaigns, such as those in Turkish airports alerting travellers to the risks of illicit trafficking of cultural property, demonstrate efforts to protect heritage from exploitation.

Sustainable cultural tourism encompasses multiple priorities: minimizing environmental impact by limiting visitor numbers at heritage sites and promoting responsible travel; promoting economic development by creating jobs; supporting local artisans and fostering traditional performances and festivals; and, yielding social benefits by preserving community identity, enhancing local pride and ensuring that tourism benefits residents as much as visitors.

Bhutan's High Value, Low Impact tourism policy exemplifies sustainable cultural tourism (Sirvastava, 2023). By limiting tourist numbers through daily tariffs and requiring local guides, Bhutan protects its cultural and natural heritage while channelling tourism revenue into the local economy. This approach supports traditional crafts and festivals, fosters cultural preservation and ensures that residents benefit from tourism without suffering its downsides, such as overcrowding or environmental degradation. In historic urban areas, carefully-implemented policies can lead to enhanced cultural preservation and increased tourism revenue. This revenue is crucial for local economic development, especially when participatory governance models engage with local communities in stewardship of their heritage and natural landscapes.

Integrating ecological perspectives into the CCIs offers further opportunities to align these industries with broader sustainability goals. Environmentally-conscious practices such as resource efficiency, waste reduction and sustainable sourcing of

materials are increasingly recognized as crucial to reducing the ecological footprint of CCIs. The Creative Economy 2030 report highlights the alignment of these practices with broader frameworks like the SDGs.

An illustrative example is the Doi Tung Development Project in Thailand, which demonstrates an innovative approach to combining cultural heritage preservation with environmental conservation. Located in a previously deforested area, the project has restored ecosystems through reforestation and sustainable agriculture, while revitalizing traditional crafts such as weaving and pottery. By employing local communities, particularly women, the initiative fosters cultural continuity and creates sustainable livelihoods. The project has succeed notably because of its integrated methodology, which addresses social, cultural and environmental dimensions of development simultaneously. Its impact includes improved biodiversity, reduced poverty and the preservation of cultural heritage, making it a widely recognized model of sustainable development in CCIs. Such examples underline the industry's capacity to contribute to sustainability not only through artistic expression but also by embedding ecological principles in their operations and community engagement strategies.

## Sustainable investment in the culture sector – direct and indirect measures

As highlighted by cultural economists (e.g. W. Baumol, A. Pratt and D. Ilczuk), the production and distribution of cultural goods often remain resource intensive and economically fragile. This is due to complex and unsecured demand, barriers to finance and high levels of informality. While many countries (especially in the Global North) have a long track record of underpinning cultural activities with subsidies and building a mixed economy model for culture, this approach is not universally applied across all regions. In many countries, cultural financing has shifted from state-supported models to a more neoliberal framework characterized by reduced public investment and an emphasis on self-sufficiency through commercial ventures, philanthropy and informal networks. However, in some countries, particularly in the Global South, there isn't a public subsidy model, with most cultural financing derived from the private sector, international NGOs or through self-funded or in-kind activities.

This transition presents significant challenges, and while the commercial culture sector has grown, it relies heavily – yet often invisibly – on the not-for-profit and informal sectors that underpin its sustainability. These shifts necessitate an entrepreneurial mindset within the culture sector, pushing artists and institutions to seek diverse funding sources, from sponsorships and crowdfunding to market-driven strategies. However, this model risks marginalizing cultural initiatives that lack commercial appeal but are essential for cultural diversity and heritage preservation.

The dilemma lies in how states perceive and value culture. The welfare state or social investment model framed cultural support as a public good, tied to social cohesion and identity. The neoliberal model increasingly treats culture as a market-driven commodity, raising questions about access, equity and long-term cultural sustainability. This ongoing transformation calls for an international debate on the role of culture in society, its financing mechanisms and how states and global actors can balance public, commercial and philanthropic support to ensure culture's relevance in a rapidly changing economy.

Public investment in the culture sector is essential for sustaining cultural heritage and fostering inclusive CCIs. Funding is critical for institutions that do not generate sufficient revenue through ticket sales or private donations. The New Zealand government, for example, supported its cultural institutions through annual appropriations of the Crown's budget to ensure the arts are accessible to all New Zealanders.

The sustainable development of culture depends on diverse financial systems, each with distinct advantages and limitations. In Europe, the most widespread model prioritizes public funding, ensuring accessibility and supporting a wide range of cultural activities. While this model promotes inclusivity and stability, it

often relies on substantial state budgets, which can be vulnerable to economic downturns or political shifts. In contrast, the model used in some countries without a history of socially-driven investment in the arts is more focused on non-profits and philanthropy, encouraging private donations and sponsorships. This approach can foster community involvement and innovation but risks over-reliance on market-driven forces, which may in some cases favour commercially viable projects over less profitable yet culturally significant initiatives.

The broader implications of these models reveal critical findings for cultural investment. Systems reliant solely on free-market forces often fail to sustain the diversity and accessibility of cultural offerings, emphasizing the need for public or mixed investments. A balanced approach combining state support with private contributions can ensure both stability and dynamism in the creative sectors. Strategic public investment is essential to address market failures, support non-commercial cultural activities and safeguard cultural heritage, while private sector involvement can introduce flexibility and additional resources. Ultimately, the sustainability of the culture sector requires a hybrid financial model tailored to regional contexts, blending public and private efforts to ensure long-term resilience, inclusivity and diversity.

The mean per capita budget for culture, measured in USD by regional groups, reveals significant disparities in cultural investment across the world. Europe and North America lead by a substantial margin, with an average per capita cultural budget of $418.56, reflecting strong institutional frameworks, prioritization of culture as a key component of development and identity and, of course, the size of the economies of Europe and North America (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). However, given the sample size used to measure mean value (where outlier countries with very high or low investment in culture can skew the overall mean), it is also important to consider median values.

Table 5 below presents an overview of a combination of the median, minimum, maximum values of cultural investment. In addition to this analysis, the link between national GDP and cultural spend is also relevant. For example, the minimum spend for high-income countries is more than 20 times higher than the maximum spend in low-income countries – and even almost twice that in upper-middle-income countries. This demonstrates the huge disparity in cultural budgets across the world, illustrating the differences in the ability to invest.

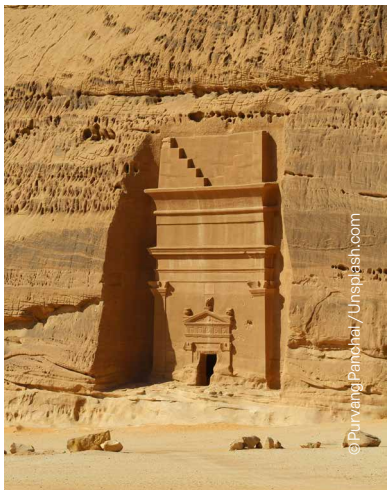
**Table 5. Per capita public budget for culture (in USD): median, minimum, maximum and standard deviation by income group**

| | Median | Minimum | Maximum | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| LI | $0.15 | $0.07 | $0.07 | 0.38 |
| LMI | $2.74 | $0.29 | $0.29 | 8.42 |
| UMI | $11.79 | $4.95 | $4.95 | 4.38 |
| HI | $349.00 | $20.85 | $20.85 | 391.17 |
| **GLOBAL** | **$6.32** | **$0.07** | **$1,400.98** | **277.03** |

Source: UNESCO, 2005 Convention Periodic Reports

These disparities highlight the need for greater global equity in cultural financing. Regions with lower per capita investments would benefit from international cooperation and knowledge sharing to build capacity and enhance the role of culture in sustainable development. The data also underscores the importance of prioritizing culture in public spending to foster innovation, social cohesion and economic growth in all regions.

Recent commitments underscore this importance. The Pact for the Future highlights culture's centrality in sustainable development and social inclusion, emphasizing the need for continued public funding. Similarly, the latest G20 Culture Declaration reaffirms Member States' dedication to cultural preservation, innovation and equitable access, framing culture as a public good integral to global dialogue and cooperation. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition of the state's responsibility to sustain cultural ecosystems and harness their potential for social, economic and diplomatic advancement.



AlUla, Saudi Arabia

## Heritage financing

Heritage preservation constitutes a significant aspect of public investment in the culture sector, encompassing the conservation, safeguarding and presentation of both tangible and living heritage, as outlined in UNESCO's Culture Conventions. These efforts not only ensure the protection of cultural heritage sites and practices for future generations but also strengthen their role as key drivers of cultural tourism and community identity.

Effective heritage preservation requires both financial investment and strategic management, with many countries implementing comprehensive heritage management plans to guide conservation efforts. For example, while the inscription of a site on the UNESCO World Heritage List brings international recognition, it also comes with heightened administrative responsibilities and financial costs for national authorities and local communities. In Tanzania, for instance, the preservation of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area illustrates this dynamic: maintaining the site, monitoring environmental and cultural indicators and managing tourism flows require significant local resources. To address these challenges, many plans emphasize capacity building, such as training local communities in conservation techniques and involving them in decision-making processes, often with a gender sensitive approach. This approach not only reduces costs but also ensures the sustainability of preservation efforts by fostering local ownership and expertise. Such strategies highlight the importance of aligning investment and community engagement to balance the financial and practical demands of heritage management.

The mean percentage of total annual public expenditure allocated to the identification, conservation, protection and presentation of cultural and natural heritage, varies significantly across regional and income groups, reflecting differing policy priorities and levels of resource availability.

Globally, the average share of public expenditure is 0.67% for cultural heritage and 0.69% for natural heritage. When analysed by regional groupings, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) report the highest average share for cultural heritage at 0.87% and Oceania (OC) leads in natural heritage investment, with 1.95% of public expenditure dedicated to it.

Western Asia and Northern Africa (WANA) allocate 0.73% to cultural and 0.79% to natural heritage, indicating a relatively balanced commitment. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) shows slightly lower but comparable share of investment, at 0.69% for cultural and 0.70% for natural heritage. Central and Southern Asia (CSA) spends 0.58% and 0.60%, respectively, while Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (ESEA) allocates 0.48% to cultural heritage but a notably higher 0.79% to natural heritage, suggesting a growing focus on environmental preservation in the region.

**Table 6. Mean percentage of total annual public expenditure spent on the identification, conservation, protection and presentation of cultural and natural heritage, by regional, income, Global North/Global South groups.**

| Group | Mean budget share for cultural heritage (%) | Mean budget share for natural heritage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Global total | 0.67 | 0.69 |
| CSA | 0.58 | 0.60 |
| EASA | 0.48 | 0.79 |
| EUNA | 0.58 | 0.49 |
| LAC | 0.87 | 0.73 |
| OC | 0.86 | 1.95 |
| SSA | 0.69 | 0.70 |
| WANA | 0.73 | 0.79 |
| HI | 0.57 | 0.59 |
| UMI | 0.74 | 0.57 |
| LMI | 0.53 | 0.55 |
| LI | 0.81 | 0.95 |
| GLOBAL NORTH | 0.56 | 0.50 |
| GLOBAL SOUTH | 0.74 | 0.75 |

Source: UNESCO, 1972 Convention Periodic Reports.

Global total n=84, Europe and North America n=27, Sub-Saharan Africa n=21, Latin America and the Caribbean n=14, Western Asia and Northern Africa n=6, Eastern and Southern Asia n=8, Central and Southern Asia n=4, Oceanian States n=4, High Income States n=33, Upper Middle Income States n=18, Lower Middle Income States n=18, Low Income States n=12, Global South n=56, Global North n=27.

Europe and North America (EUNA) invest 0.58% in cultural heritage and only 0.49% in natural heritage, placing them below the global average share. This is mostly due to their high level of overall public expenditure rather than a lack of investment in cultural and natural heritage.

These regional disparities underscore the need for targeted support in underfunded areas to safeguard cultural and natural heritage. Greater international collaboration, capacity building and funding could help bridge the gap, enabling regions with rich but vulnerable heritage resources to ensure their long-term preservation and utilization for social and economic development.

ArtScience Museum, Singapore. © Jason Rost / Unsplash.com

## Cultural infrastructure investment

Cultural infrastructure encompasses a broad spectrum beyond physical buildings, including facilities, programmes, organizations and institutions that support cultural life. Justin O'Connor, in Culture is Not an Industry (2024), emphasized the multifaceted nature of cultural infrastructure. Such infrastructure supports tourism, involving hotels, roads and airports, which connect cultural experiences with broader economic activity. Additionally, infrastructure encompasses both 'hard' elements, like cultural hubs and performance venues, and 'soft' components, such as training programmes and audience-building initiatives that foster expertise and further cultural engagement.

While large-scale prestige projects often dominate investment, smaller, informal spaces – such as studios or community venues – play a critical role in supporting grassroots cultural production. This is often overlooked in cultural policy, which tends to prioritize visible infrastructure over the less glamorous but essential elements needed to sustain creativity and local engagement. Moreover, effective cultural infrastructure requires not just physical spaces but also robust management systems, tying 'soft' and 'hard' infrastructure together. This distinction has been acknowledged in the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators, which collect data separately on cultural hubs and community spaces.

The intersection of cultural policy with industrial strategy and urban regeneration further nuances the discussion and analysis. Cultural hubs can drive economic development, but this requires an industrial strategy that aligns cultural policy with broader economic goals. For example, AEA Consulting's 2023 Cultural Infrastructure Index highlights global trends in cultural investment, emphasizing the need for balanced approaches that integrate hard and soft infrastructure while addressing the economic and social dimensions of urban development. Such integrated strategies are essential for maximizing the impact of cultural infrastructure on regeneration, production and community well-being.

Investing in cultural infrastructure is a crucial aspect of both public and private spending, encompassing the construction and maintenance of facilities such as cultural centres, performance spaces and creative hubs. While public investment often provides essential support for community-focused spaces, private investment has become increasingly significant in shaping cultural infrastructure globally. According to AEA Consulting's 2023 Cultural Infrastructure Index, private sector contributions now play a major role in funding large-scale cultural projects, often through public-private partnerships (PPPs).

These collaborations enable the development of landmark venues and more commercially-driven creative hubs, sharing financial and operational responsibilities between governments and private entities. For example, PPPs can support not only the creation of physical spaces but also the ongoing management and programming required to ensure these facilities remain vibrant and accessible. Such investments highlight the evolving dynamics of cultural infrastructure financing, where public and private sectors must work in tandem to address the diverse needs of cultural production, community engagement and economic development.

In recent years, governments have increasingly recognized the role of cultural infrastructure in driving cultural engagement and taken a more inclusive approach to economic development. Singapore's SG Arts Plan (2018–2023), for example, allocated SGD 1.2 billion – a significant increase from previous funding levels – to enhance cultural spaces, promote local artistic talent and integrate culture into urban development strategies (Singapore National Arts Council, 2023). Early results indicate improved access to cultural facilities, greater community participation in arts programmes and a boost in the visibility of local artists on international platforms. Such investments showcase how strategic funding in cultural infrastructure can yield both cultural and economic benefits, serving as a model for policymakers worldwide. The European Union's structural funds, particularly the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), play a pivotal role in developing cultural infrastructure across Member States, including in digital infrastructure. In addition to supporting the construction and modernization of museums, theatres, art centres and libraries, these funds enable significant investment in digital platforms, the digitization of cultural collections and advanced tools for managing and sharing cultural resources (European Commission, 2021).

By digitizing collections and creating online platforms, cultural institutions can reach wider and more diverse audiences, including those in remote or underserved areas. Under optimal conditions, this increased access fosters inclusivity and cultural participation, allowing people from various backgrounds to engage with cultural goods and experiences. Moreover, such investments stimulate innovation within the culture sector, enabling the development of interactive and immersive formats such as virtual exhibitions or digital archives, which enrich cultural engagement and attract new audiences. For example, the UNESCO Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects (discussed also in Chapter 2) raises public awareness about the illicit trafficking of cultural property and its impact on communities deprived of their cultural heritage. At the national level, innovative projects like Magnify Miniatures use advanced machine learning and robotic imaging to allow users to explore intricate details of artworks, making cultural heritage more dynamic and accessible. These initiatives highlight how digital infrastructure enhances both the accessibility and diversity of cultural offerings, amplifying their social and economic impact while also promoting cultural preservation and innovation on a global scale.

## Inclusivity and sustainability as foundations for CCI development

Inclusion in the CCIs is not only a matter of equity but also a cornerstone of democracy, accountability and the full realization of creative and economic potential. Failing to support marginalized groups undermines not only their opportunities but also the broader potential of the cultural ecosystem to innovate and grow. This is particularly significant in the Global South, where youth represent the majority of the population and are key to the future of cultural and economic development. Prioritizing their inclusion ensures that their creative energy and perspectives contribute to shaping more equitable and dynamic culture sectors. In turn, this forms the basis for a more inclusive and sustainable economy, with the CCIs an important and growing contributors. In this regard, the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) clearly recognizes culture as a lever for achieving gender equality, empowering youth and leaving no one behind, as it contributes to fostering opportunities to pursue alternative livelihoods and ensuring their financial, economic and social inclusion (United Nations, 2024).

As highlighted in UNESCO's Empowering Creativity report, fostering diversity, equality and inclusion within cultural systems can lead to a transformative impact, strengthening both democratic participation and the cultural economy. The report illustrates how cultural policies can address structural inequalities: in Togo, the National Policy for Equity and Gender Equality identifies socio-cultural barriers to women's empowerment and outlines institutional reforms to address them. In Costa Rica, roundtables with young artists supported by the UNESCO-Aschberg Programme, fed into the revision of the National Policy on Cultural Rights, drawing on input from over 300 participants to define what constitutes decent work in the arts. Both cases show how inclusive cultural policymaking can give voice to underrepresented communities and promote equity.

The CCIs have significant potential for boosting inclusivity among vulnerable groups such as youth, seniors, minorities and Indigenous Peoples. By engaging these groups in creative activities, CCIs can provide a platform for expression, skill development and economic opportunities. Through inclusive programming and access to creative opportunities, these sectors become platforms for self-expression, economic empowerment and cultural recognition.

Seniors, for instance, are vital custodians of traditional knowledge, stories and practices. Actively including them in cultural initiatives – such as storytelling workshops, cultural mentoring and participatory arts – not only preserves intangible heritage but also fosters intergenerational exchange, enriching creative processes, enabling self-expression and strengthening community bonds. Recognizing and empowering seniors within CCIs ensures that their wisdom remains an active force in shaping contemporary cultural life.

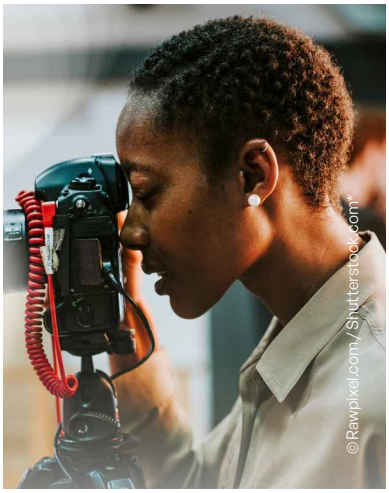
Conversely, youth-targeted cultural initiatives can harness their creativity and energy, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment while contributing to social cohesion and future economic resilience. By providing skill development and cultural

participation, these initiatives not only address the aspirations of young people but also channel their potential into constructive societal contributions. In regions with significant youth populations, particularly in the Global South, such programmes play a critical role in equipping the next generation with the tools to shape cultural narratives and drive innovation. Furthermore, engaging youth in cultural initiatives helps build a deeper appreciation for cultural heritage and diversity, fostering inclusive societies and ensuring the sustainability of cultural practices for generations to come.

Projects like the Amagugu International Heritage Centre in Zimbabwe exemplify the potential of CCIs can safeguard traditional knowledge and practices while contributing to economic development. Located in Matobo Hills, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the centre focuses on preserving Indigenous heritage through workshops, exhibitions and educational programmes that engage both local communities and visitors. The centre serves as a platform for artisans and performers to showcase their skills, generating income and fostering cultural pride. By involving youth in these activities, the centre ensures that traditional knowledge is passed down to future generations, creating synergies between cultural preservation, skills development and economic opportunity.

Another example is the Youth Empowerment through Arts and Media (YETAM) initiative, which engages young people in Africa to document and share their cultural heritage through creative projects such as filmmaking and storytelling. This programme not only safeguards traditional practices but also empowers youth by providing them with the tools and platforms to express their creativity, fostering both personal development and community engagement.

Yet, addressing inequalities in the CCIs requires more than representation – it demands structural change. Persistent inequalities in access, pay, leadership roles and portrayal must be addressed. Increasing representation must be addressed together with how marginalized groups are portrayed in cultural outputs, ensuring these do not reinforce societal biases. Heritage preservation also exhibits inequality, as marginalized communities are too often excluded from decision-making processes, despite being key knowledge bearers. A truly inclusive CCIs requires addressing these intertwined challenges to create equitable opportunities and narratives that reflect and empower all voices.




## Gender (in)equality in the CCIs

Gender equality is a pivotal yet persistently challenging issue within the CCIs. Despite some progress, women continue to encounter significant barriers, including unequal access to resources, leadership roles and fair remuneration. According to the UNESCO Reshaping Policies for Creativity report, women hold fewer than 30% of leadership positions in cultural organizations worldwide, underscoring the structural inequalities that persist. Additionally, in the Gender & Creativity: Progress on the Precipice report, data further highlight that women are underrepresented in key sectors such as film and music, where participation rates are especially low. Addressing these disparities requires targeted policies and initiatives that tackle systemic barriers and promote gender balance. Countries with comprehensive gender equality strategies in the culture sector – such as Sweden and France – have achieved better outcomes in women's participation and leadership. These policies often include funding incentives, mentorship programmes, quotas and gender-sensitive evaluations frameworks. To advance meaningful change, cultural policies must integrate data-driven approaches, prioritize equal representation and address intersectional inequalities. Drawing from UNESCO's findings, fostering gender equality in the CCIs is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for unlocking the full potential of the sector.

Employment in the CCIs demonstrates both gender progress and ongoing disparities, with data revealing regional and occupational nuances. Globally, women account for a significant share of the workforce in cultural occupations. For example, in cities like Sheki (Azerbaijan) and Baguio City (Philippines), women constitute 81% and 55% of the cultural workforce, respectively, showcasing strong representation in specific urban contexts (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports). Similarly, in countries like Croatia and Serbia, women represent 56% and 55.7% of the cultural workforce (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports; 2005 Periodic Reports).

However, these figures mask underlying disparities: in technical and managerial roles, men often dominate, reflecting structural barriers that limit women's access to higher-level opportunities. In regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, men's participation in cultural occupations continues to outpace that of women, with significant gaps in leadership and technical fields. Access to childcare remains a major barrier to women's and care-givers' career advancement in the sector. This is also a challenging outcome of the inequality of access to satisfactory working conditions, where women are less likely to have formal and fairly-paid positions with sensitive and equitable approaches to aspects such as social security, paid leave and more (UNESCO, 2023).

In urban centres within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, the gender profile of CCIs reveals a nuanced picture. Women frequently exceed men in overall representation but face underrepresentation in higher-paid and decision-making positions. For example, in cities like Jinju (Republic of Korea) and Portoviejo (Ecuador), the cultural workforce reflects closer gender parity, but data suggests that traditional gender roles still influence the types of jobs occupied (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports).

These findings highlight both achievements and areas for improvement in gender equity within the CCIs. While women play a central role in these industries, barriers to advancement and pay disparities persist. Addressing these issues through policies that promote equal opportunities and representation in leadership and technical roles is critical to fostering a more inclusive and equitable cultural economy.

Policies promoting gender equality in the CCIs often encompass a range of targeted measures, each designed to address specific barriers faced by women. For instance, funding programmes like Canada's Gender Parity Initiative in the arts provide financial support specifically for women artists and creative entrepreneurs, ensuring equitable access to resources. Similarly, Australia's Women in Music Mentor Program offers gender-sensitive training, equipping women with skills in management, leadership and digital innovation to thrive in the competitive music industry.

Increased representation in leadership positions is another critical focus for gender equality in the CCIs. For example, France's Cultural and Creative Industries Equality Charter mandates gender parity in cultural boards and decision-making roles, fostering systemic change within cultural institutions. Additionally, Sweden's Film Agreement introduced gender quotas to ensure equal funding for projects led by women, which has contributed to higher representation of women filmmakers and enriched the diversity of narratives in the film industry.

Public programmes and civil society organization (CSO) initiatives play distinct but complementary roles in promoting gender equality. Similarly, Women in Film (WIF) is a global organization dedicated to achieving gender parity in the film industry by advocating for and advancing the careers of women in film, television and digital media. UNESCO's Empowering Creative Women programme provides global visibility, resources and networking for women creatives, aiming to bridge gaps in representation and access. Regional efforts like the European Women's Audio-visual Network (EWA) and the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (APSA) amplify these goals, offering mentorship, funding and advocacy to elevate women's roles in film and television. The Keychange programme in the European Union champions the role of women in the music industry and is working to achieve a 50% gender balance in the music industry workforce. Grassroot and community-based initiatives often address specific cultural contexts and marginalized groups. For example, She Leads Africa empowers African women in the CCIs through training, funding and networking opportunities. These efforts are essential in addressing intersecting inequalities of gender, ethnicity and class.

While only 2% of countries lack governmental agencies or parliamentary bodies dedicated to gender equality (2005 Convention Periodic Reports), nearly one-third report that these bodies are not relevant to artists and culture professionals. Furthermore, around 24% of countries do not have dedicated mechanisms addressing gender equality specifically in the culture sector (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports). Still, 84% of states collect at least some data on gender equality, an encouraging sign of political will and a foundation for policy progress (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Analysis of policies supporting women as artists, culture professionals and creative entrepreneurs reveals significant regional disparities in both policy reporting and implementation. Europe and North America lead with 82% of countries indicating the existence of policies and measures aimed at advancing women's recognition in the culture sectors, reflecting strong institutional support and a long-standing focus on gender equity (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). Latin America and the Caribbean, along with Sub-Saharan Africa report moderate engagement, with respectively 56% and 68% of countries implementing similar measures. While these efforts are promising, they remain uneven and highlight the need for sustained commitment, underscoring the challenges of prioritizing gender equity amidst broader economic and social constraints (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Efforts to address these gaps have included policies promoting gender equality in hiring, pay scales and career advancement opportunities, alongside initiatives to ensure equitable access to resources and professional development for women. However, progress remains uneven, with significant regional variations influenced by institutional frameworks, resource availability and societal attitudes. In addition, there are gender disparities in how artists and culture professionals respond to existing regulations and guidance. It cannot be assumed that because a regulation exists, there will be gender parity in its take-up. In the United States, for example, data show that men authors register copyrights at twice the rate of women authors (Brauneis and Oliar, 2016).

In higher-income countries, robust gender policies have been implemented to support equality, including quotas and funding incentives to increase women's representation in cultural leadership roles. However, despite these measures, significant challenges remain, evidenced by persistent gender disparities and safety concerns brought to light by movements like the MeToo movement. In sub-regions of Africa and Latin America, community-driven programmes have achieved meaningful progress by promoting gender equality at grassroots levels. However, structural barriers, including limited funding and institutional support, continue to hinder broader advancement. A nuanced, regionally-tailored approach is essential to address these disparities while recognizing both achievements and ongoing challenges.

Systematic data collection and monitoring practices are critical for advancing gender equality in the CCIs. While such systems are more prevalent in some regions, many economies face challenges due to competing priorities and limited resources, emphasizing the need for capacity development and international support. Gender equality, as central to SDG 5, offers a framework that can be adapted to culture sectors. However, CCIs require tailored approaches due to their unique dynamics, such as the prevalence of informal and part-time work, hybrid business models and the underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles.

To address these specific challenges, initiatives should include targeted funding for women-led cultural projects, capacity-building programmes for data collection and policy development and cross-sectoral collaborations that integrate cultural policies with broader gender equality strategies. In that sense, UNESCO's upcoming Culture for all: a toolkit for gender equality in policymaking, will provide step-by-step guidelines on how to integrate gender equality into cultural policies. By recognizing these distinctions and scaling up efforts in underrepresented regions, the CCIs can contribute meaningfully to global gender equality goals.

## Advancing decent work standards

Cultural workers often face precarious conditions, including low pay, impermanent roles and limited or no access to social protections like health insurance or retirement plans. This reflects the unique nature of the CCIs which are characterized by atypical work arrangements, project-based contracts and a reliance on informal economies.

To align with SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, CCIs require tailored support mechanisms that address these challenges, while preserving the flexibility essential to creative production. Additionally, the rise of AI brings both opportunities and risks, such as automation replacing creative roles or reshaping the value chain (covered more in Chapter 2). A just transition for cultural workers in this evolving

landscape will require policies that ensure fair remuneration, upskilling and access to new technologies, safeguarding the sustainability and dignity of cultural work.

The digital transformation of the culture sector has reshaped every area of public policy, including approaches to culture. As discussed in Chapter 2, digital technologies are seen as drivers of innovation and growth across the culture sector, facilitating scale through new and expanding channels and platforms. Policies increasingly focus on boosting infrastructure for digital development, digital literacy, intellectual property protection and fair monetization of cultural goods. However, in many contexts, policies need to be reformed to ensure their relevance to the digital transformation, with common capacity and expertise challenges. AI intensifies challenges around remuneration, ethics, resource exploitation and intellectual property rights. Frameworks and policy recommendations – such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and the EU's Digital Services Act – aim to regulate these issues, albeit facing considerable risks and challenges, particularly as AI is poised to fundamentally disrupt existing systems of intellectual property management. Digital exclusion also remains a critical issue: the International Telecommunication Union (2024) points out that 2.6 billion people remain offline, with women facing a disproportionate share of the divide – 189 million more men than women are using the internet. Plus, there is a risk that digital transformation actively excludes women or even leads to damaging consequences – e.g. the risk of gender-based violence facilitated through AI.

Yet the benefits of digital transformation are evident, opening up opportunities for inclusive cultural production and distribution in every global region. As shown in the report Digitalization: A Game Changer for Local Governments & Communities – Enhancing Capacities to Deploy Transformative Solutions (ICLEI, 2023), countries more advanced in digitalization derive 20% greater economic benefits compared to those at the initial stages of digital development. While digitalization can support the diversification of income streams and generate economic value, inclusive approaches are required to address gaps in equitable access and remuneration and to support artists and cultural workers to innovate with digital tools rather than be marginalized in the face of its rapid transformation.

# Box 6. Strengthening rights and protections: the role of trade unions and policy reform

## Ensuring fair economic compensation and protecting intellectual property rights

The rapid expansion of generative AI, especially since 2022, has raised significant challenges for artists, cultural and creative professionals, as underscored by multiple trade unions. These technologies, used either to produce new creative outputs or for specific tasks in the creative process, are trained with vast datasets, sometimes including copyrighted works, as well as user-generated content and open-source materials. However, this data is frequently collected and processed without the consent or licensing from their original authors, creating a substantial risk of copyright infringement, particularly in the music and audio-visual industries. This situation highlights the urgent need for greater transparency in the use of creative works by AI algorithms.

The rise of generative AI also threatens traditional value streams in the cultural and creative industries: under current regulations, audio-visual creators could

suffer from a 21% revenue decline by 2028, reaching 24% for musicians. This critical situation is due to unfair competition between AI-generated and human-created content, and to the absence of robust mechanisms for fair compensation in the use of copyrighted works in AI outputs.

Another major concern for trade unions in the culture sector, regarding the socioeconomic rights of artists, is the increasing dominance of copyright buyout contracts, especially in the audio-visual sector and on streaming platforms. These contracts require creators to surrender their rights against one-off payments, depriving them from future royalties. The asymmetrical power balance, combined with a lack of information and awareness among creators about long-term risks, fuel artists' already precarious economic livelihoods and undermine the stability of their income.

## Advancing the socioeconomic rights of culture professionals: what policy responses?

Trade unions have welcomed several landmark policy advances aimed at addressing the structural challenges faced by artists and culture professionals – particularly with respect to copyright protection, fair remuneration and the status of the artist in the digital environment. At the national level, strengthened legislation has been instrumental in curbing the erosion of copyright protection. In addressing the prevalence of buyout contracts, several European countries – including France, Italy and Spain – have enacted laws to guarantee that creators receive a remuneration proportionate to the revenues generated from their work. In others, such as Belgium, Hungary and Poland, legislation allows for the revision of royalties when initial agreements prove inadequate and grants artists the right to revoke or withhold rights in cases of under-exploitation.

At the regional level, the 2019 European Union Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market represents a significant policy breakthrough. The Directive requires online content-sharing service providers to comply with copyright rules and obtain licenses from creators, for a more equitable distribution of the economic value generated by digital content.

Collective agreements remain vital in securing the socioeconomic rights of culture professionals. These agreements establish a solid framework for fair remuneration and social protection, by establishing minimum fees, payment schedules, royalties, dispute resolution mechanisms, health and pension contributions, among others.

Across all these areas, multi-stakeholder cooperation – including partnerships between trade unions and international organizations such as UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) – remains essential. Such cooperation is key to reinforcing the Status of the Artist and adapting policy frameworks to an evolving digital landscape.

*Source: Contributions by the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC), and the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds (IAWG) to the UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies – Culture: The Missing SDG.*

As regards employment, the CCIs are relative newcomers with existing legislation often failing to address their unique conditions, such as atypical work arrangements and project-based roles. Public perception and policy decisions frequently undervalue cultural work, failing to recognize cultural and creative work as legitimate employment. Politicians and policymakers often prioritize STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects over cultural training and education, despite the growing acknowledgment of the arts' significance, as evidenced by their inclusion in the OECD PISA tests.

The breadth of employment in CCIs – from performing arts and visual arts to digital media and cultural heritage management – demonstrates their versatility and capacity to integrate with various industries. Yet, as Laurence Cuny notes

in IFACCA's A Crisis of Sustainable Careers?, the lack of systemic support, fair remuneration and recognition of cultural labour as work remains a critical barrier to its sustainable growth. Addressing these issues requires tailored policies that validate CCIs as a significant employment sector, with fair conditions and equal recognition in education and policy frameworks.

Mapping income across cultural occupations employment in CCIs often includes a mix of formal and informal arrangements, with a significant number of workers engaged in self-employed/contract-based work. This variability in employment forms presents challenges in ensuring stable income and social protection for all workers. Many cultural workers face economic vulnerability due to the intermittent nature of their work and the lack of comprehensive social security measures.

The formalization of employment in the CCIs presents complex and context-specific challenges that demand nuanced approaches. The informal economy dominates globally, with the culture sector disproportionately represented within it. While extending social protections such as health benefits, retirement plans and unemployment insurance is essential to improving working conditions, pathways to formalization are fraught with challenges, particularly in CCIs. These challenges include balancing taxation and regulation with the fluid and often project-based nature of creative work, as well as addressing systemic inequities without undermining the livelihoods of those in informal arrangements.

Formalization efforts must reconcile the relationship between formal and informal economies, recognizing that informality is not simply a temporary state but an embedded feature of many cultural economies. Approaches to managing this relationship include hybrid models that extend protection to informal workers without requiring full formalization. For instance, some countries have implemented social security systems that accommodate freelance and contract workers, allowing them to access benefits typically reserved for formal employment.

Examples such as the Zimbabwe report on informality in CCIs and UNESCO's Empowering Creativity report highlight strategies that bridge the formal-informal divide. In Zimbabwe, programmes have been introduced to provide informal cultural workers with access to financing and capacity-building initiatives, while gradually integrating regulatory frameworks that protect their economic and social rights. Similarly, ILO research underscores the importance of inclusive policies that address taxation and regulation barriers while safeguarding the livelihoods of informal workers.

Sustainable solutions must recognize the structural role of informality in the sector and focus on managing the relationship between formal and informal economies. As highlighted in recent research, fostering fair remuneration and expanding social protections – while respecting the flexible and project-based nature of cultural work – can lead to more equitable and resilient outcomes for creative professionals (IFACCA, 2022).

## Artist and creator support schemes

The definition of artist or creative worker varies widely and shapes how rights and protections are applied within the CCIs. While legislation, such as copyright laws, often protects traditional roles like authors and artists, many other creative contributors – such as designers, technicians and project managers – remain unrecognized within legal frameworks. This narrow view of the cultural workforce excludes essential roles in the production process, leading to unequal access to rights and protections.

This dynamic underscores the complexity of understanding the cultural workforce, where traditional notions of artist coexist with a broader ecosystem of creative workers. Discussions around rights, protections and support mechanisms increasingly highlight the need to consider the diverse roles and employment realities within CCIs, as well as the structural barriers that perpetuate inequalities, particularly for women (see above).

The organization of the labour market has a direct impact on the quality of working conditions for artists. In many countries, trade unions and guilds play a crucial role in advocating for their members by negotiating collective agreements, lobbying for group interests and providing support for various professional activities. The

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degree of market professionalization is further reflected in the role of intermediary institutions, such as employment agencies and managers, which serve as a bridge between artistic creativity and the market.

Equipping future art school graduates with essential market skills is equally important. Aligning artistic education with market demands can better prepare young artists to enter the workforce, manage their own businesses, or collaborate effectively with the private sector. Opportunities for additional training in cultural entrepreneurship also contribute to building a foundation for sustainable careers in the CCIs (Ilczuk, Karpińska and Stano-Strzałkowska, 2017).

Supporting individual artists through grants and subsidies is a direct measure that governments use to foster creativity and sustain the culture sector. These support schemes are designed to provide financial assistance to artists, enabling them to pursue their creative endeavours without the immediate pressure of commercial success. Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) scheme, initiated by Minister Catherine Martin, supports artists and creative workers as part of the National Economic Recovery Plan. Funded with €25 million over three years, the pilot scheme aims to inform future policies by providing a stable income to artists. Early outcomes have been positive, with 2,000 artists receiving €325 weekly, leading to increased time and resources dedicated to their art, higher life satisfaction and reduced depression and anxiety. Recipients spend 8 additional hours per week on creative work and €550 more per month on their practice compared to non-recipients (Government of Ireland, 2023b). The introduction of a basic income for artists in Ireland addresses critical challenges faced by those in the culture sector. Beyond the issue of low consumer willingness to pay for cultural goods, structural factors such as the fragmentation of cultural work and the reliance on temporary or project-based employment exacerbate income instability. Additionally, many artists lack access to supplementary income from intellectual property (IP) rights, which could otherwise balance their earnings from creative work.

As highlighted in UNESCO's Empowering Creativity and Reshaping Policies for Creativity report, integrating legal frameworks with policies that support fair remuneration, social rights and artistic freedom is essential for a resilient culture sector. These measures not only protect cultural creators but also ensure that diverse voices and expressions are represented, contributing to vibrant and sustainable cultural ecosystems. For readers interested in these interconnections, the discussion of cultural rights in this context provides a deeper understanding of how legal and policy frameworks converge to uphold cultural equity and freedom.

The Government of India offers a range of support schemes for artists under the Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana (KSVY) and the Global Engagement Scheme. At the national level, a key component is the Repertory Grant, based on the traditional guru-shishya parampara (master-disciple tradition), where master artists in the performing arts receive a monthly honorarium of INR 15,000 (approx. $175), while their disciples receive between 2,000 and 10,000 INR (approx. 23 USD and 116 USD) depending on their age. Artists can also apply for financial assistance for the realization of artistic projects, performances and cultural events through the Cultural Function and Production Grant (CFPG), which offers funding ranging from 500,000 to 2 million INR (approx. 5,810 USD to 23,246 USD) per initiative. In addition, grants are available for the development of small-scale artistic infrastructure such as studio theatres or exhibition spaces. A separate form of support is provided for veteran artists over the age of 60, who are eligible for a monthly allowance of up to 6,000 INR (approx. 70 USD) to ensure a basic level of social security for those with a significant artistic legacy. Internationally, under the Festival of India initiative, artists are invited to participate in events promoting Indian culture abroad – all travel and accommodation costs are covered by the government, with main performers receiving 35,000 INR (approx. 407 USD) per show and accompanying artists 7,000 INR (approx. 81 USD). These programmes reflect a dedicated approach by the Indian State to supporting both emerging and senior artists, while also advancing the global visibility of Indian cultural heritage.

Equally important is maintaining artistic freedom, allowing creators to explore their visions without undue constraints. To achieve this, equitable access to funding opportunities must be prioritized, ensuring that artists from diverse backgrounds can benefit from financial support. By addressing systemic barriers and promoting inclusivity, these schemes not only enrich cultural diversity but also uphold the

principle of creative freedom, enabling artists to produce work that reflects a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives. This balance between accessibility and autonomy is essential for cultivating a vibrant and inclusive culture sector.

The Korean Artists Welfare Foundation (KAWF), established under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, plays a crucial role in supporting artists in the Republic of Korea. It aims to enhance the welfare of artists through various programmes and policies. One of its key initiatives is the New Artists Support Project, which provides financial assistance to emerging artists, helping them to stabilize their careers and continue their creative activities. Additionally, KAWF has introduced employment insurance for artists, ensuring they have access to social security benefits even during periods of unemployment (Hae Yeon, 2021).

# Conclusions and key takeaways

Policies for culture sit at the interface of a wider set of policy considerations – including approaches to social development, education and economy. Culture is increasingly seen as a vector for delivering impact, most notably in the push for economic diversification and growth.

However, as this chapter makes clear, economic impact can only be realistically achieved if it is part of a wider approach to culture as a foundation for sustainable development. If artists and cultural workers struggle to earn a living, are stifled at the point of creative expression and are not supported to develop and grow their practice, then a creative economy will serve a handful of larger commercial entities rather than society as a whole. In response to this reality of inequality, cultural policies increasingly need to focus on inclusivity, sustainability and equity, rather than being simply driven by economic development criteria. CCIs serve as platforms for marginalized groups, fostering self-expression, skills development and economic opportunities, particularly in developing regions. Addressing systemic barriers, such as unequal pay and limited leadership roles for women and minorities, remains critical. Integrating sustainability into CCIs' operations, alongside ecological considerations in tourism and resource management, aligns culture sectors with broader environmental goals.

Moreover, strengthening transnational collaboration can enhance knowledge-sharing and equitable development, ensuring culture's contribution to sustainable progress and societal well-being. This is reflected in the Pact for the Future and G20 Culture Declaration (2020), and cultural mobility and equitable trade and exchange are key to supporting the status of the artist and ensuring the protection and promotion of a diversity of cultural expressions.

In light of the conclusions of this chapter, four overarching takeaways are proposed:

- **Invest in robust cultural data and evidence-based policymaking.** Evidence-based cultural policies are the most effective tools for achieving sustainable goals. Expanding the scope of collected data is necessary to fill persistent gaps and guide effective decision-making. It is no longer acceptable to treat the scarcity of cultural statistics as inevitable. Global investment in coordinated cultural data systems is urgently needed. Policymakers and politicians must prioritize improved statistical frameworks to better understand and support the dynamic growth of CCIs worldwide. The target audience for this recommendation is statistical services. Sustainable funding mechanisms are needed to support standardized, reliable and globally comparable cultural statistics. Additionally, binary distinctions like Global North/Global South fail to capture the complexity of national contexts. Disaggregated, nuanced data must guide policy to better reflect culture sector dynamics across diverse settings.

- **Strengthen legal frameworks for sustainable, inclusive CCIs.** Despite their rapid growth, CCIs often operate in informal or project-based environments and remain undervalued in education and policy frameworks that privilege STEM fields. Existing legislation – typically focused on heritage or intellectual property – fails to address the broader working conditions of artists and culture professionals. Comprehensive legal frameworks and their implementation are needed to ensure fair remuneration, employment rights, social protection, artistic freedom and gender equity. These should also integrate ecological sustainability and be embedded as standard criteria in international project funding.

- **Recognize and support culture as a foundation for sustainable development** rather than as a straightforward driver of economic growth. Through policy and action that supports the protection and promotion of a diversity of cultural expressions and facilitates an enabling environment for artists and culture professionals, a wider set of outcomes will be delivered – such as more inclusive and participatory communities, social and cultural innovation, enhanced trust and cohesion. These outcomes are the basis for a more inclusive and sustainable economy which benefits all communities and supports the flourishing of each cultural and creative industry. In turn, a focus on equity, fairness and inclusion in the CCIs will reinforce the status of the artist and provide the conditions for cultures to flourish. This can form the basis of a CCIs which contributes to a more sustainable and equitable economy.

- **Align cultural investment with broader development priorities.** Enhanced investment and financial support for the culture sector are critical to building an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem that can drive innovation, diversity of expressions, social cohesion, and long-term human-centred development. Strengthening public investment, mobilizing private sector engagement, and aligning cultural financing with broader development priorities is an opportunity and will be key to upholding cultural rights and enabling artists, institutions, and creative enterprises to thrive and to ensuring culture's full contribution to resilience and sustainable growth.

# Policy Brief

## *Simon Brault*

Independent art consultant

## The cultural and creative industries must be able to shape the world to which we aspire

The cultural and creative industry is now one of the most promising drivers of economic and social development in every region of the globe. Contributing 3.39% to global GDP,[116] it represents a mean share of 3.55% of employment,[117] half of which are held by women, and young people under the age of thirty make up a considerable proportion of the workforce, especially in the Global South.

This vast, fragmented sector, where commercial and non-commercial dynamics intertwine, depends on a plurality of decisions and financial flows from actors with differentiated behaviors – such as private companies and foundations, consumers and governments – who act in accordance with their cultural and industrial policies, or simply leave everything to market forces.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the contrast between the precarious living and working conditions of most artists and creative workers, and the current and anticipated growth of the sector. Almost 45% of cultural occupations exist in the informal economy, with no social safety net.

Arts and culture play a part in the identity narratives of individuals, communities and nations. The many ways in which culture can contribute to the growth of social capital and the enhancement of the common good do not, however, prevent the global privatization of its economic spin-offs, nor the increasing control of production and distribution mechanisms worldwide by digital giants. The astounding advances of artificial intelligence are already threatening many jobs in the creative sector, in addition to calling into question notions of authenticity, exclusivity, artistic freedom or intrinsic value by instrumentalizing humanity's artistic, cultural, visual and literary heritage – not simply to reproduce it, but to create new works, experiences, or commodities in pursuit of commercial objectives or ideological and political ends.

The ever-growing weight of the cultural and creative industry in the economies of all regions, its contribution to the creation of rewarding jobs, its capacity to produce symbolic content capable of influencing individual and societal values and behaviors – including in terms of human rights, the environment and inclusive and democratic governance – and its impact on innovation in all areas of human activity are such that it is unthinkable not to include it in global and local sustainable development strategies.

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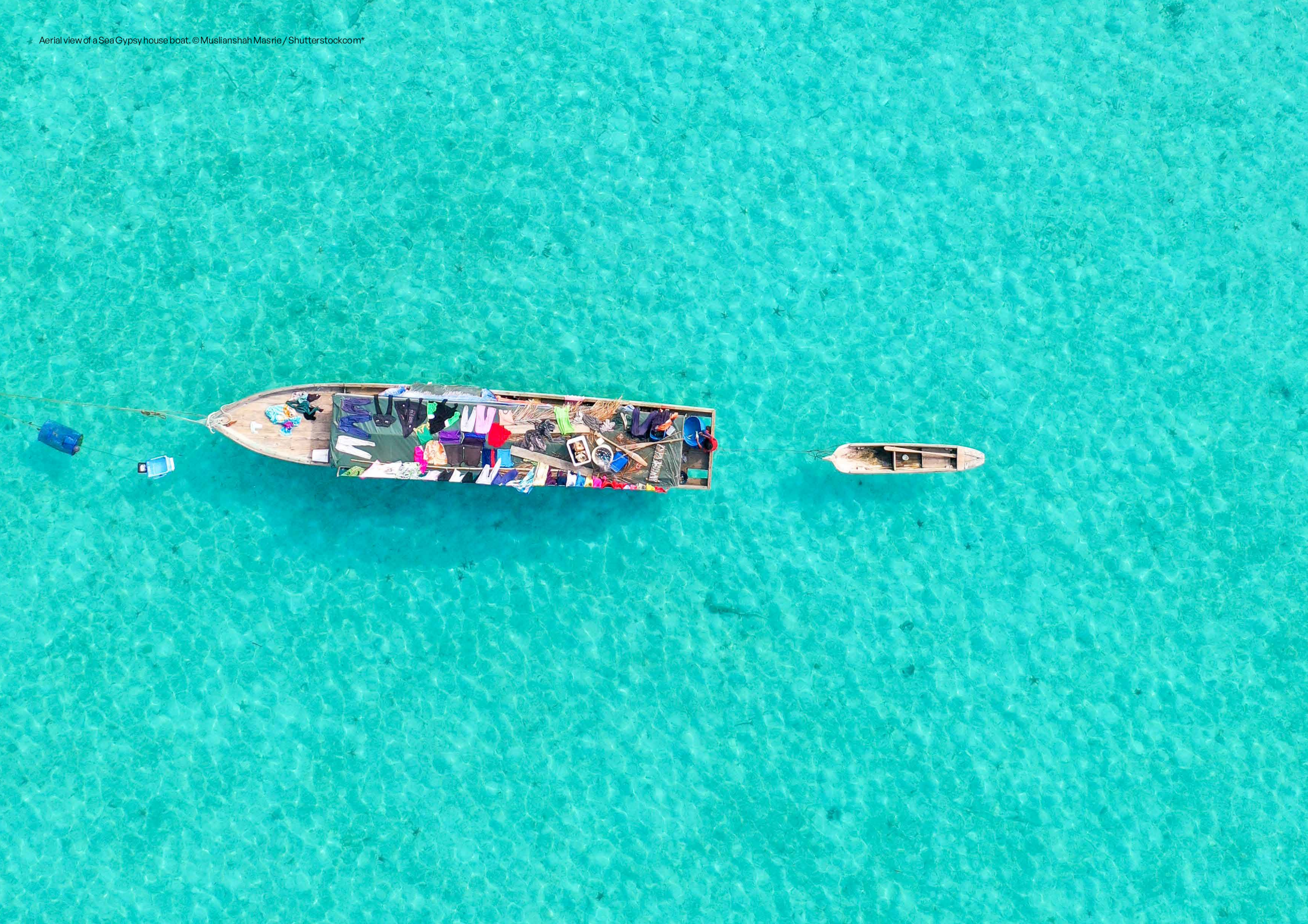
[116] *Estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.*

[117] *Mean share of employment for the 61 countries for which there is available data.*

This is why the immediate issues and challenges facing the cultural and creative industry – notably the precarious social and professional status of its workforce, the defence of creative freedom in all its dimensions and the protection of authentic local cultures in all their diversity – must be taken into account by national and local governments, who should develop or modernize their cultural policies and their labour and intellectual property laws, make the necessary investments in infrastructure, and support the growth of the enterprises in the sector while ensuring that the conditions of the people who work in it are improved.

Culture should be included as an independent objective in the upcoming Sustainable Development Agenda to align with important global goals. It remains one of the essential conditions for preventing our societies from crumbling and our planet from perishing.



Aerial view of a Sea Gypsy house boat. © Muslianshah Masrie / Shutterstock.com*

Chapter 5

# Tackling climate change and promoting environmental sustainability through culture

# Creative Voices
## *Oto Hudec*

Visual artist and teacher, Technical University of Košice, Slovakia

## Seeds of a gentler future: the role of culture in envisioning a sustainable world

In today's world, characterized by geopolitical and economic hurricanes, military fires, windstorms of social inequality and floods of migration, culture plays an irreplaceable role. It helps us make sense of the world; it offers safe spaces where we collectively experience trauma and joy; and, it reconnects us with what makes us human – our sensitivity, empathy, fallibility and self-awareness.

This also holds true for sustainability and the environment. In the artistic spheres I know, culture has been a vanguard of ecological thinking – shifting focus from the Anthropocene to a more empathetic view of our coexistence with animals and plants, from individualism to understanding humans as inseparable from their ecosystems. Sustainable methods of creation, transportation, production and energy use are increasingly part of cultural work. Art and culture have the freedom to imagine the unimaginable – to model utopian alternatives, to create small-scale examples of sustainability, and to foster a society of care, where even the most vulnerable are considered.

Through theatre, literature, film and installations, many artists have explored the planet's delicate balance, especially within local environments. Like canaries in a coal mine, they sense that the idea of endless civilizational growth is fading, as its environmental cost becomes undeniable.

It is no coincidence that major cultural events, institutions and community-based projects are turning towards the knowledge and practices of Indigenous and traditional communities. The cultural field is questioning colonial and rationalist legacies, re-examining power structures and exploring new strategies for collectiveness. Arts have long challenged inherited worldviews and inspired visions – of a world where value isn't measured solely by matter, financial value, benefit, yield, ore, or energy, but by care and interdependence. In contrast to conquest-driven economic models stands a view of Earth as a fragile 'spaceship', where environmental sustainability is the highest imperative – an idea famously explored in Kenneth Boulding's 1966 essay.

Models of sustainable living have not only been theorized by Western economists, but more importantly, lived by Indigenous communities. One such example is buen vivir – or sumak kawsay in Quechua – a way of life that focuses on community, ecological balance and cultural respect. Humans are perceived not as conquerors of nature, but as part of it. This worldview, already embedded in national frameworks like Ecuador's constitution, should become a guiding principle for cultural institutions, governments and international bodies.

Cultural and environmental workers often stand together to protect their fields from political and economic pressures. In my own work, I've tried to highlight the efforts of activists who give up comfort, time and sometimes even safety to protect culture and nature. Arts may not always change systems directly, as activism or legislation can – but they open hearts, draw attention and honour those who defend our shared heritage, whether a cultural site or a local forest.

In a world facing geopolitical unpredictability and inequality – the greenhouse gas emissions curve still continues to grow inexorably – culture helps us reconnect with what makes us human. It fosters empathy and offers visions of environmental paradigm shifts in the face of global challenges. As we can see, Indigenous communities have long embodied sustainable ways of living, grounded in harmony with nature and collective well-being. The cultural sphere must engage more deeply with this wisdom, elevate it and resist extractive and colonial paradigms. Despite today's crises, I believe that a society centred on care, environmental and social balance and interconnection is both attainable and real. This is not only a hopeful vision, it is a necessary one, and in the works of today's artists, we can already see the outlines of its forms.

Tartaruga1 and 2, Kunsthalle Bratislava, 2017. © Oto Hudec

# Tackling climate change and promoting environmental sustainability through culture

**Thiago Jesus**
Researcher and creative producer advancing culture-based approaches to climate action.

# Overview

01. Climate change is among the greatest threats facing natural and cultural heritage today and causes both economic and non-economic losses. From the wilds of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park and the Taj Mahal of India to the vast glaciers of Greenland, Denmark and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America, it is estimated that one in three natural heritage sites and one in six cultural heritage sites are currently under threat from the impacts of extreme weather and slow-onset climate events. Furthermore, climate change is increasingly disrupting the socio-cultural fabric of communities worldwide. As many forms of intangible cultural heritage are profoundly tied to specific places, territories and natural environments, it also threatens the viability of living heritage and its bearers, as well as the resources they require to practise and transmit their living heritage.

02. Indigenous Peoples are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This vulnerability is exacerbated by multiple intersecting factors that produce inequality – such as gender, income and class – and by historical marginalization that remains reinforced today, through policies and legal frameworks that violate their rights and alter their territories. Additionally, the irreparable damage to languages, knowledge systems and livelihoods due to loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services diminishes these communities' otherwise strong adaptive capacity. However, increased attention is given to Indigenous Knowledge systems and their sustainable relationship with the environment to support global climate action.

03. As the planet faces the urgent need for transformation across all aspects of human life, the cultural sphere holds immense power to support this transition, especially as culture serves as a source of knowledge, values and communication. There is thus a growing recognition that culture is not only a victim of climate change but also a powerful resource for risk reduction and management, climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies by offering valuable knowledge and practices, which enhance community resilience to climate impacts. Integrating cultural dimensions into climate action is thus essential for reducing vulnerability and promoting inclusive approaches that safeguard and promote diverse knowledge systems and cultural expressions.

04. In the context of culture, the transition to a low-carbon economy requires significant investment in skills, resources and infrastructure, alongside the need to protect and safeguard heritage and cultural practices and build consensus among decision-makers while empowering communities to remain active stewards of their cultural and natural resources. A just transition framework for the culture sector must ensure fairness in climate planning and decision-making processes, with targeted measures to support local communities and smaller organizations that are most vulnerable. This includes capacity building and training programmes, equitable funding for green technologies, the recognition of the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples, gender-specific policies and the fair distribution of benefits to those most affected by the transition.

05. Multilateral efforts must be made to implement effective policy frameworks that protect and promote culture in the face of climate change, and to advance the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. To achieve this, culture sector bodies, governments and research institutions must urgently address knowledge gaps and strengthen the evidence base on the links between culture and climate action. This requires investment in collaborative, coordinated data collection and targeted research to inform detailed policy and action at all levels, particularly on culture's contributions to adaptation and mitigation, preventing loss and damage, building resilience and driving behavioural change. Culture-based solutions often scale in place-based, sector-specific and culturally adaptable ways, yet current efforts remain disproportionately focused on Europe and North America, with limited representation from other regions. Strengthening the evidence base on culture's immense potential to drive climate action will help unlock financial resources to accelerate progress towards the SDGs and support national and multilateral efforts to formally integrate culture into climate policies and strategies at all levels.

# Introduction

Tongariro National Park, New Zealand

In October 2024, a month after recording the worst air quality in the world, the city of São Paulo awoke to a giant street mural depicting Indigenous activist Alessandra Korap Munduruku holding a sign with the urgent plea 'Stop the Destruction', standing before a deforested landscape marked by barren tree stumps and cracked earth. Covering the side of an 11-story building, Mundano created the artwork using 100 kilograms of ashes from the fires that devastated the Amazon rainforest and mud from the catastrophic floods in Rio Grande do Sul earlier that year. Mundano, who calls himself an 'artivist', uses bold, colourful street art to make people stop and think about how these unprecedented and escalating disasters wreaking havoc in Brazil – the host nation of COP30, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in November 2025 – are deeply connected to climate change.

Human activities are the main driver of climate change, primarily due to burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas. It generates greenhouse gas emissions that act like a blanket wrapped around the Earth, trapping the Sun's heat and increasing temperatures (UN, n.d.). The World Meteorological Organization has confirmed that 2024 was the hottest year on record, with the global average temperature 1.55 °C above the pre-industrial baseline (WMO, 2025). The past decade has seen ten warmest years recorded, and 2024 marked the first calendar year with the global mean temperature exceeding 1.5 °C above the 1850–1900 average.

The marker is significant because it represents a key goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement. In this landmark agreement, 196 Parties committed to limiting emissions to keep the global temperature increase well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels while pursuing efforts to limit the rise to 1.5 °C (UNFCCC, 2015). The Parties also committed to supporting countries in building resilience and adapting to the impacts of climate change. However, progress has been slow and challenging. In recent years, key climate indicators have reached record levels, including sea surface temperature, sea level rise, Antarctic Sea ice loss and glacier retreat.

Climate change poses significant and escalating threats to the entire planet, disproportionately affecting people, communities and ecosystems. Extreme weather events – such as floods, cyclones, heatwaves, droughts and wildfires – and the looming danger of slow-onset hazardous events are increasingly disrupting communities around the world and putting the planet's biological support systems at serious risk. The consequences of climate change threaten our natural, cultural and living heritage, endanger cultural and creative industries and in the most extreme scenarios, devastate lives and livelihoods globally.

Given the urgency to limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5 °C and avert the worst of climate scenarios, this chapter highlights the impacts of climate change on culture but also illustrates ways in which culture serves as an indispensable driver of effective climate action. There is a growing understanding that culture is not a mere victim of climate change impacts but a powerful resource for risk reduction and management, climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies that are capable of reducing vulnerability and building resilience in the face of these escalating challenges. As Simon Stiell, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), aptly stated, 'arts and culture play a critical role in inspiring people to imagine and realize a low carbon, just and climate-resilient future' (UNFCCC, 2024a).

## Culture and climate action at a crossroads

Science is clear: the Paris Agreement is in grave danger, and the next few years are critical for climate action. To keep the 1.5 °C target alive, global emissions must halve by 2030 and reach net zero by around 2050.

The first Global Stocktake Synthesis Report, an assessment of collective progress towards achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement by the UNFCCC, has revealed that the current efforts are insufficient, and the world is not on track to meet the long-term temperature targets (UNFCCC, 2024b). The Emissions Gap Report 2024 also indicates that if ambitions are not increased and only current policies are implemented, the world could warm by up to 3.1 °C over the course of this century (UNEP, 2024). According to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment, without immediate and unprecedented deep emissions reductions and major transitions across all sectors within this decade, we risk losing a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable planet and sustainable future for all (IPCC, 2023).

Approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change (IPCC, 2023). Its impacts have already caused substantial damage and increasingly irreversible losses in terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and open ocean marine ecosystems. These effects are particularly severe in coastal areas and low-lying nations, with Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States facing the greatest risks. Millions of people in these regions are exposed to acute food insecurity and reduced water security, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Rising temperatures and rainfall are increasing the spread of diseases in people, crops, livestock and wildlife. By the end of the century, more than half of the global population could be exposed to periods of life-threatening climatic conditions due to extreme heat and humidity (IPCC, 2022a).

In all countries, the most vulnerable communities are those most reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods and that have less capacity to respond to natural hazards. Women and girls, particularly in rural areas and in situations of poverty, often experience climate impacts differently than men, due to unequal access to resources and opportunities. It is estimated that 158 million women and girls are pushed into poverty as a direct result of climate change, and as many as 80 per cent of those displaced by climate change or natural disasters are women and girls (UNESCO, 2024f). Climate extremes exacerbate existing inequalities and power dynamics, reinforcing harmful gender norms and stereotypes. Gender-based violence is also more prevalent in areas of conflict that also face a higher risk of extreme weather events (UNFCCC, 2022a). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, men are migrating from rural areas to urban centres in search of employment, a trend driven by altered rainfall patterns and increased temperatures, leaving the women and girls behind managing households and adapting agricultural practices to the changing climate (UNEP, 2023). Child marriage, which is considered an act of gender-based violence by the United Nations, has increased in frequency or driven down the age of marriage in states such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mozambique, Nepal, Somalia and Sri Lanka. This is often as a coping mechanism for generating family income in response to the loss of assets and income after crises such as droughts and floods (UNFPA and UNICEF, 2021).

Climate and culture are deeply interconnected: the latter is intricately embedded in all modes of production, consumption, lifestyles knowledge systems and social organizations that have created an imbalanced relationship with the natural world, and the result contributes to climate change. As the planet faces the urgent need for transformation across all aspects of human life, the cultural sphere holds immense power to support this transition.

Culture serves as a source of knowledge, values and communication. Cultural diversity, as UNESCO states, is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature (UNESCO, 2001). Accessible scientific knowledge, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding are vital for helping communities build resilience and enabling informed participation of all individuals in climate debates. These elements foster positive behaviours, enhance social cohesion and promote transparent policymaking – essential components for accelerating climate action.

## Culture: a driver of progress towards sustainable development and climate action

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time, with its adverse impacts undermining the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development (UN, 2015). As the world undergoes profound transformations amidst escalating environmental crises – including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution – these interconnected challenges pose significant threats to achieving the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, designed to ensure the rights and well-being of all people on a healthy, thriving planet. According to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 (UN, 2024b), with only six years remaining until the 2030 deadline, just 17% of the 135 assessed targets are on track, and current progress is significantly insufficient to meet the SDGs. In September 2024, during the United Nations Summit of the Future, world leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They emphasized the urgent need to accelerate progress toward the SDGs while fulfilling obligations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement (UN, 2024a).

The progress assessment revealed that none of the nine climate-related SDG targets – encompassing a range of goals aimed at mitigating climate impacts and promoting sustainable practices across different sectors – showed moderate progress to realise the 2030 Agenda. Alarmingly, one target (15.1: Conserve and restore terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems) has stagnated, while two others (13.2: Integrate climate change measures into policies and planning and 14.7: Increase the economic benefits from sustainable use of marine resources) have regressed below their 2015 baseline levels.

**Figure 20. SDG progress by target.**

Source: UNDESA, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024. (https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/)

Culture is a global public good, as recognized in the final declaration of MONDIACULT 2022, and a crucial enabler and driver of progress towards the SDGs (UNESCO, 2022a). Delivering change at the speed and scale requires unprecedented effort from public institutions and political leaders. Countries, sector bodies and civil society organisations must redouble global efforts to implement policies and programmes to protect and promote culture in the face of climate change, working towards SDG 13 (Climate action), as well as contributing to all 16 other goals of the 2030 Agenda. Failure to achieve the SGDs may fuel greater political instability, disrupt economies and lead to irreversible damage to the natural environment. Without massive investment and scaled-up action, the SDGs will fail to be achieved.

During the last few decades, there has been a growing understanding of the inseparable links between culture and nature, and how these links play a crucial role in sustainable development (Council of Europe, 2023). As such, significant progress has been made in integrating culture, heritage and creativity in the formulation of national, regional and international development policies and intergovernmental forums more recently. For instance, the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) marked a tipping point for the recognition of culture as an essential component of global climate strategies. This was achieved through including cultural heritage as one of the targets in the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, and the establishing the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action.

Reaffirming the power of culture to renew and broaden bilateral and multilateral cooperation, the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration also called for anchoring culture as a global public good and integrating it as a specific goal among the Sustainable Development Goals beyond 2030. The participating 150 UNESCO Member States emphasized the 'importance of integrating cultural heritage and creativity into international discussions on climate change, given its multidimensional impact on the safeguarding of all forms of cultural heritage and expressions and acknowledging the role of culture for climate action, notably through traditional and Indigenous knowledge systems' (UNESCO, 2022a).

## Climate change, the greatest threat to culture and heritage

According to the World Meteorological Organization, 2024 capped a decade-long 'extraordinary streak of record-breaking temperatures' (WMO, 2025). In recent years, we have become increasingly accustomed to witnessing relentless fires, floods, storms and coral-bleaching, among many other climate change-related impacts. The consequences of shifting weather patterns are being felt by communities across the globe, disrupting livelihoods, leading to displacement and forced migration, and putting entire ways of life at risk of being lost forever.

Climate change is among the greatest threats facing natural and cultural heritage today. From the wilds of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park and the Taj Mahal of India to the vast glaciers of Greenland, Denmark and the Baroque cathedrals of Latin America, some of the world's most iconic World Heritage properties are experiencing the impacts of extreme weather events and climate change. With their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV),[118] these properties are places whose conservation importance transcends boundaries, cultures and generations.

World Heritage properties are protected by the respective States Parties of the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which has now been almost universally ratified, making it one of the most widely accepted international treaties. Since 2021, the World Heritage Committee has examined at least 115 state of conservation reports for 43 World Heritage properties in 41 countries to monitor specifically the impact of climate change on their OUV

[118] *Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) refers to the exceptional cultural and/or natural significance of a site that transcends national boundaries and is of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. To be deemed of Outstanding Universal Value, a property must meet one or more of ten predefined criteria, as well as the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity, and must have an adequate protection and management system to ensure its safeguarding.*

as part of the statutory Reactive Monitoring process. It is estimated that one in three natural heritage sites and one in six cultural heritage sites are currently threatened by climate change (UNESCO, 2022b).

## Heritage on the frontline of climate change

Natural World Heritage properties are essential for biodiversity conservation and safeguarding of ecosystem services upon which human societies depend for their well-being. Covering less than 1% of the Earth's surface, they harbour over one-fifth of mapped global species richness and serve as a haven to preserve more than 20,000 of the world's most threatened species. They are internationally recognized as the most significant natural areas on Earth for their high biodiversity, functional habitats and ecosystem integrity, and their conservation must meet the high standards of the World Heritage Convention. However, shifting climatic conditions are putting severe pressure on them. Every 1 °C temperature increase could lead to a twofold rise in species exposed to harmful climate conditions (UNESCO and IUCN, 2023).

Climate change causes economic and non-economic losses, and damages ecosystem services provided by World Heritage properties, such as water regulation, biodiversity conservation and carbon storage. Recent UNESCO studies indicate that 60% of World Heritage forests are threatened by climate change-related events. Since the mid-2010s, intense wildfires associated with extreme temperatures and drought conditions have been a cause of high emissions at some sites, generating greenhouse gases emissions above 30 Mt $CO_2e$ in a single year, higher than the national annual emissions from fossil fuels of more than half of the countries in the world (UNESCO, IUCN and WRI, 2021).

Marine sites are equally under pressure: two-thirds of these vital carbon stores, home to 15% of global blue carbon assets, are currently experiencing high risks of degradation, and coral may disappear at natural heritage sites by the end of the century (UNESCO, 2021b). The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) seeks to stimulate ocean science and knowledge generation to reverse the decline of the state of the ocean system. Glaciers in one-third of World Heritage glacierized sites will disappear by 2050, regardless of the applied climate scenario and glaciers in around half of all sites could almost entirely disappear by 2100 in a business-as-usual emissions scenario (UNESCO and IUCN, 2022).

Cultural World Heritage properties are increasingly vulnerable to climate change, as many nominated structures and sites were built for specific local climates. Approximately 130 cultural World Heritage properties face long-term risk from sea-level rise, including the Elephanta Caves in India, Mont-Saint-Michel and its Bay in France, and the Archaeological Site of Carthage in Tunisia (UNESCO and UNEP, 2016). Changes in the sea levels on the continental margin are exposing thousands of prehistoric sites on the beaches, and wave impact affects coastal fortresses posing threats to underwater cultural heritage due to a change in conservation patterns, change of currents and the introduction of new animal species into the waters. At the same time, prolonged droughts significantly lower lake and rivers levels, exposing archaeological material and leading to rapid decay.

Historically, cities and settlements have developed along coasts and rivers, making them particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. World Heritage Cities and underwater cultural heritage sites in the Mediterranean region, for instance, face a range of climate change-related impacts, from flooding and storm surges to extreme events such as heatwaves and drought (UNESCO, 2025 forthcoming). On 12 November 2019, Venice and its Lagoon experienced a historical tide over 1.87 m high at its peak, leaving more than 80% of the city underwater and damaging hundreds of buildings and monuments, as existing waterproof measures were inadequate to withstand such high water levels. Projections estimate that the average sea level in the Lagoon could be anywhere from 10 cm to 120 cm higher by 2100, depending on the emission scenarios (Zanchettin et al., 2021).

Immovable heritage is increasingly vulnerable to climate-related damage, including extreme winds, heavy rainfall, coastal erosion, flooding and dampness. Additionally, climate fluctuations inside buildings, with the effect of higher temperatures and humidity, can cause mould, rot and insect infestations that may compromise structural integrity. Foundations may be destabilized

Moai statues at risk due to climatic and water factors, Easter Island, Chile. © Robert Harding Video / Shutterstock.com**

by changes in soil moisture, freeze/thaw cycles, or melting permafrost in the Arctic regions. Changes in environmental conditions are particularly critical for traditional earthen architecture, such as the Djenné Mosque in Mali and the Ancient Ksour of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt and Oualata in Mauritania. Likewise, rising soil temperatures and altered precipitation patterns, resulting in droughts or floods, threaten buried cultural objects by accelerating decay mechanisms at archaeological sites and elevating the risks of looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property.

Climate change is increasingly disrupting the socio-cultural fabric of communities worldwide, whether in large sprawling cities or remote rural communities. In recent decades, the understanding of cultural heritage has expanded significantly to include not only monuments, buildings and collections of objects but also intangible cultural heritage, largely thanks to the instruments developed by UNESCO, notably the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003). The 2003 Convention is the only heritage convention tasked not just with respecting and engaging intangible cultural heritage, including local knowledge systems, but also with understanding and safeguarding them as systems. Living heritage has a dual aspect in all emergencies, including climate change.

As many forms of intangible cultural heritage are profoundly tied to specific places, territories and natural environments, climate change threatens the viability of living heritage, its bearers, and the resources these bearers require to practise and transmit their living heritage (UNESCO, 2024a). Both rapid disruptions (resulting from sudden-onset hazard disasters) and slow onset events (such as habitat alteration or sea-level rise) can result in the loss or transformation of built structures, spaces for practice and performance, resource environments and habitats deeply affecting livelihoods, identity and spirituality. In this sense, climate change poses acute threats to the capacity of a community to reproduce its customs and shared identity and to ensure the transmission of its living heritage to future generations.

A sense of shared identity and a sense of belonging can be threatened by the loss of place or the displacement of communities. Populations worldwide are being displaced or forced to change their ways of living, working, socializing and worshipping because of a changing climate. The loss of territory and habitability and of cultural heritage has cascading impacts on people's well-being and can lead to the loss of access to other community members, to ancestral connections, to familiar sites, spaces and landscapes, and to the materials required to sustain cultural practices. Displacement uncouples communities from their social, material and environmental contexts, eroding their safety nets and cultural cohesion (UNFCCC, 2024c).

Indigenous Peoples are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change (IPCC, 2022b). Multiple intersecting factors exacerbate this vulnerability and produce inequality – such as gender, income and class – and by historical marginalization that remains reinforced today (IWGIA, 2022), through policies and legal frameworks that violate their rights and alter their territories. Additionally, the irreparable damage to languages, knowledge systems and livelihoods due to loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services diminish these communities' otherwise strong adaptive capacity (UNFCCC, 2024c).

However, it is vital to recognize the capacities of communities to adapt to climate change. Living heritage is dynamic and evolves according to the contexts and needs of each generation. Rather than being undermined or made irrelevant by changing climatic conditions, it can demonstrate resilience to future scenarios. Understanding how living heritage may be compromised or transformed amid shifting social and environmental conditions is crucial for its continued safeguarding and transmission to future generations.

In this context, it is important to particularly highlight the role that Indigenous women play in environmental conservation and climate action. Data gathered throughout the pilot phase of the implementation of the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators also suggests that the important role of women in general with regards to climate adaptation resilience is increasingly recognized at policy level. 7 out of 10 Member States[119] participating in this pilot phase provided evidence that

[119] *The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators' first phase of implementation (2021–2022) included 12 countries and 14 cities. However, data was only available for 10 countries at the time of conducting this analysis.*

policies increasingly support the particular role of women in sustainable environmental management of local resources (UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators).

## Economic impacts of climate change on culture and heritage

The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change – one of the most influential analyses of climate change economics – argued that inaction could reduce global GDP by at least 5%, potentially up to 20%. In contrast, early mitigation would cost around 1% of global GDP annually (Stern, 2006). According to WMO, climate and weather-related disasters have surged fivefold over the past 50 years (WMO, 2021). Between 1998 and 2017, climate-related and geophysical disasters killed 1.3 million people and left a further 4.4 billion injured, homeless, displaced or in need of emergency assistance. While the majority of fatalities were due to geophysical events, mostly earthquakes and tsunamis, 91% of all disasters were caused by floods, storms, droughts, heatwaves and other extreme weather events. Disaster-hit countries experienced direct economic losses valued at $2,908 billion, of which climate-related disasters caused $2,245 billion or 77% of the total (UNDRR, 2018).

Lembongan island, Indonesia

The economic impacts of climate change on cultural and heritage sectors remain largely unquantified, underscoring the urgent need for additional research and targeted reporting. These sectors face unique vulnerabilities, as cultural heritage sites, artefacts and practices are often irreplaceable and deeply intertwined with community identity and resilience. Moreover, the increasing risks posed by extreme weather events have made insuring cultural heritage properties in high-risk areas more challenging, resulting in higher costs or insufficient financial protection.

In 2022, torrential rains and flash flooding caused an unprecedented disaster in Pakistan, affecting around 33 million, or one in seven people, displacing nearly 8 million and claiming the lives of more than 1,700 individuals, one-third of whom were children. The Post-Disaster Needs Assessment estimated that $16.3 billion was needed for total recovery and reconstruction efforts. Of this, $12.8 million is attributed to damage and loss within the cultural and heritage sector, with a further $8.5 million required for its recovery and reconstruction. At least 149 cultural heritage sites, including two World Heritage Sites in Sindh, suffered partial but significant damage. Numerous Buddhist stupas, Hindu temples and tombs of pre- and post-Islamic dynasties have suffered extensive damage. These sites, many of which are historically and culturally significant, face long-term deterioration, threatening not only their preservation but also their economic contributions. This will, in turn, affect visitor numbers and revenue from ticket sales, and indirect earnings for the food, hospitality and tourism sectors (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, 2022).

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economic sectors, playing a crucial role in many national economies. However, rising global temperatures pose significant risks to this industry. In Greece, where tourism is a cornerstone of the national economy, over 2,000 tourists were evacuated due to wildfires on the island of Rhodes, while Athens took the unprecedented step of closing its top tourist attraction, the World Heritage-listed Acropolis, after temperatures reached 45 °C in July 2023. Coastal tourism, the largest segment of the global tourism sector, is particularly vulnerable. Many countries, especially Small Island Developing States, are economically reliant on it. In the Caribbean, sea level rise could lead to a 59% reduction in beach areas, resulting in a 47% decrease in direct tourism revenue. Furthermore, this region is highly vulnerable to extreme weather events, with hurricane rainfall expected to become up to five times more likely in warmer climate projections (Vosper et al., 2020).

The economic impacts of climate change are particularly severe for Indigenous and traditional livelihoods, including micro-enterprises such as hunting, fishing, gathering, shifting cultivation, pastoralism and high mountain agriculture. Between November 2023 and April 2024, Mongolia experienced a devastating Dzud: a harsh winter following summer droughts that devastated the country's livestock and herding communities. This extreme weather phenomenon resulted in the death of 7.9 million livestock by starvation and cold (12.3% of the national herd), with profound repercussions on the cultural and economic fabric of nomadic pastoralist communities. These communities rely on cattle, sheep and goats not only for sustenance and income, but also for practices such as traditional herding techniques, seasonal rituals and the production of artisanal crafts like felt-making, leatherwork and

wool-based textiles, all of which form part of their intangible cultural heritage. (FAO, 2024). The loss of livestock threatens the transmission of traditional knowledge, oral traditions and cultural identities rooted in herding, while rising poverty and food insecurity further challenge the resilience of these communities.

The cultural and creative industries are similarly exposed to the economic risks of climate change, with immediate impacts on artisans, artists and culture professionals. Festivals are among the most popular ways Australians engage with the arts, attracting 44% of the population over 15 years old (Creative Australia, 2023). However, between 2022 and 2023, at least 22 music festivals were cancelled, postponed, or evacuated due to heat, fires, rain, or floods, a significant increase from the 10 impacted between 2013 and 2019 (Green and Strong, 2024). In August 2023, Hurricane Hilary forced the delay of the Burning Man festival in the Nevada Desert, USA and two weeks later, an additional torrential rainfall caused severe flooding at the festival site, stranding more than 70,000 festivalgoers in the desert (Time, 2023).

Climate change also poses significant long-term risks to the economic viability of the cultural and creative industries, particularly due to the increasing frequency of climate-induced disruptions that undermine their sustainability and resilience. In January 2025, wildfires in Los Angeles, driven by prolonged dry, warm and windy conditions combined with increased vegetation growth from earlier rains, severely impacted the city's creative economy. Leading studios such as Amazon MGM Studios and Universal Pictures were forced to halt productions, causing substantial financial losses, while major cultural institutions like the Getty Museum activated emergency measures to protect their world-renowned collections. Many artists and arts nonprofits experienced the complete loss or damage to studios, equipment and artworks (Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture, 2025). These challenges, compounded by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and industry strikes in 2023 and 2024, have intensified economic pressures across the sector.

The economic strain on culture is further compounded by climate change, a risk multiplier to peace and security. It intensifies current hazards and non-climate threats, including poverty, political instability, disease, urbanization, pollution, water and energy insecurities and potential implications for social conflict. These overlapping threats can intensify the vulnerability of culture and heritage by diverting resources from cultural preservation, funding for the arts, health and education services, infrastructure and employment, directly threatening communities and their capacity to resource, access and enjoy their cultural heritage.

## Non-economic losses of climate change in terms of culture and heritage

The disruption of intergenerational transmission of socio-cultural practices weakens communities' abilities to draw on their cultural resources to fight and adapt to the consequences of climate change. In extreme cases, climate change is linked to loss of territory and habitability (UNFCCC, 2024c), forcing entire communities to migrate, abandoning their built, living and natural heritage. Such is the case of Tuvalu, which faces existential threats from sea-level rise, increased storms and coastal erosion that can sever communities from their ancestral lands, natural and cultural heritage, risking the profound loss of their cultural identity and ways of life. It is therefore crucial to consider the cultural environment and practices of climate refugees when relocating them.

Tuvaluans' cultural practices and heritage – rooted in their oral traditions, ceremonial practices and ecological knowledge – are deeply tied to their islands and marine environment. During peak tide season, the capital, Funafuti, experiences flooding of up to 40% of its area, causing soil salinity that renders staple crops inedible and forces residents to rely on imports for survival. Life in Tuvalu's low-lying atolls is increasingly strained, with the population facing an imminent exodus that threatens the erosion of cultural practices, knowledge, language and traditional governance systems. At COP27, Tuvalu's Foreign Minister, Simon Kofe, announced radical plans to create a digital version of the islands to preserve their history and culture, enabling climate refugees to maintain a connection with their ancestral land and ocean (Reuters, 2022). This also raises the possibility of Pacific Island nations whose nationality is defined by a virtual homeland or cultural identity rather than a physical territory. The Consti-

Saami Shepherd in the Arctic, Norway, © ShojolIslam / Pexels.com

tution of Tuvalu Act 2023 already defines the nation's area using a set of geographic coordinates that will still represent the country even if its land becomes uninhabitable or submerged.

Language is an example which is both vulnerable to climate change and an epistemological system that help the communities to adapt and respond to climate changes. It is a fundamental precondition for human development, serving as the vehicle through which many forms of living heritage are manifested, expressed and transmitted. In the northern mountains of Pakistan, over 30 endangered languages are spoken by small populations increasingly vulnerable to climate-induced disasters. Deeply rooted in specific environments such as livestock-rich pastures, river systems, snowy highlands and dense forests, these languages represent worldviews and knowledge systems encompassing land management and governance practices, biodiversity conservation, weather monitoring and prediction and natural resource utilization. The floods in 2010 displaced an estimated 14 million people in the region, while the Chitral district experienced more than thirteen glacial outburst floods in different valleys between 2004 and 2021 (Islamic Relief, 2021), forcing families into prolonged displacement or permanent migration. In the face of such disruptions, communities experience grief, anxiety, hopelessness that can further destabilize the social cohesion and resilience, making them more vulnerable to future disasters.

Climate research, intervention and aid initiatives can also pose significant threats to heritage when assistance is inappropriate or when policies for displacement and eviction are recommended or implemented, not taking into account the values and needs of the communities concerned. Often presented as protective measures against disasters or conflict, these interventions disrupt the relationship between communities and their environments. Additionally, the growing investment in large-scale renewable energy infrastructure, such as dams or wind power plants intended to foster ecological transition, often requires extensive land use. These projects could adversely affect the authenticity or integrity of cultural and natural heritage landscapes, disrupting traditional practices and livelihoods and hindering the transmission and safeguarding of this heritage to future generations.

The Indigenous Saami people have historically made their living from fishing, hunting and gathering in the region of Sápmi, in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, close to the Arctic Circle. Semi-nomadic reindeer herding is a fundamental aspect of Saami culture, through which Indigenous Knowledge and language are passed on to the next generations. This traditional practice involves leading large herds to the mountains every summer through landscapes already threatened by climate change. In Norway, national efforts to advance the transition to renewable energy have included the development of wind power projects, including the construction of 151 wind turbines in central Norway, which have the capacity to power approximately 100,000 homes. While this development contributes to national sustainability goals, some concerns have been raised about its impact on ancestral Saami reindeer herding. Reported challenges include changes in grazing patterns, reduced access to pasturelands and increased stress on reindeer due to heightened activity and infrastructure in the area (Society for Threatened Peoples, 2024). Ongoing dialogue and consultation among all stakeholders are essential to ensuring that environmental sustainability goals and Indigenous cultural rights, in line with international standards and UNESCO's mandate on safeguarding cultural heritage, are respected and balanced.

Cultural heritage has remained largely invisible in climate change agreements, policies and discourse, despite its significance as a repository of knowledge. The urgent recognition of cultural heritage in international processes and initiatives was reaffirmed by the UNFCCC Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage in its 2024 Non-Economic Losses technical paper (UNFCCC, 2024c). The document emphasizes that the 'protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage is itself a significant climate action', and that 'reinforcing cultural resilience is urgent and essential. This includes strengthening governance systems and legislation while also engaging local communities and Indigenous Peoples'.

# Protecting and promoting culture in the face of climate change

World Heritage properties play a key role as climate change observatories, offering models for applied and tested monitoring, mitigation and adaptation practices. Collectively, these natural, cultural and mixed heritage properties – 1,248 in total as of September 2025 – support global biodiversity conservation, sustainable development and climate solutions, enhancing the quality of life on Earth. They provide diverse ecosystem services and benefits, such as regulating climate, soil, water and air quality, and serve as repositories of traditional knowledge essential for sustainable resource management. Additionally, they offer valuable opportunities for tourism, research and education.

Heritage shapes humanity's collective sense of identity and belonging, representing our legacy from the past, what we live with today and what we will pass on to future generations. To ensure its continued safeguarding, it is essential to understand the impacts of climate change and respond effectively by designing and implementing appropriate national and local adaptation plans. This requires pluralistic approaches that integrate scientific assessments, innovative methodologies, policy frameworks, local cultural knowledge, Indigenous knowledge systems and traditional management practices. Building cultural resilience involves empowering communities to actively engage in protecting and safeguarding their natural and cultural heritage.

# Integrated approaches to safeguarding cultural and natural heritage

Among the seven key existing international biodiversity-related conventions,[120] the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is unique because it deals equally with both natural and cultural heritage. It also has one of the widest global coverages, with 196 States Parties (as of June 2025) committing to protecting, conserving and monitoring of the recognized sites within their territories. Similarly, other global environmental agreements benefit from widespread adherence: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has been ratified by 196 Parties, while the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has 185 Contracting Parties.

Tuvalu and Nauru are the most recent states to ratify the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Following its ratification in 2023, Tuvalu submitted its inaugural Tentative List, featuring The Pacific Atoll-Island Cultural Landscape of Tuvalu (UNESCO, 2024b). The submission reflects the nation's efforts to safeguard traditional land and sea use practices that have been integral to its communities for generations, ensuring these traditions endure despite the pressing challenges posed by climate change. Similarly, Nauru ratified the Convention in 2024, demonstrating its deep commitment to preserving its unique heritage against climate-induced threats and the critical role of international cooperation in addressing these challenges (UNESCO, 2024c).

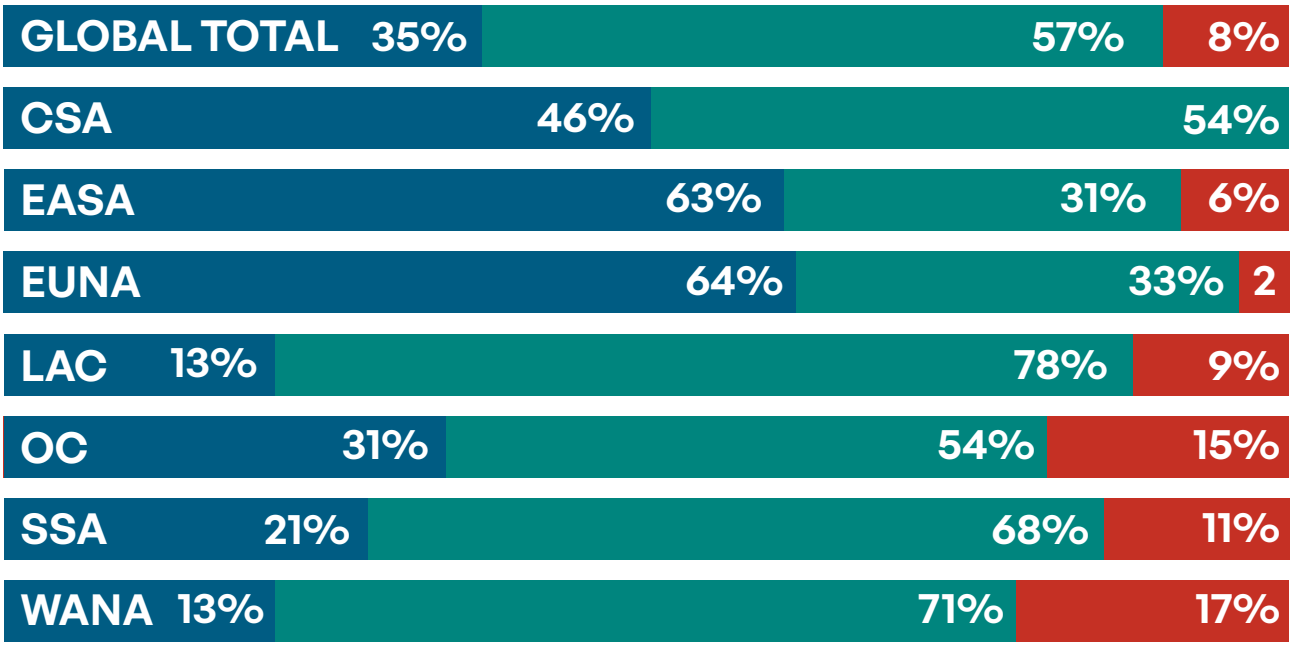
States Parties are increasingly exploring synergies between Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA) and other UNESCO programmes. According to the data from the Periodic Reporting of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, 34 States Parties intend to designate their World Heritage properties, in whole or in part, for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar List). Additionally, 33 States Parties intend to nominate their properties

[120] *The Biodiversity Liaison Group (BLG) was established under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to enhance cooperation and coordination between the major biodiversity-related conventions. The following treaties are part of the BLG: 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention), International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC).*

as Biosphere Reserves under the intergovernmental Man and the Biosphere Programme, and 16 have applied for their World Heritage properties to be designated as UNESCO Global Geoparks.

Although multilateral agreements and programmes are widely adopted, integrating them into the development of national policies for the conservation, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage, as well as coordinating among the various mandates, remains a significant challenge for many countries. According to the 1972 Convention Periodic Reports (2019–2023), only 35% of 190 States Parties reported having adequate levels of coordination and integration of these multilateral agreements and World Heritage policies/ strategies at the national level, with notably lower figures in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as West Asia and North Africa, both with 13%. The data also shows that high-income and Global North countries report having 2.5 times higher coordination and integration compared to those in the low-income and Global South categories.

**Figure 21. Level of coordination and integration of multilateral heritage agreements into national policies, for the conservation, protection and presentation of cultural and natural heritage, as reported by Member States, by regional group.**

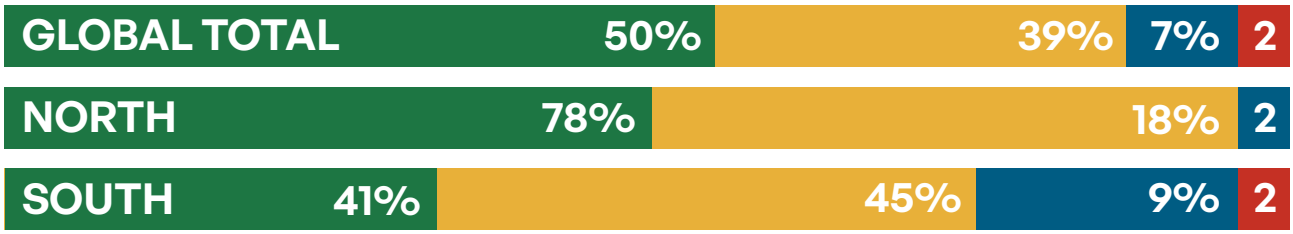



(Global total n=190, Europe and North American States n=45, Latin American and Caribbean States n=32, Sub Saharan Africa States n=47, West Asian and North African States n=24, Oceanian States n=13, East and Southern Asian States n=16, Central and Southern Asian States n=13).

Source: UNESCO, 1972 Convention Periodic Reports.

Concerning the policies and measures that exist at the national level to safeguard cultural and natural heritage from environmental and climate impacts – such as environmental impact assessments – between 86–89% of States Parties reported that they believe their legal frameworks for cultural and natural heritage are adequate or partially adequate (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). Between 6% and 7% consider their policies to be inadequate for natural and cultural heritage respectively, while 2% reported that such frameworks do not exist in both cases. Countries in the Global North (78% for cultural heritage and 86% for natural heritage) have reported better adequacy of their policies than those in the Global South (41% for cultural heritage and 44% for natural heritage) (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).

**Figure 22. Existence and adequacy of legislation and/or regulations for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage, by Global North/Global South.**

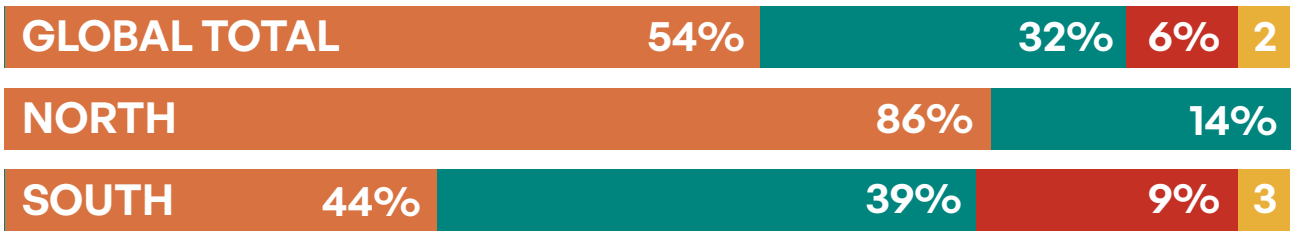



The legal framework is adequate
The legal framework is partially adequate
The legal framework is inadequate
There is no legal framework

(Global total n=191, Global South n=140, Global North n=49, Uncalssified n=2).

Source: UNESCO, 1972 Convention Periodic Reports.

**Figure 23. Existence and adequacy of legislation and/or regulations for the conservation and protection of natural heritage, by Global North/Global South.**



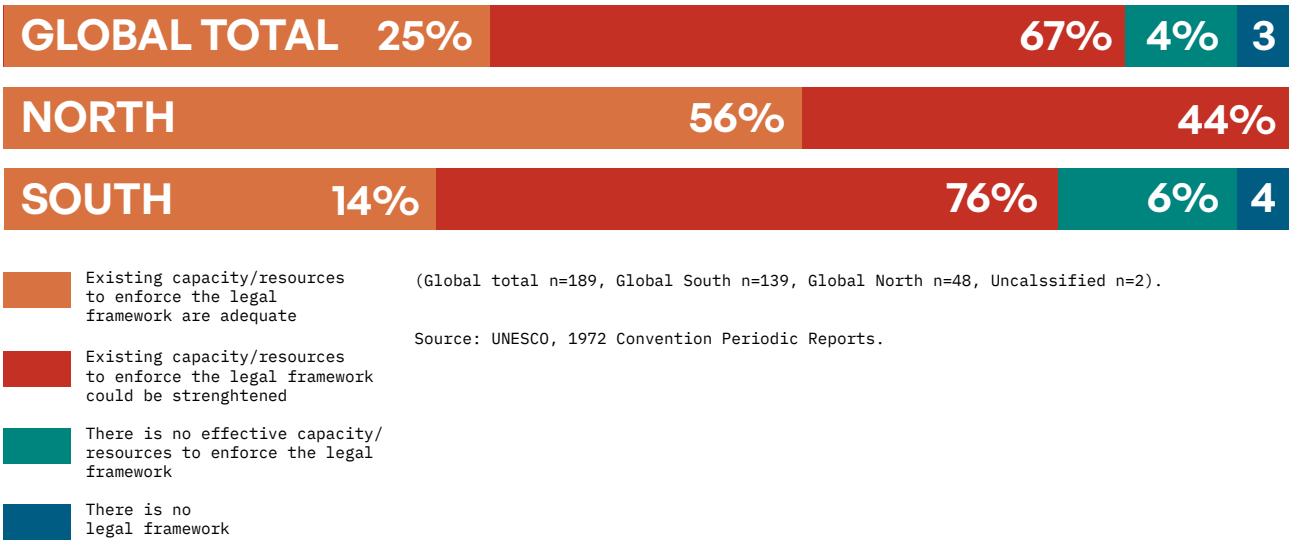

The legal framework is adequate
The legal framework is partially adequate
The legal framework is inadequate
There is no legal framework

(Global total n=191, Global South n=140, Global North n=49, Uncalssified n=2).

Source: UNESCO, 1972 Convention Periodic Reports.
Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to label rounding.

While regulatory frameworks exist and are considered mostly adequate for the conservation and protection of cultural and natural heritage, their enforceability remains a critical challenge in most countries. Only between 25% and 26% of the States Parties that responded to the periodic reporting believe they already have the capacity and resources to enforce these legislations and regulations for the conservation and protection of their cultural and natural heritage respectively. The disparity between groups in this assessment increases significantly, with 56% of Global North countries having adequate capacity and resources for both cultural and natural heritage, compared to only 14% to 15% for cultural and natural heritage respectively in the Global South (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).

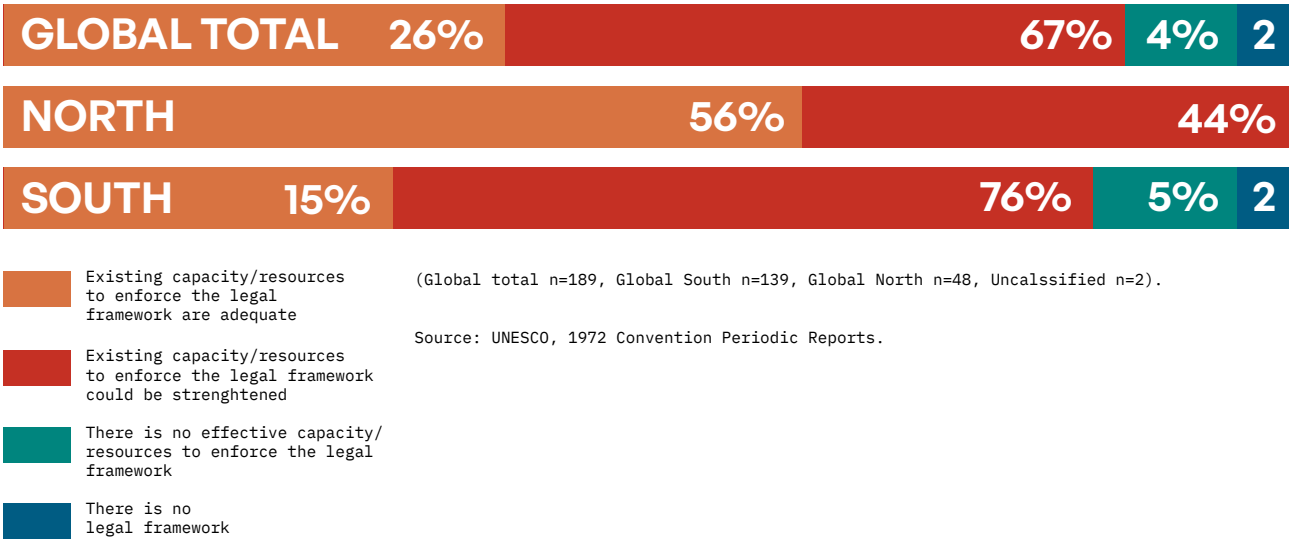
**Figure 24. Member States' assessment of the capacity and resources to enforce the legal framework for the conservation and protection of their cultural heritage, by Global North/Global South.**




(Global total n=189, Global South n=139, Global North n=48, Uncalssified n=2).

Source: UNESCO, 1972 Convention Periodic Reports.

**Figure 25. Member States' assessment of the capacity and resources to enforce the legal framework for the conservation and protection of their natural heritage, by Global North/Global South.**




(Global total n=189, Global South n=139, Global North n=48, Uncalssified n=2).

Source: UNESCO, 1972 Convention Periodic Reports.

The conservation of the Great Barrier Reef, the world's most extensive coral reef ecosystem in Australia, demonstrates a highly coordinated and integrated approach to heritage management. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority operates under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975, a robust legal framework for managing the World Heritage property and addressing threats such as climate change, pollution and overfishing. It works closely with the Australian and Queensland governments, the marine tourism and commercial fishing industries, and First Nations people. The Traditional Owner Taskforce (ReefTO), a key recommendation in the Reef 2050 Traditional Owner Implementation Plan, was established in July 2024 to strengthen and elevate the position of Traditional Owners in caring for and preserving the Great Barrier Reef for future generations (Australian Government, 2025).

Protected under Italy's Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code, the management of the Historic Centre of Florence involves close collaboration between the municipal government, local communities, cultural organizations and public-private partnerships. The Management Plan of the Historic Centre of Florence (Firenze Patrimonio Mondiale, 2022) integrates urban planning with tourism regulations to ensure that development projects do not compromise the historic centre's Outstanding Universal Value or disaster risk management. Following the catastrophic floods of 1966, which damaged cultural sites and artefacts, the city implemented flood and earthquake mitigation measures, including the Arno River Basin Management Plan, alongside infrastructure improvements and advanced monitoring systems. Furthermore, cultural heritage investment in Italy is supported by public-private collaborations. Initiatives such as the Art Bonus tax incentive encourage private donations toward preserving and enhancing public cultural heritage, generating significant support for restoring iconic landmarks like the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore and the Uffizi Gallery.

The Peruvian Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu exemplifies the challenges faced in implementing and enforcing adequate heritage protection and conservation measures while balancing economic benefits from tourism. The management of the most significant tangible legacy of the Inca civilization involves numerous institutions and stakeholders, including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Environment, local municipalities and international agencies. Inadequate budgetary support and overlapping responsibilities can lead to difficulties in the effective implementation of coordinated operational plans addressing critical priorities that include risk management for natural disasters such as flooding and landslides, sustainable tourism strategies to regulate visitor flows, site conservation and environmental protection (UNESCO, 2023b). To remedy this, the 2025 Tourism Strategic Plan for Peru is a policy document addressing the challenges of over-tourism and environmental degradation while promoting sustainable tourism practices. It includes daily visitor caps and time-slot ticketing systems to prevent overcrowding, the creation of alternative trekking routes to distribute visitor numbers and private investments in sustainable infrastructure and marketing campaigns.

These examples highlight that effective management of World Heritage properties includes several factors beyond legal frameworks and underscore the need for enhanced support and capacity-building initiatives in Global South contexts. Aiming to enhance the protection and conservation of heritage with Outstanding Universal Value through comprehensive climate action measures, the Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage (2023) was adopted by the General Assembly of the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2023a). It establishes an outcome-oriented framework for developing goals and targets at both national and heritage site levels. Reflecting the spirit of Article 5 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the document's principles apply broadly to cultural and natural heritage.

Yaokwe, the Enawene Nawe people's ritual for the maintenance of social and cosmic order. © IPHAN, 2008 / Marcus Matthes*

# Strengthening traditional and Indigenous Knowledge systems in climate governance

The Paris Agreement recognizes that climate action must 'be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local knowledge systems' (UNFCCC, 2015). The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (IPCC, 2022a) has given increased attention to the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous scholars in the context of global climate action. The report marks a significant advancement in recognizing Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge systems. It highlights that strengthening the connections between scientific and technical knowledge and local knowledge systems significantly increases the potential for developing more comprehensive and effective solutions beyond their specific territories and from a holistic perspective.

In 2024, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage examined the Guidance Note on climate action for living heritage, resulting from a three-year reflection process among stakeholders of the 2003 Convention (UNESCO, 2024a). The Guidance Note presents a 'comprehensive, rights-based and people-centred approach to climate action for living heritage' according to three key goals: (i) promoting and enhancing the positive role of living heritage in climate adaptation; (ii) promoting and enhancing the positive role of living heritage in climate mitigation; and, (iii) improving measures for safeguarding living heritage in the climate emergency. This document underscores the need to embed all action within the framework of the rights and values of communities whose heritage is at stake. It emphasizes that the diversity and inclusivity amongst the stakeholders involved is essential to the success of climate actions, requiring equal access and voice for marginalized communities or members within communities and across distinctions by gender, age, ethnicity, location and wealth.

Governments often do not fully integrate human rights issues, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples into climate and conservation planning, and in some cases, actively promote activities that threaten community rights and environments. Some national governments, however, have embraced Indigenous and local knowledge perspectives, integrating these into their governance frameworks. For instance, the Indigenous Andean concept of Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir or 'good living') promotes living in balance with Pachamama (Mother Earth). It recognizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems, emphasizes values of reciprocity, solidarity and shared resources, and rejects the exploitation of natural resources for short-term economic gain (Acosta, 2012). Guided by these principles, Ecuador became the first country in the world to incorporate the Rights of Nature into its 2008 Constitution (Ecuadorian Constituent Assembly, 2008). Since then, national policies for sustainable land use, biodiversity conservation and the redistribution of wealth have been designed to align with it.

Bolivia also integrated Indigenous perspectives into its 2009 Constitution and passed the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010. This groundbreaking legislation defines Mother Earth as 'a collective subject of public interest' with inherent rights, including the rights to life, biodiversity, clean water and restoration (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2010). Both countries have set a global precedent for ecological justice by granting legal rights to nature, transforming traditional environmental legislation from a human-centred (anthropocentric) to a nature-centred (ecocentric) perspective. In countries like India, the United States, Colombia, Canada, Spain and Panama, the rights of nature to exist, persist and regenerate or the legal personhood of natural entities have been legally recognized in laws and court rulings.

Similarly, the Māori concept of kaitiakitanga (guardianship), underpinned by a moral duty and obligation to protect both the natural world and the spiritual realm, has been incorporated into key pieces of environmental legislation in New Zealand, such as the Resource Management Act 1991. Landmark legal frameworks like the Te Urewera Act 2014 and the Te Awa Tupua Act 2017, which granted legal personhood to Te Urewera and the Whanganui River respectively, exemplify how Māori knowledge informs the national environmental policy. The principle of kaitiakitanga is reflected in many

conservation projects where Māori leadership is integral, such as the participatory governance and management of Lake Taupō, New Zealand's largest lake and a site of profound cultural and spiritual importance.

## Culture, a critical resource in combatting climate change

There is growing recognition that culture – from heritage and the arts to the cultural and creative industries – is a powerful resource for responding to the impacts of climate change. Culture not only contributes to mitigation efforts but also plays a pivotal role in climate adaptation by offering valuable knowledge and practices which enhance community resilience to climate impacts. Integrating cultural dimensions into climate action is essential for reducing vulnerability and promoting inclusive approaches that safeguard and promote diverse knowledge systems and cultural expressions.

At the 28th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP28), hosted by the United Arab Emirates, Ministers of Culture and government representatives from over 30 countries convened for the first High-Level Ministerial Dialogue on Culture-Based Climate Action. They launched the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA), the first international coalition of UN Member States of its kind, established under the joint leadership of the UAE and Brazil. During the event, Margareth Menezes, Brazil's Minister of Culture, emphasized that culture is not merely a passive victim of climate change but 'a strength that needs to be utilized to achieve the targets of the Paris Agreement'. UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, HRH Princess Dana Firas of Jordan, highlighted the importance of 'the growing coalition of cultural leaders and advocates, as well as civil society organizations from throughout the world committed to this goal' (UNFCCC, 2023a).

As part of the Emirates Declaration on Cultural-based Climate Action, ministers unanimously committed to accelerating 'the integration of attention to culture, values and diverse knowledge systems into climate action and, simultaneously, to mainstream climate action across their national policy agendas and actions related to cultural heritage, arts and creative industries' (GFCBCA, 2023). According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023), climate action encompasses efforts aimed at the mitigation and adaptation to tackle the causes and effects of climate change. Mitigation refers to human actions to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions or enhance their removals through carbon sinks such as forests and oceans. Adaptation involves adjustments in natural or human systems to actual or expected climate and its effects to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. The multiplicity of local solutions for mitigation and adaptation must be harnessed and knowledge shared to build resilience, including for reducing the risk of climate-related disasters and emergencies (UNFCCC, 2024c).

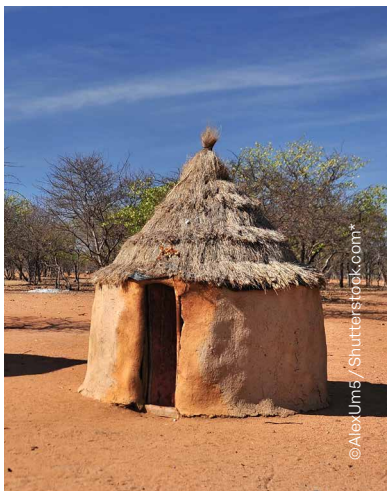
The connections between climate action, biodiversity and culture are profound and deeply intertwined. As mentioned previously, Article 1 of the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity asserts that 'cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature'. Similarly, the preamble of the Paris Agreement acknowledges 'the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth', and highlights 'the importance for some of the concept of 'climate justice' when taking action to address climate change'. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework also places biodiversity – its conservation, sustainable use and equitable benefit-sharing – at the heart of the sustainable development agenda, explicitly recognizing 'the important linkages between biological and cultural diversity' (CBD, 2022).

# Box 7.
# The role of culture in climate action – Gulu community, Uganda

In 2023, UNESCO documented a community-led initiative in Gulu District, northern Uganda, that highlights how culture and living heritage can support climate action and sustainable resource management. The project focused on reviving traditional agricultural practices, drought-resistant crops and water conservation techniques based on Indigenous Knowledge systems. These practices, embedded in local rituals, storytelling and collective farming traditions, not only strengthen resilience to climate variability but also foster community cohesion and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Women and youth played a central role in these efforts, ensuring that the adaptation strategies were inclusive and reflective of local cultural values. This initiative demonstrates the potential of integrating cultural dimensions into climate policies, offering a replicable model for other regions.

## Climate change mitigation

Urgent and ambitious mitigation is essential to keep the 1.5 °C goal alive and to ensure that the planet and human societies retain sufficient capacity to adapt to the already unfolding impacts of climate change. Natural World Heritage properties play a critical role in maintaining ecosystem integrity and contributing to climate mitigation. They encompass most major ecosystems spanning over 3,500,000 km2 and are home to over 75,000 species of plants and over 30,000 species of mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles and amphibians, representing more than one-fifth of all mapped global species richness (UNESCO and IUCN, 2023). Well-preserved forests and coastal habitats act as crucial carbon sinks, helping to regulate the climate by absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Forests within 257 World Heritage properties cover approximately 69 million hectares – twice the size of Germany – and sequestered around 190 million tonnes of CO2 annually between 2001 and 2020, equivalent to about half of the United Kingdom's annual fossil fuel emissions (UNESCO, IUCN and WRI, 2021). Marine World Heritage properties and their immediate surrounding areas comprise at least 21% of blue carbon ecosystems and 15% of global blue carbon assets. These carbon stores held the equivalent of about 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions in 2018 (UNESCO, 2021b).



Traditional huts, Himba Community, Namibia

Areas of high cultural diversity are often areas of high biological diversity, and approximately a fifth of Cultural World Heritage properties (>160 sites) are found in Key Biodiversity Areas (UNESCO and IUCN, 2023). Represented by cultural landscapes, archaeological sites, sites with religious or spiritual significance and urban areas, these properties can also demonstrate a variety of locally developed strategies for mitigation through the energy efficiency of built heritage to mitigate greenhouse gases and sustainable use of local spaces and resources (UNESCO, 2023a). In addition, local knowledge and traditional practices represent different knowledge systems and cosmologies, embodying experience handed down through time that conservation science and mitigation strategies can learn from, elevate and scale up in action and research more broadly. While much of the focus on local knowledge systems and climate change has been on monitoring and adaptation, it is equally important to recognize their contribution to mitigation, complementing scientific knowledge to improve conservation outcomes.

A range of traditional practices relevant to contemporary mitigation strategies has been identified by the Climate Change and Cultural Heritage Working Group (ICOMOS, 2019). These include the inherently sustainable, passive features of traditional architecture – such as eaves, verandas, shutters and shading devices – along with traditional urban land-use patterns like dense, walkable, mixed-use

spaces and knowledge embedded in low-carbon agricultural heritage systems. Many traditional cultural systems also epitomize circular economy models that emphasize stewardship, reuse and resource efficiency.

In Japan, these approaches are gaining renewed attention through the revitalization of traditional wooden architecture by training young carpenters in ancient building techniques. Traditional Japanese architecture emphasizes natural materials and passive design principles, such as maximizing natural light and ventilation, which are key to energy-efficient structures. Historically, Japanese carpentry skills were passed down through one-on-one apprenticeships. Today, organizations and woodcraft associations are committed to preserving these techniques by integrating them into both new construction and restoration projects (UNESCO, 2020).

Traditional knowledge in Indigenous fire management is crucial for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by replacing high-intensity burns with low-intensity, early-season burns. In Western Australia's north Kimberley region, the Balanggarra, Dambimangari, Wilinggin and Wunambal peoples have revived cultural burning practices to reduce wildfire risks and enhance ecosystem health after regaining control over their lands. Since 2012, they have decreased late-season wildfires across nearly three-quarters of the area, where large fires exceeding 40,000 hectares occurred almost every year (Vigilante et al., 2024). Indigenous fire management practices have been integrated into Australia's national and regional policies through initiatives such as the Indigenous Rangers Program (Rangers Program), the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Fire Strategy and savanna burning carbon projects.

The Maya Ch'orti' people of Chiquimula, Guatemala, have long practised agroforestry systems that integrate trees, crops and livestock, providing sustainable food and income while promoting carbon sequestration in above-ground biomass. The ancestral milpa intercropping system enhances soil fertility and crop yields, with women cultivating 101 of the 143 edible species in their food system (FAO and Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, 2021). Guatemala's Strategic Plan for Climate Change of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food 2018–2027 identifies as priorities the promotion of climate-adapted good agricultural practices and the recovery of ancestral knowledge for agricultural adaptation, which preserves local biodiversity and cultural practices (FAO, 2025).

Increasing evidence shows that local and traditional knowledge enhances understanding of human-environment relationships, contributing to effective and equitable climate action. Research indicates that granting land rights to Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian Amazon could reduce deforestation by up to 66% (Baragwanath and Bayi, 2020), avoiding substantial carbon dioxide emissions from forest biomass loss. Embedding rights-based approaches, participatory governance and secure land tenure into climate policies offers culturally grounded, cost-effective mitigation strategies. In this context, recent legislative discussions in Brazil – such as those surrounding Bill 490/2007 – have generated debate regarding the potential implications for Indigenous land rights and environmental protection. These discussions highlight the importance of ensuring that climate and development policies are implemented in line with international human rights standards and remain inclusive of Indigenous perspectives, knowledge systems and cultural heritage.

## Climate change adaptation

Climate change adaptation is a pressing global challenge that must be addressed across all levels of governance and society. Climate change is a risk multiplier that exacerbates hazards, exposures and vulnerabilities that are directly or indirectly attributed to it, and adaptation cannot be seen in isolation from other risk factors (UNESCO, 2023a). Adaptation involves adjusting practices, processes and infrastructure to avoid and minimize the negative impacts of climate change that are already occurring or expected to occur while taking advantage of any potential positive opportunities.

Culture, including living heritage, can play a critical role as a source of preparedness, resilience and recovery, reducing vulnerabilities and exposure, assessing risks and supporting communities in facing climate-related risks. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, a global agreement adopted in 2015 by UN Member States to guide disaster risk reduction efforts from 2015 to 2030, underscores the vital role of civil society in managing risks at the local level, particularly the contributions

of women, children and youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, migrants and Indigenous Peoples. The framework recognizes explicitly Indigenous Peoples' experience and traditional knowledge as critical to developing and implementing disaster risk reduction plans and mechanisms, including monitoring and early warning systems.

Direct references to the roles of living heritage in enhancing community-based resilience to disasters and climate change are highlighted in UNESCO's Operational Directives (UNESCO, 2024d) and Guidance Note on Climate Action for Living Heritage (UNESCO, 2024a). These documents underline the central role communities must have in all safeguarding actions, including identifying how their intangible cultural heritage may be affected by climate change risks, determining the measures needed to safeguard it, and drawing on it as a resource to strengthen their adaptation and mitigation capacities.

Countries are increasingly engaging communities in adaptation efforts, ensuring that they are not only aware of the risks but also actively contributing to identifying vulnerabilities of systems and resources and actively reducing the impacts of climate change. In Ecuador, the Kichwa and Waorani Indigenous Peoples, whose rivers are threatened by mining, deforestation and oil spills, partnered with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to establish a community-led conservation area. Through a Free, Prior and Informed Consent process, including workshops in native languages, all 33 Waorani and 47 Kichwa communities consented to protect 1,860 km of rivers and 26,000 hectares of wetlands, benefiting 4,300 people (IUCN, 2023). The Nushiño-Curaray-Villano Fluvial Reserve applied to become a Conservation and Sustainable Use Area (ACUS), an area established by decentralized autonomous governments, communities, or private owners to protect ecosystem services that benefit human life. These areas are officially recognized by Ecuador's National Environmental Authority. The government designated five water-protected areas between 2022 and 2023, covering 2,300 kilometres of rivers and 2,800 hectares of wetlands, safeguarding essential water resources for 174,000 people (The Nature Conservancy, 2023).

In the Indian Himalayas, a community partnership for the management and conservation of wetlands transformed tourism practices and integrated local knowledge into policy solutions. In Sikkim, local communities led a campaign to conserve the Tsomgo wetland complex, located within the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Khangchendzonga National Park, which receives around 300,000 tourists annually. While tourism supports the local economy, it also places pressure on the environment (O'Neill, 2023). Constituted by the state government with support from environmental NGOs in 2008, the Tsomgo Pokhri Sanrakshan Samiti (TPSS) – Sikkim's first Lake Conservation Committee – reformed tourism management and empowered communities to lead wetland conservation. With direct authority, the TPSS includes representatives from each household and local associations, who collect conservation fees from visitors to fund initiatives such as relocating shops, establishing waste management systems, running awareness programmes and reviving cultural festivals like Bhadaurey Poornima to preserve local traditions (Guha, 2021).

Historic urban areas are repositories of accumulated traditions and experiences unique to each region, shaped over centuries by successive generations and diverse cultures. Nearly one-third of the World Heritage properties are located in urban areas. These areas hold a wealth of wisdom on the optimal use of natural resources and can act as living laboratories, offering a range of traditional building techniques and local community practices on, for example, water management and urban conservation. The 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape states the importance of aligning sustainability and inclusion with the management and conservation of historic urban areas (UNESCO, 2024e).

With its medieval plan and secular buildings, the World Heritage Town of Bamberg, Germany, faces increasing climate impacts, including a 5% reduction in annual rainfall, urban heat island effects exacerbated by urbanization and damage to the façades of historic buildings caused by drought. A public-private partnership revived hydroelectric power generation at the former water mills, incorporating their structural remains into a new visitor centre. Since 2018, a fish-friendly turbine adapted to the shallow river has contributed around 750,000 kWh of renewable electricity to the municipal power grid annually – enough to power approximately 300 households – while maintaining the property's historic use of hydroelectric power without compromising its Outstanding Universal Value. Opened in 2019, the Bamberg World Heritage Centre raises awareness of climate change by linking the

city's medieval heritage of sustainable energy use with modern renewable solutions for urban challenges. The city's renewable energy production is embedded in its climate change strategy and integrated into the region's sustainable development plans (UNESCO, 2023c).

Article 7 of the Paris Agreement established the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) to address how the world can adapt to the adverse effects of climate change. The GGA aims to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience and reduce climate impacts while contributing to sustainable development and pursuing efforts to limit global warming to 1.5 °C. In 2023, at COP28 in Dubai, Parties operationalized the GGA by agreeing on a set of targets to guide adaptation actions and support at national, regional and global levels as part of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience. Cultural Heritage was included as one of the seven thematic targets (UNFCCC, 2023b). This groundbreaking inclusion marks a historic recognition that culture is both vulnerable to climate impacts and a vital resource for building resilience. UNESCO is currently collaborating with the UNFCCC in the development of Indicators for the GGA for Cultural Heritage.

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## Just transition

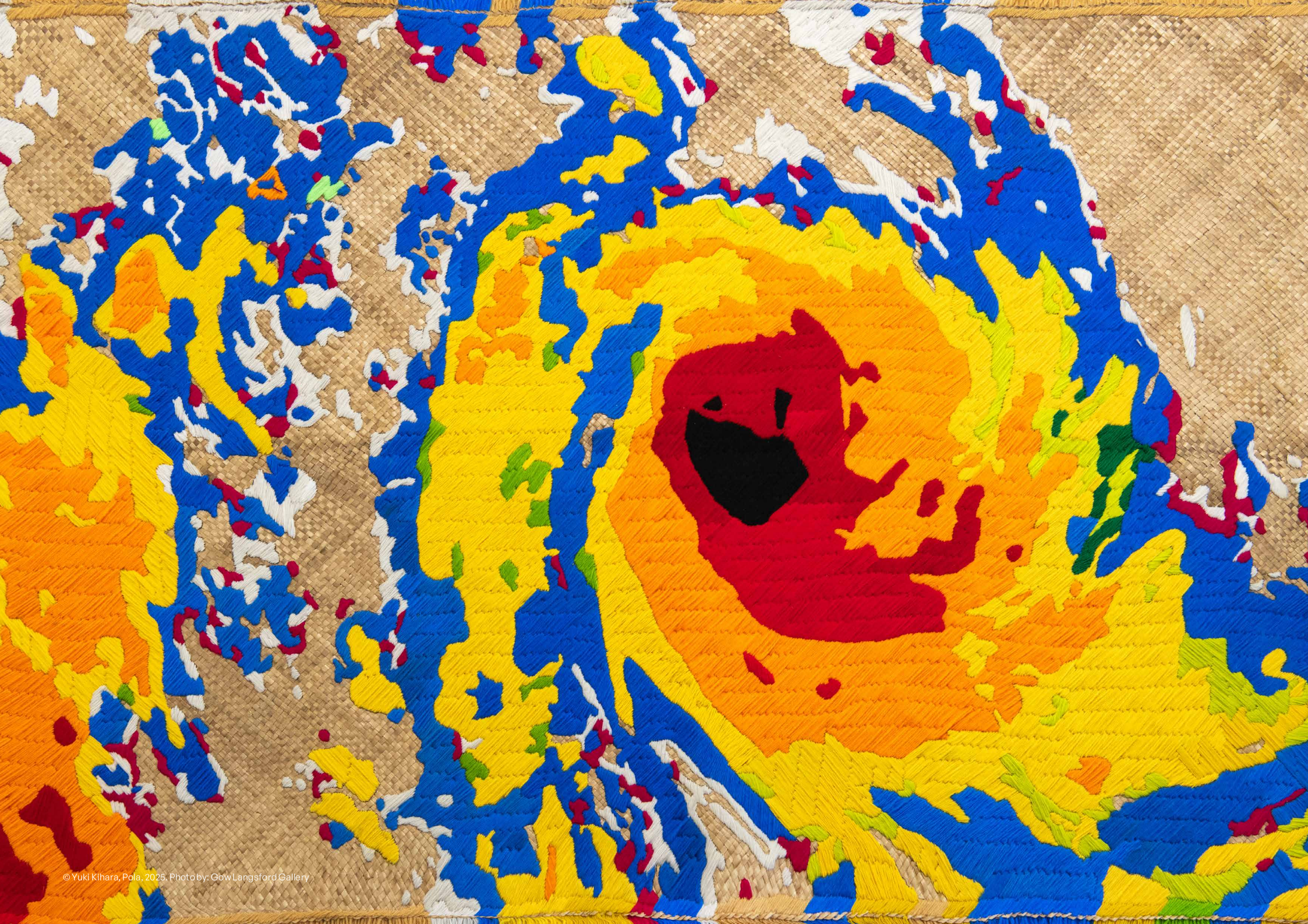
Rapid and far-reaching transitions across all sectors and systems are essential to achieve deep, sustained emissions reductions and secure a liveable and sustainable future for all. These transitions involve a significant upscaling of a wide portfolio of climate mitigation and adaptation measures. The scale of this systemic change is unprecedented and directly related to the need for a fair and equitable transition.

In the context of culture, the transition to a low-carbon economy requires significant investment in skills, resources and infrastructure, alongside the need to protect and safeguard heritage and cultural practices and build consensus among the decision-makers while empowering communities to remain active stewards of their cultural and natural resources. A just transition framework for the cultural and creative industries must ensure fairness in climate planning and decision-making processes, with targeted measures to support local communities and smaller organizations that are most vulnerable. This includes capacity building and training programmes, equitable funding for green technologies, the recognition of inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples, gender-specific policies and the fair distribution of benefits to those most affected by the transition. Ensuring that the cultural and creative industries are more environmentally sustainable and transitioning them to a low-carbon economy is thus costly and governments and funders need to consider this in their policies and funding approaches.

## Awareness raising driving climate action

Countries across the world are grappling with the urgent need for a radical transformation of lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while building climate resilience. According to the latest IPCC assessment, enabling conditions for individual and collective actions by governments as well as private sector and civil society actors to achieve climate-resilient development include the integration of diverse knowledges and values. These encompass cultural values, Indigenous and local knowledge and scientific knowledge. The document highlights that socio-cultural factors, behaviour and lifestyle changes, supported by policy, infrastructure and technology, can accelerate the societal shift to low-emissions-intensive consumption. It notes that growing public and political awareness of climate impacts and risks has resulted in at least 170 countries and many cities including adaptation in their climate policies and planning processes across all sectors (IPCC, 2023).

The cultural sphere emerges as a powerful enabler of climate action, where diverse values, shared meanings and ways of life emanate from and influence the paradigm shifts urgently needed to transform how societies live, produce and consume (Kamara, 2022). Both the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement recognize the crucial role of public engagement in driving climate action. Article 6 of the Convention and Article 12 of the Agreement highlight the importance of parties in promoting and facilitating climate change education,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public awareness, training, public participation, public access to information and international cooperation. Collectively known as Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), these six elements aim to empower all members of society, particularly young people, to understand and actively participate in the transition to a low-emission, climate-resilient world (UNFCCC, 2015).

The United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council Cultural Value Project (Crossick and Kazsynska, 2016) highlights that participation in arts and culture may produce engaged citizens, promoting not only civic behaviours, but also helping articulate alternatives to current assumptions, stimulate broader political imagination and engage people in thinking about climate change when used not didactically but as a basis for reflection and debate. The project argues that information alone is insufficient to address climate change and that engaging arts and culture offers an important alternative pathway.

Art is often described as a mirror held up to nature, and artists and creatives worldwide are increasingly using their platforms to address ecological and environmental themes, raise awareness of climate change, and advocate for a more sustainable connection between people and their natural environment. A growing number of artistic and ecological movements are bringing the urgency of this challenge to the forefront through storytelling, artivism, the exchange of ideas and collective experiences. These works help people make sense of past legacies, navigate the interconnected complexities of the present, and be inspired to imagine and contribute to alternative ways of relating to the world. From environmentally engaged movies, books, songs, exhibitions and plays to other artistic productions that translate complex information, communicate scientific evidence, challenge despair and highlight the potential for positive change, or document heritage at risk, the critical role of arts and creativity in shaping how society perceives and engages with climate issues is becoming ever more evident.

The 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, featuring former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, was pivotal in bringing climate discourse into mainstream attention. This momentum carried through to COP21 in Paris, which saw unprecedented artistic presence and engagement, including high-profile public artworks like Olafur Eliasson's melting blocks of Greenland glacial ice installed at Place du Panthéon and ArtCop21's programme of over 550 cultural events in Paris and globally. These initiatives helped engage wider audiences with the conference's technical negotiations. An analysis of audience responses to artworks presented during the UN climate summit found that climate-related art can make climate change personally relevant, with exposure to such works linked – at least in the short term – to increased support for climate policies, which is mostly channelled through an emotional activation with following cognitive processing (Klöckner and Sommer, 2021).

Recognizing the crucial role of public engagement in driving climate action, the UNFCC established the Entertainment and Culture for Climate Action (ECCA), an umbrella initiative to engage the cultural and creative industries in promoting Action for Climate Empowerment (UNFCCC, n.d.). Its efforts to engage the cultural and creative industries and other sectors involved in climate action emphasize the role of storytelling and decarbonization in achieving the Paris Agreement's goals. Through initiatives such as the Art Charter for Climate Action (ACCA), the Film & Television for Climate Action and the Accelerator City programme, ECCA seeks to promote the exchange of existing tools and resources, reduce the environmental impacts of developing, producing and distributing entertainment content, and tap into the power of art to inspire climate action beyond the sector.

Cultural institutions like museums, libraries and heritage site interpretation centres also have a critical role to play in advancing ACE. By leveraging their symbolic power as trusted entities and spaces of life-long learning, these institutions can foster local and intercultural dialogue and inspire climate action within the communities they serve. Due to their trusted reputation and educative role as accessible community spaces, museums can contribute to social cohesion, climate awareness and mutual understanding through their curatorial narratives. Particularly natural history museums, water museums and geological museums can harness their scientific approaches and research background to raising awareness on climate change and sustainable practices.

Despite its immense potential to drive climate action, culture remains largely overlooked in climate strategies and policies due to a lack of awareness, expertise

and investment. There is increasing academic interest in understanding the role of arts and cultural activities in raising public awareness and shaping attitudes toward climate action. However, more evidence is needed to demonstrate their effectiveness in promoting agency and behaviour change.

# Environmental sustainability in the cultural and creative industries

## Reframing sustainability through culture

Punakha, Bhutan, 2022

The concept of sustainable development, articulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development in its 1987 report Our Common Future, defining it as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987). This foundational idea was later popularized with the commonly used framework of three pillars – economic, social and environmental balance – emphasizing that these dimensions should be integrated into local, national and global development strategies. Over time, however, there has been increasing acknowledgement that these three dimensions alone are insufficient to fully reflect the complexity and interconnected challenges of today, including those posed by climate change.

The 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was a pioneer in explicitly establishing the link between culture and sustainable development, committing States Parties to integrate culture into development policies at all levels (UNESCO, 2005). Over the past two decades, advocacy for recognizing culture as a key driver and enabler of sustainable development has gained significant traction, underscoring its essential role in fostering identity, social cohesion, creativity and innovation, as well as strengthening peace and security. This vision was further articulated in a policy statement by United Cities and Local Governments in 2010 (UCLG, 2010).

Sustainability carries different meanings across cultural and geographical contexts. In many cultures, sustainability is grounded in values of spirituality, harmony and interdependence with nature, transcending the limitations of economic metrics and resource management. Some national governments have embraced cultural perspectives and creative expressions into their sustainability governance frameworks, helping to shape more inclusive, equitable and context-specific policies.

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index is a holistic development framework introduced in the 1970s, reflecting Buddhist values and emphasizing the integration of cultural, spiritual, environmental and social well-being (OECD, 2024). The GNH framework encompasses nine domains used to assess the overall well-being and happiness of the Bhutanese population: psychological well-being, health, balanced time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience and living standards. The Index is calculated every five years and guides the formulation of National Key Result Areas that shape national policies and development priorities.

Culture is also one of the seven well-being goals of Wales's pioneering Well-being of Future Generations Act (Welsh Government, 2015), the first legislation in the world to explicitly require public bodies to consider the long-term impact of their decisions on future generations. The Act legally enshrines the principle that sustainable development must meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs and establishes the position of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, tasked with safeguarding their interests. The Cultural Well-being Goal – 'A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language' – promotes and protects Wales's cultural heritage, arts and traditions while encouraging the growth and everyday use of the Welsh language.

UNESCO has consistently championed a culture-based approach to development, which resulted in several United Nations General Assembly Resolutions that recognize culture as both an enabler and a driver of sustainable development. This culminated in its integration into two specific targets within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015. In 2019, UNESCO launched the Culture|2030 Indicators fra-

mework (UNESCO, 2019), providing countries and cities with a methodology to measure and monitor culture's contribution to the implementation of the SDGs. The framework has been implemented in over 20 countries and cities – including Morocco, Croatia, Bogotá and Essaouira – helping to inform policies with data on how cultural participation, heritage, creativity and knowledge systems advance sustainable outcomes.

## Uncovering the environmental impact of the cultural and creative industries

Sustainable development and climate action are deeply interconnected. The 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement underscore the need to strengthen global climate action and integrate climate measures across all countries, sectors and stakeholders to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and build resilience. To limit global warming to 1.5 °C, emissions must fall 45% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050, meaning reduced as close to zero as possible, with remaining emissions absorbed by ecosystems or carbon capture technologies. Some sectors will need to decarbonize even faster, achieving 'real zero' by eliminating emissions without relying on offsets.

Despite contributing 3.39% to global GDP,[121] representing a mean share of 3.55% of employment[122] (2005 Convention Periodic Reports/2023 Eurostat Data) and being embedded in other industries' supply chains, the environmental impact of the cultural and creative industries is often underestimated – particularly in high-carbon sub-sectors and countries. These areas will face increasing scrutiny to align with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and decarbonize operations at scale and speed, shifting away from fossil fuels for energy, transport and production.

With no global dataset or unified approach to capture the full scope of the sectors and industries' carbon emissions, resource consumption and waste generation, data remains fragmented and inconsistent, limiting the ability to understand and mitigate their environmental impact. Few organizations measure their emissions or waste systematically: most measure only Scope 1 emissions, with few capturing data for Scopes 2 or 3. This can be attributed to barriers such as limited capacity, skills, resources, regulatory incentives and the complexity of value chains. The widely used GHG Protocol categorizes emissions into:

- **Scope 1** – Direct emissions from sources owned or controlled by an organization, such as fuel used in festival generators, film sets, or company vehicles for transporting equipment, staff and talent.
- **Scope 2** – Indirect emissions from purchased electricity, heating, cooling, or steam, including powering venue lights, sound systems, or production equipment, as well as heating and cooling for theatres, galleries, or festivals.
- **Scope 3** – All other indirect emissions across the value chain, such as audience travel, merchandise production, streaming energy use, or agricultural impacts from cotton used in fashion.

Recognizing these challenges and gaps, an exploratory estimate of the sector's contribution to global emissions was conducted to inform the analysis in this report. The methodology combined the following:

- Estimations of the contribution of the cultural and creative industries to the GDP of Member States, combining data from the 2005 Convention Quadrennial Periodic Reports, the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators, the OECD, Ministries of Culture statistics and Creative Industries Satellite Accounts.
- Estimations of the total carbon emissions of the Member States for which data was available, specifically annual production-based emissions for 2022. The analysis also considers the impact of imports which generate production-based emissions in other countries.

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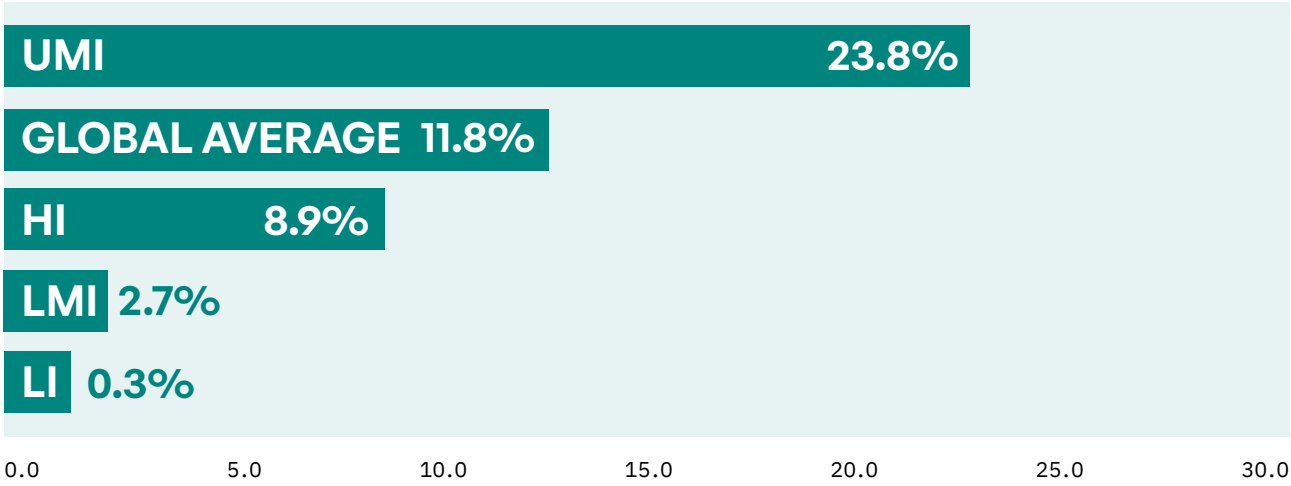
[121] *Estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.*

[122] *Mean share of employment for the 61 countries for which there is available data.*

This exploratory analysis has notable limitations, including the assumption that the cultural and creative industries emissions are proportional to their GDP contribution, despite variations across sectors and industries. It is also sensitive to the accuracy of state-level emissions data. It should also be noted that the information presented in the figure below is an average of total emissions per country, which results in groups with a high proportion of populous countries (such as the upper-middle-income group) having higher average emissions. Nonetheless, this exploratory analysis provides an initial step to address this data gap and underscores the need for more targeted research and policymaking.

**Figure 26. Mean CO2 emissions of cultural and creative industries: estimated annual production-based emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2) measured in million tons per year, by income group.**




Source: BOP Consulting, Analysis of UNESCO 2005 Convention Periodic Reports,OECD, Ministries of Culture statistics and Our World in Data, 2024.

Global total n=87, High Income States n=36, Upper Middle Income States n=28, Lower Middle Income States n=15, Low Income States n=7.

## Understanding the impacts across cultural and creative industries

From equipment usage in festivals and film productions to the energy demands of museums, theatres and live performances in addition to associated travel, every activity within the cultural and creative industries has an environmental footprint, including digital activities that are often overlooked. However, specific sub-sectors have disproportionately higher environmental impacts than others.

The fashion industry is considered to have the highest environmental footprint among cultural and creative industries and is widely regarded as one of the most polluting industries globally, due to its impacts on land degradation, water consumption and pollution, biodiversity loss and microplastic pollution. Estimates of its carbon emissions vary, reflecting the complexity of its US$2.4 trillion supply chain (UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, n.d.). It is estimated that the global fashion industry produced around 2.1 billion tonnes CO2e in 2018, equalling 4% of global emissions (McKinsey & Company and Global Fashion Agenda, 2020) – equivalent to the combined annual emissions of France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Another study estimates fashion's share at 2% of global emissions, with 80% of its carbon footprint linked to manufacturing processes (Sadowski, Perkins and McGarvey, 2021).

Carbon emissions from film and television production have become increasingly well-documented in recent years. An analysis of 161 feature films and 266 television series – including productions from Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, Sony, Paramount, NBCUniversal, Netflix and Amazon – revealed that tentpole films (with budgets of over US$70 million) had averaged carbon footprints of 3,370 tonnes CO2e, or 33 tonnes CO2e per shooting day. Fuel consumption accounted for 48% of emissions, primarily from production vehicles and generators (Sustainable Production Alliance, 2021). A typical tentpole production generates waste equivalent to the weight of 313 blue whales, while air travel emissions are comparable to 11 one-way trips from Earth to the Moon (Arup, BFI and BAFTA albert, 2020).

The environmental impacts of the music industry are arguably the most studied. Key concerns include pollution from concerts, the carbon footprint of streaming, emissions from live touring, venues and festivals. A study of the UK music industry estimated artists touring domestically and British acts touring overseas produced around 85,000 tonnes CO2e in 2010 (Julie's Bicycle, BOP Consulting and PEC, 2022). Live performances reached record highs after the COVID-19 pandemic, with Live Nation Entertainment reporting over 145 million fans attending more than 50,000 events worldwide in 2023 (Live Nation Entertainment, 2024). Each event involves temporary sets, energy-intensive lighting, sound systems, heating, cooling and significant travel by performers, equipment and audiences – often over long distances.

Festivals and outdoor events are central to the cultural landscape in many countries. In the UK alone, 4.9 million camping festival-goers in 2020 generated 25,800 tonnes of waste and 24,261 tonnes CO2e, excluding travel emissions (Vision: 2025, Julie's Bicycle and Powerful Thinking, 2020). A study of 17 European festivals, accounting for Scope 3 emissions, found that each attendee generates an average of 11 kg CO2e per day. Audience, artist, production and trader travel accounts for approximately 58% of a festival's total emissions, while food and drink consumption contribute around 34% (A Greener Future, 2023).

Music and video streaming are often perceived as more sustainable alternatives to physical media, as they significantly reduce plastic waste. However, storing, processing and transferring digital data across the globe requires enormous energy resources, resulting in higher carbon emissions than at any previous point in history. While the per-user impact of listening to music, watching films, or gaming online has never been lower, the cumulative environmental footprint has soared with the rise of streaming services, especially since the pandemic, on average one hour of media streaming generates about 55 grams CO2e, with most emissions coming from the end-user device (Carbon Trust, 2021). As of 2023, global music streaming subscribers surpassed 700 million, an increase of 90 million from the previous year, bringing the industry closer to the one-billion-user milestone (Midia Research, 2024).

The visual arts sector's global carbon footprint is estimated at 70 million tonnes CO2e annually (Julie's Bicycle and AKO Foundation, 2021). Of this, 26% (18 million tonnes CO2e) comes from building energy use, including lighting and climate control in museums, galleries and exhibitions, and from international art shipments and business travel. The remaining 74% (52 million tonnes CO2e) is attributed to audience travel emissions, reflecting the high visitor numbers to major institutions. For instance, in 2023, the Louvre welcomed nearly 8.9 million visitors, while the Vatican Museums and the National Museum of China each received approximately 6.8 million. While these numbers reflect the global appeal and economic significance of cultural tourism, they also underscore the environmental impact of long-distance international travel associated with visiting major cultural landmarks.

The environmental impacts of publishing are largely linked to printing and paper production, despite declining print circulation due to the rise of digital formats. Paper and pulp production contributes to deforestation and is resource-intensive, involving significant water usage and the release of pollutants, and is estimated to account for 0.6% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Julie's Bicycle, BOP Consulting and PEC, 2022). Other cultural activities, such as literature, painting and crafts, have relatively lower environmental impacts, with small-scale, local initiatives operating with minimal resource use. In Global South countries, traditional practices and locally sourced materials often result in a much lower footprint compared to the industrialized methods prevalent in most Global North economies.

## Advancing climate action in culture

Arts Council England became the first cultural body in the world to require environmental reporting and action planning as a condition for funding over a decade ago. In partnership with Julie's Bicycle, the programme has mobilized thousands of arts organizations to monitor, measure and report their environmental data since 2012. The tools developed have been adopted globally, offering practical, data-driven methods to reduce the sector's environmental impacts. While 96% of reporting Member States report policies facilitating access to diverse cultural facilities and expressions (2005 Convention Periodic Reports), these reported data across areas including energy, waste, water, touring, materials and business travel (Julie's Bicycle, 2024).

This successful initiative has inspired cultural policy developments internationally. In 2023, Germany's Federal Ministry of Culture and Media launched the Green Culture Contact Point, a service unit supporting the country's 20,000 cultural institutions in achieving carbon neutrality by 2045. The initiative piloted a culture-specific framework for carbon footprint assessments and is rolling out training programme across all 16 federal states to build capacity and support sector-wide sustainable practices (BKM, 2023). In the same year, the Nordic Council of Ministers launched the Nordic Green Roadmap for Cultural Institutions. Designed to guide the culture sector towards a green transition, the roadmap provides practical frameworks for organizations and artists to integrate sustainable practices into their work (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023).

The Creative Ireland Programme, in collaboration with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, established the Creative Climate Action Fund to support creative, cultural and artistic projects that raise climate awareness and encourage behavioural change. Launched in 2021 with a €2 million allocation supporting 15 pilot projects, the fund expanded in 2023, providing €5.8 million to 43 projects, including biodiversity initiatives in Nephin, sustainable tourism in Bunratty and coastal resilience in the Maharees (Creative Ireland, 2023). Among Creative Australia's priorities for the 2025–2028 period is the establishment of Climate Action Services, aiming to provide national support for sustainable, climate-responsive actions within the arts sector and wider communities (Creative Australia, 2025).

Concert at Glastonbury

Many cultural organizations are actively leading efforts to reduce emissions and build capacity across the sector through partnerships, frameworks and research to guide climate action. The music industry leadership stands out partly due to the longstanding engagement of artists and businesses with sustainability issues. For instance, Coldplay reduced direct CO2e emissions from their shows by 59% in 2022 and 2023 by adopting solar-powered venues, kinetic dance floors and power bikes (Coldplay, 2024). At Glastonbury Festival 2023, all generators – serving around 200,000 attendees – ran exclusively on palm-oil-free HVO fuel, cutting lifecycle CO2e emissions by up to 90% (Glastonbury Festivals, 2023). In 2024, Massive Attack staged a concert aimed at setting new standards for large-scale, low-carbon music events powered entirely by renewable energy, with zero landfill waste and only plant-based food, the result of a five-year collaboration with climate researchers (Tyndall Centre for Climate, 2025). Civil society campaigns like No Music On A Dead Planet are pushing climate activism into the cultural mainstream, and high-profile artists such as Billie Eilish and BLACKPINK have emerged as strong advocates for climate action. Other initiatives include Sounds Right, which recognizes Nature as an artist on streaming platforms, redirecting royalties to biodiversity conservation (Museum for the United Nations, 2024).

The visual arts sector faces significant challenges in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, particularly due to the growth of international art fairs and touring exhibitions, which increase business, audience and artwork transportation. In 2024, over 40 major art fairs – including Art Basel, Frieze and TEFAF – pledged to halve their emissions by 2030 through an alliance established by the Gallery Climate Coalition (GCC). Founded in 2020, the GCC convenes over 1,500 artists, galleries and institutions – such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao – providing tools and resources to measure and reduce their environmental footprint (Gallery Climate Coalition, 2024).

Campaigns to end fossil fuel sponsorship of cultural institutions have gained momentum in recent years, highlighting the ethical and environmental contradictions of these partnerships. For decades, museums, galleries, theatres and festivals have relied on fossil fuel funding to sustain programming and operations. However, growing public pressure has exposed how such sponsorships contribute to greenwashing the reputations of polluting industries. While challenges remain in securing sustainable funding, several high-profile institutions like the Van Gogh Museum and the Royal Shakespeare Company have since severed ties with Shell and BP, respectively, setting a precedent for others worldwide (The Art Newspaper, 2018; RSC, 2019).

Notably, most of these initiatives are concentrated in Global North countries, which benefit from greater resources, stronger policy frameworks, advanced technological infrastructure and well-established cultural institutions. The Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) principle

outlined in the Paris Agreement recognizes that while all countries must contribute to addressing climate change, developed nations, with their greater financial and technological resources and historical responsibility for emissions, have an ethical obligation to take a lead in climate action and to support the Global South.

In the top garment-producing countries such as Bangladesh, India and Cambodia, manufacturers are calling on global fashion brands and retailers to establish a Fair Climate Fund to support the industry's green transition (Wickramasuriya, 2024). They argue that brands, which profit most and have greater financial capacity, should also share the costs of decarbonizing supply chains. This initiative is particularly urgent given that as the fashion industry requires an estimated US$1 trillion investment to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The proposed fund highlights how equity can be embedded into climate action, fostering a just and inclusive pathway to decarbonization.

Developed countries have the responsibility to support initiatives that connect climate action and culture in developing economies, particularly through collaborative partnerships. These collaborations should focus on co-developing solutions, valuing local knowledge and ensuring mutual benefits, including providing financial resources, building capacity and creating opportunities to share resources, expertise and best practices while facilitating access to sustainable technologies.

Examples of such collaborations include the British Council's partnership with Art Jameel on the Anhar Culture and Climate Platform, funding art projects on climate in the MENA region (Art Jameel, 2024), and its collaboration with Julie's Bicycle on the Circular Culture programme, providing training on circular economy to over 110 festivals across Latin America and the Caribbean (British Council, 2024). Other notable initiatives include the Creatives for Climate Action Thailand (CCAT) conference, which introduced Thailand's first Climate Action Toolkit for the cultural and creative industries (EUNIC, 2024), and the Preserving Legacies initiative, a partnership between ICOMOS, the Climate Heritage Network and National Geographic Society, equipping communities in over 20 countries with tools, training, and support to safeguard their cultural heritage (Preserving Legacies, 2025).

Individuals and civil society organizations usually take the lead in mobilizing the culture sector to address climate change in the Global South, filling the gaps left by governments with limited resources or competing priorities. Organizations often collaborate with local communities, artists and cultural practitioners on grassroots initiatives to tackle urgent environmental issues closely tied to their cultural practices and livelihoods, such as biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, deforestation and pollution. These initiatives have a more holistic approach to climate action and highlight the interconnectedness of cultural resilience and climate justice.

Indigenous Peoples worldwide are harnessing filmmaking and digital technologies to reclaim their narratives, safeguard histories, traditions and languages, and amplify their voices in global debates on territorial protection, justice and systemic inequalities. The rise of social media and streaming platforms and the emergence of Indigenous film festivals have empowered new generations of filmmakers, such as Brazil's Rede Katahirine – a network of 60 female Indigenous filmmakers, producers and screenwriters from all of the country's biomes (Rede Katahirine, 2025). This creative empowerment goes beyond storytelling through film, extending to the use of cutting-edge technologies combined with traditional knowledge to protect cultural heritage. In the Xingu Indigenous Territory, Wauja artists collaborated with international scholars and technologists to create a replica of their sacred Kamukuwaká cave after its ancient petroglyphs were destroyed. They also developed a virtual reality educational tool for local schools to preserve and transmit this cultural knowledge to future generations (People's Palace Projects, 2024).

In Cape Verde, the city of Mindelo, known for its rich musical heritage, inaugurated the Floating Music Hub in 2021. Built with locally sourced sustainable materials on buoyant platforms, it embodies a vision of climate-resilient architecture for coastal and island communities facing the challenges of rising sea levels and limited urban space. Since opening, the Hub has become an economic catalyst, attracting international artists and tourists, creating jobs and promoting Cape Verdean music and arts globally (NLÉ, 2021).

# Charting the way forward

In anticipation of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in 2021, the report Culture: The Missing Link to Climate Action revealed that most national cultural policies were not aligned with climate science or national commitments under the Paris Agreement (Julie's Bicycle, 2021b). The study found that most arts councils, cultural ministries and public art agencies lacked a statutory mandate to address climate and environmental issues within their policies or strategies. Although the absence of a legal mandate was identified as a key barrier for ministries and national arts bodies worldwide, there was growing consensus that explicitly aligning cultural policies with climate goals could unlock financial, human and technical resources, strengthening climate action as an integral part of cultural governance and practice.

While the global creative community has embraced climate action at local, sectoral and national levels, with the movement growing significantly during the pandemic, initiatives at the cultural policy level remained sporadic. An analysis by the Culture 2030 Goal campaign on how local and regional governments address culture in sustainable development policies concluded that the level of cultural engagement in the delivery of SDG 13 was considered low (Culture 2030 Goal campaign, 2021). Similarly, UNESCO reported at the time that reflections and initiatives to address environmental degradation, climate change and the environmental impact of cultural production and artistic practice were still limited (UNESCO, 2018).

Nevertheless, recognition of culture's role in climate action has steadily gained momentum in recent years. Since 2020, significant progress has been made by governments, international policymakers and global institutions in integrating culture into international climate discussions and intergovernmental forums. This section outlines key milestones towards strengthening the case for culture-based climate policies within the global climate framework.

## Integrating culture into climate policy

The inclusion of culture in the G20 agenda began under the Saudi Arabian Presidency in 2020, which hosted the first G20 Ministers of Culture meeting on the margins of the summit. The following year, the Italian Presidency established the Culture Working Group (CWG), which resulted in the unanimous adoption of the Rome Declaration of the G20 Culture Ministers. This landmark document recognized that culture offers great potential to drive climate action and contribute meaningfully to climate solutions, calling all relevant international and intergovernmental bodies to ensure a more robust anchoring of culture within the UNFCCC and other global endeavours on climate action and in national policies and plans (G20 Ministers of Culture, 2021).

Ahead of and during COP26 in Glasgow (2021), a mobilization of artists, cultural organizations and Indigenous activists advocated for stronger cultural representation in UN climate negotiations. Notable initiatives included a Call to Action urging governments to address the lack of culture in environmental policies (Julie's Bicycle, 2021b); the Race to Resilience Campaign launched by the Climate Heritage Network (CHN), promoting culture-based resilience strategies; and, the Climate Content Pledge, in which broadcasters committed to helping audiences understand and navigate the path to net zero (Albert, 2021).

At COP26, important steps were taken towards engaging Indigenous Peoples in international climate negotiations and support for collaboration between knowledge systems. The Glasgow Climate Pact (UNFCCC, 2021a) acknowledged the 'important role of Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' culture and knowledge' and urged their involvement in 'designing and implementing climate action'. Parties also adopted the 10-year Glasgow work programme to further strengthen the implementation of Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), highlighted the role of cultural institutions and events in public awareness (UNFCCC, 2021b).

Strengthening synergies between culture and climate science was the focus of the first Co-sponsored Meeting on Culture, Heritage and Climate Change jointly

Lençóis Maranhenses National Park, Brasil © MMPOP / Shutterstock.com*

organized by UNESCO, the IPCC and ICOMOS in December 2021. The online meeting convened over 120 scientists and experts from all regions of the world to advance the assessment of the connections between culture, heritage and climate change responses, setting the stage for the IPCC's upcoming Seventh Assessment Cycle (UNESCO, IPCC and ICOMOS, 2021). At the MONDIACULT Conference held in Mexico City in 2022, Ministers of Culture of UNESCO Member States called for culture to be recognized as a global public good, and for its integration as a stand-alone goal in the international development agenda beyond 2030, as well as within international climate negotiations (UNESCO, 2022a).

At COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh (2022), the role of cultural heritage in climate action was recognized in the cover decision, the Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan (UNFCCC, 2022b), specifically in its statement on Loss and Damage. Cultural heritage was also included as a theme within the framework adopted for the Glasgow-Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) (UNFCCC, 2022c). The GGA, a commitment under the Paris Agreement, aims to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change. Advocacy efforts from organizations such as CHN were instrumental in achieving these inclusions. COP27 also marked the first showcase of the Entertainment and Culture for Climate Action (ECCA) platform and the inaugural CultureCOP Assembly, bringing together artists, cultural practitioners, philanthropists and frontline communities.

COP28 in Dubai 2023 marked a pivotal moment in global climate negotiations, bringing critical issues to the forefront, many with particular relevance for the culture sector. Among them, the operationalization of the longstanding Loss and Damage fund, the conclusion of the first Global Stocktake (GST) – the five-yearly assessment of national efforts to meet Paris Agreement goals – and a historic commitment to transition away from fossil fuels, the root cause of climate change. However, despite these advancements, the final GST text failed to acknowledge culture and social dimensions as enablers of climate action, leaving a GST Culture Gap (Climate Heritage Network, 2023a), an omission that risks limiting its impact as a framework for more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

One of the key outcomes of COP28 was an unprecedented political commitment to integrating culture into climate policy. The adoption of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, a unifying framework guiding the achievement of the GGA, introduced seven specific targets for measuring progress, including one dedicated to cultural heritage (UNFCCC, 2023b). Other milestones included the first High-Level Ministerial Dialogue on Culture-based Climate Action, the adoption of the Emirates Declaration on Culture-Based Climate Action, and the launch of the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA, 2023). Co-chaired by the UAE and Brazil, with UNESCO as Lead Knowledge Partner, this coalition of over 45 Member States (as of April 2025) and organizations seeks to promote the formal recognition of culture as a key driver of climate policy and to advance culture-based solutions.

These achievements were supported by the mobilization of non-party stakeholders, including civil society and intergovernmental organizations. Among these was the Global Call to Put Cultural Heritage, Arts and Creative Sectors at the Heart of Climate Action (Climate Heritage Network, 2023), an advocacy campaign that gathered over 1,500 signatures from cultural networks, organizations and leaders. Additionally, the inaugural Entertainment + Culture Pavilion hosted 12 days of programming on climate-culture initiatives, featuring more than 300 speakers from 66 countries (Entertainment + Culture Pavilion, 2024).

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Pact for the Future during the Summit of the Future in September 2024 (UN, 2024a). This international agreement addresses global challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, artificial intelligence, escalating conflicts and rising inequality, with the overarching goal of safeguarding present and future generations. For the first time, culture is explicitly recognized as a key Action Point, with Member States committing to protect and promote culture as an integral part of sustainable development. The Pact calls for integrating culture into economic, social and environmental policies, supported by public investment. It also emphasizes the importance of safeguarding Indigenous, traditional and local knowledge, in line with the principle of free, prior and informed consent.

As part of the G20 Culture Ministers' Meeting in Salvador (2024), Brazil's Ministry of Culture hosted the first G20 International Seminar on Culture and Climate

Change, in partnership with UNESCO and the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI). During the meeting, parties adopted the Salvador da Bahia Declaration, which explicitly linked culture and climate change for the first time in G20 history. The declaration emphasized the significant potential of culture to advance climate action, encouraging the 'scaling up of culture- and heritage-based strategies related to climate adaptation, mitigation, resilience-building and technical and economic cooperation among countries'. Furthermore, it called for the integration of 'cultural heritage, arts and creative industries into national climate adaptation and mitigation strategies' (G20 Culture Working Group, 2024).

COP29, concluded in Baku (2024), marked both progress and ongoing challenges in global climate negotiations. While discussions on operationalizing the commitment made at COP28 to phase down fossil fuels will continue at COP30, consensus was reached on the rules governing international carbon markets – an important milestone expected to facilitate new avenues for climate financing. A new climate finance goal of US$300 billion annually by 2035 was also announced to support mitigation and adaptation efforts, particularly in vulnerable countries. Although estimates suggest greater financial needs to address the full scale of climate impacts and ensure a just transition (estimated at an annual US$1.3 trillion), this development reflects continued momentum toward aligning international cooperation with long-term sustainability objectives (UNFCCC, 2024d; Carbon Brief, 2024).

Culture representatives strongly advocated for the inclusion of a request in the final COP29 cover decision for the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies to hold one or more workshops on culture and heritage ahead of their 62nd sessions in Bonn, in June 2025. These workshops were intended as a first step towards adopting a Joint Work Decision (JWD) on Culture and Climate Action. However, despite coordinated efforts by non-state actors, the necessary political support was not achieved. A JWD would initiate a one-year consultation and information-gathering process led by the UNFCCC's Scientific, Technical and Implementation Bodies (SBSTA and SBI), laying the groundwork for the first-ever UNFCCC Work Plan on Culture (Climate Heritage Network, 2024).

UNESCO is collaborating with the UNFCCC for the development of Indicators for Cultural Heritage in the framework of the GGA. In parallel, UNESCO is elaborating indicators to measure culture's contribution to adaptation and resilience as well as to measure loss and damage in the framework of the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators with the support of the European Union.

## COP30: A pivotal moment to leverage culture for climate action

While significant progress in integrating culture into statutory climate processes and frameworks has been made, critical gaps remain to further strengthen the culture and climate nexus as a follow-up to MONDIACULT 2025 and COP30. In anticipation of updated submissions of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) to the UNFCCC by Member States in 2025, there is a pressing need to ensure that culture is mainstreamed within these commitments, as references to culture remain largely absent. NDCs are national climate plans submitted every five years, outlining each country's commitments to reduce emissions, while NAPs focus on long-term strategies for adapting to climate change impacts.

Climate finance remains a critical but complex challenge in global negotiations: debates around the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance (NCQG) are still underexplored by the culture sector, despite growing recognition of culture's role in fostering resilience, reducing emissions and sustaining livelihoods. Most climate finance discussions have focused on infrastructure, energy and nature-based solutions, with limited attention to culture, heritage, or cultural and creative industries. Integrating culture into the NCQG framework would help ensure that culture-based solutions are eligible for climate finance.

The year 2025 represents a critical moment to advance culture's role in climate action across intergovernmental forums. The Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action continues to grow its membership and strengthen alliances to advocate for a UNFCCC Work Plan on Culture and to position culture as a stand-alone goal in the

post-2030 global development agenda. Under South Africa's G20 Presidency in 2025, the Culture Working Group has prioritized climate action, particularly in relation to solidarity and social justice (G20 Culture Working Group, 2025).

MONDIACULT 2025 in Barcelona (Spain) and COP30, taking place in Belém (Brazil) will present a pivotal opportunity to formally integrate culture into the global climate agenda, particularly through the mutirão – a concept for collective work rooted in Indigenous traditions– of culture advocates building momentum for national governments to formally anchor culture into UNFCCC processes.

# Conclusions and key takeaways

Multilateral efforts must be scaled up to implement effective policy frameworks that protect and promote culture in the face of climate change, and to advance the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. To achieve this, culture sector bodies, governments and research institutions must urgently address knowledge gaps and strengthen the evidence base on the links between culture and climate action. This requires investment in collaborative, coordinated data collection and targeted research to inform detailed policy and action at all levels, particularly on culture's contributions to adaptation and mitigation, preventing loss and damage, building resilience and promoting behavioural change. Culture-based solutions often scale in place-based, sector-specific and culturally adaptable ways, yet current efforts remain disproportionately focused on Europe and North America, with limited representation from other regions.

It is critical to expand the geographic scope of data gathering, and attention should be paid to quantifying the economic and non-economic losses of climate change, with special attention given to living heritage to inform resilience strategies; collecting comprehensive data on carbon emissions (Scopes 1 to 3), waste generation and environmental impacts across the cultural and creative industries; mapping international policies, sector initiatives and regenerative cultural best practices; assessing how culture and heritage-based strategies for adaptation and mitigation are being implemented across regions; and, expanding evidence on the effectiveness of arts and cultural activities in influencing decisions, shifting attitudes and driving behaviour change.

Strengthening the evidence base on culture's immense potential to drive climate action will help unlock financial resources to accelerate progress towards the SDGs and support national and multilateral efforts to formally integrate it into climate policies and strategies at all levels. This will also lay the groundwork for anchoring culture within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and establishing it as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 sustainable development agenda.

- **Governments at all levels should increase attention to the cultural dimensions of climate change** across all public policies, strategies and dialogue mechanisms at local, national and international levels, ensuring that culture is firmly embedded in climate governance. This includes safeguarding culture and expressions of all types from the growing and multifaceted impacts of climate change, building the case for the role of culture in climate action and promoting a just transition to a low-carbon economy across the cultural and creative industries.

- **The integration of culture into national climate action instruments, policies, strategies, institutional and financial frameworks should be accelerated.** This includes explicitly embedding the protection and promotion of culture into their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), National Sustainable Development Strategies, National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAP) and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Ministries responsible for culture must be systematically involved in climate policy planning, development and implementation by actively engaging in cross-ministerial dialogue – particularly with environment and foreign affairs – to build informed, expert capacity for culture-based climate action. This will require targeted capacity building for decision-makers across the cultural and climate sectors.

- **Climate action should also be embedded within cultural policies.** This requires aligning cultural policies and strategies with national commitments under the Paris Agreement and giving the statutory mandate to arts councils, cultural agencies and public arts development agencies to address climate and environmental issues within their policies and programmes.

- **Ensuring the full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women at all levels of climate change,** environmental and disaster risk reduction governance is crucial, as this not only saves lives but can also help to transform gender dynamics within communities. Women and girls must be at the centre of climate action because they have the potential to offer unique knowledge and experiences that can help solve climate and ecosystem crises and as women's leadership is associated with improved sustainability, resource management and climate resilience. Indigenous women as main transmitters of intangible heritage especially possess an important understanding of sustainable land and natural resource management practices.

- **Culture-based climate action led by civil society and cultural organizations on the ground should be recognized and scaled up, ensuring its integration into national policies and strategies.** To achieve this, governments should identify and support impactful initiatives being undertaken worldwide; establish dedicated funding streams, frameworks and programmes for culture-based climate action; and strengthen environmental expertise and leadership within and across the culture sector. Governments should also develop regulatory frameworks and incentives to measure and reduce the sector's environmental footprint; enhance public awareness and engagement by leveraging the power of arts, storytelling and heritage; invest in the conservation and adaptive reuse of heritage buildings; and support grassroots and community-led initiatives, particularly those led by Indigenous communities.

- **Disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness measures to protect cultural heritage from climate-related hazards should be strengthened.** This includes integrating cultural heritage into national and local disaster risk reduction strategies and ensuring that heritage sites and cultural institutions are included in climate vulnerability assessments and risk mapping. Investment in early warning systems tailored to heritage preservation, and support to community-based preparedness initiatives should be prioritised and the capacity of stakeholders within the culture, climate and emergency/disaster sectors enhanced to effectively prepare for and respond to the impact of climate change and related disasters.

- **Communities must be empowered in protecting and safeguarding their heritage, ensuring that governance mechanisms are culturally relevant, sustainable and locally informed.** Policy response should be enhanced to mainstream Indigenous Knowledge into mitigation and adaptation strategies. This requires investment in policies that recognize the role of cultural heritage in environmental stewardship, climate resilience and sustainable development.

- **Collaborative and participatory climate policymaking and partnerships connecting culture and climate action,** co-created with communities and sensitive to culture-specific contexts and needs, should be promoted, fostering transparency, equity and context-specific solutions. Civil society organizations, sector bodies and equity-denied groups should be engaged in decision-making processes. This includes recognizing the leadership and contributions of women, Indigenous Peoples, traditional knowledge holders, local communities, children and youth, persons with disabilities and older persons.

- **Governments, multilateral organizations and financial institutions should embed culture in climate finance mechanisms,** including in relation to non-economic losses, ensuring equitable access for cultural actors, creative industries and heritage institutions to funding for sustainable transformation and adaptation. This includes allocating dedicated resources within national and international climate funds, designing tailored instruments to support heritage preservation, creative climate solutions, decarbonization of the built environment, adaptation and reconstruction

of cultural institutions, and ensuring that cultural projects are eligible for climate financing.

- **Governments, businesses and financial institutions in countries in the Global North, which benefit from lower production costs in the Global South, should invest in decarbonizing supply and value chains in the cultural and creative industries.** This includes introducing policies, regulatory frameworks and financing mechanisms to support sustainable technologies, circular economy models and low-carbon production processes, promoting sustainable production across the global creative economy.

- **Ministries responsible for culture should strengthen global advocacy efforts to integrate culture into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other multilateral mechanisms.** This includes advocating for a Joint Work Decision on Culture and Climate Action at COP30, working toward the establishment of a UNFCCC Work Plan for Culture and actively engaging with national climate negotiators to ensure that culture is embedded in international climate agreements. Ministries should also join the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action – an international coalition with UNESCO as Lead Knowledge Partner – to help elevate culture in global climate policy discussions.

- **Sector bodies, funders, civil society organizations and individuals should actively engage in and scale up global mobilization to ensure that culture is recognized and embedded in climate policy, planning and action at the international level.** This includes developing a unified language, clear messaging and strategic communication tools to strengthen advocacy and endorsing initiatives such as the Global Call campaign to put culture at the heart of climate action at COPs.

# Policy Brief

## *Frances C. Koya Vaka'uta*

Team Leader, Culture for Development, Pacific Community (SPC)

## Culture, climate leadership and environmental sustainability: a pacific call for a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 agenda

The vulnerability of the Pacific Island region to climate change is well established. Recognizing climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of Pacific peoples,[123] the Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide (2023) outlines escalating risks to land availability, food and water security, health systems, disasters and mobility. These impacts pose significant challenges to resilience capacity, national sovereignty and regional stability.[124]

At the heart of climate resilience is culture. This is a call to the international community – and particularly to Ministers responsible for culture – to recognize culture as a critical dimension for human security and domain of climate leadership. Indigenous Peoples have long sustained life in balance with the environment, guided by holistic, place-based knowledge systems. To achieve inclusive and sustainable development, culture must be affirmed as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 global agenda.

Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge Systems (ITK) must be reflected in climate frameworks as vital sources of innovation and continuity through Indigenous science. These systems are rooted in generations of lived experience and offer rich ecological insights – through seasonal calendars and land and water stewardship for example. Indigenous languages encode this knowledge through oral traditions, genealogies and cultural stories. These knowledge systems should not be seen as alternative ways of knowing, being and doing, but rather as complementary and essential to a thriving planetary future.

Culture must inform and shape decision making through the embedding of cultural dimensions in national, regional and global agendas. Policy design and implementation must involve a broad spectrum of stakeholder engagement, including Indigenous Peoples and cultural communities.

Climate adaptation policies must integrate legal protections for cultural heritage and include cultural dimensions in risk reduction, resilience strategies and climate adaptation approaches. Cultural and natural heritage – tangible and intangible – are under growing threat from climate impacts. Sacred sites, cultural landscapes and traditional practices are increasingly at risk.

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[123] *Boe Declaration, 2018. Boe Declaration on Regional Security | Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat*

[124] *UNDP and PIFS (2023). Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide. https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Pacific-Climate-Security-Assessment-Guide.pdf*

Culture must be embedded in climate governance. This requires new ways of working through inclusive policymaking that respects and integrates Indigenous and traditional governance systems and ensures the participation of cultural communities in decision-making processes. Ministries responsible for culture play a key role in enabling this shift.

Climate financing for loss and damage must consider cultural dimensions, particularly the preservation of intangible heritage and cultural knowledge. Investment in culture-based initiatives that foster resilience, healing and sustainable behaviours is essential. Culture shapes values, collective identity and social cohesion – foundational drivers of sustainable lifestyles. As ancestral lands are lost, communities are also experiencing solastalgia – a profound sense of grief and displacement. Addressing cultural and emotional resilience must be part of effective climate responses.

Cultural expressions are central to climate communication and advocacy. Indigenous knowledge holders, storytellers and artists can play a greater role in mobilizing communities and deepening climate and ocean literacy through art, performance and ceremony. Their voices must be equitably supported in climate change discourses and policy processes.

Greening the culture sector – through eco-friendly infrastructure, ethical cultural and creative industries, regenerative tourism and fair trade – offers a path to low-carbon development. ITK systems offer holistic guidance on embedding sustainability across all dimensions of life, for human security, cross-sectoral approaches and planetary health.

Culture is a driver for inclusive, regenerative sustainable development. A global standalone goal for culture in the post-2030 agenda would affirm the central role of culture in shaping climate change solutions. This ambition must be approached with care. Culture as a public good must not lead to the appropriation or dilution of Indigenous knowledge. The rights of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination, cultural integrity, free, prior and informed consent and due recognition of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) must be upheld.

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Chapter 6

# Protecting artists and culture at risk: bolstering resilience, peace and security

# Creative Voices
## *Aya Tarek*

Painter and multidisciplinary artist

## The unbreakable soul: why protecting artists is essential for a healthy society

It's simply not possible to imagine a healthy, sustainable society without protecting artists and safeguarding cultural heritage – it's like trying to picture a body without a soul. Even in times of uncertainty and conflict, when culture becomes a target, people and communities also have this amazing way of fighting back. The first step often taken by those who wish to eradicate a people's identity is to target its history, attempt to silence their artists and close down the locations where their culture flourishes.

But here's the thing, even in the darkest circumstances, artists continue to create. Their art becomes a form of quiet resistance, their voices give people strength and courage, and just by putting their work out there, they show the unbelievable power of human expression. So, when we talk about keeping artists safe, we're not just talking about protecting one individual's freedom – we're fundamentally talking about keeping our collective memory alive and shaping what our societies will look like down the road.

Look at any major movement for change throughout history and you'll find arts and culture right at the heart of it. In cities torn apart by war, you see culture spray-painted on walls, you hear it in the songs people sing, you feel it in the performances that pop up in unexpected places – creativity becomes a lifeline for communities trying to survive. Creative expressions help people process trauma, reclaim their own stories from those who would try to rewrite them, and to call for justice, healing and reconciliation. It's precisely because of this transformative power and resilience that artists often become targets. Silencing artists' voices silences an entire population, which is why protecting artists protects the very idea of freedom. No artist should ever have to choose between expressing themselves and staying safe, and no society can afford to lose the voices that challenge us, make us think in new ways, and inspire us.

Yet, culture faces threats beyond conflict zones. Economic pressures increasingly endanger creative spaces and market forces often reduce artistic expressions to mere commodities, stripping them of their original heart and meaning in terms of our shared human values. When gentrification forces artists out of urban centres, we lose what makes our cities interesting and vibrant in the first place. The homogenization of culture threatens the unique, the rebellious, the truly local forms of culture that need to be recognized for their profound social value.

The systematic underfunding of arts and culture – from cultural institutions to residency programmes and independent creative spaces – hinders cultural development. Artists cannot survive on passion alone. They need ways to support their livelihood, they need resources to create, which is a vital investment in our society. We need to start seeing culture as an essential resource. Without it, our societies just stagnate, they lose that spark of imagination that's needed to build a better future.

This isn't just a polite request – it's a real call to action. Protecting artists, cultural spaces and our shared heritage needs to be recognized as a global priority. Artists, like journalists and human rights activists, need to be protected, cultural workers need to be shielded from harm and independent and public art spaces need to be financially supported. We need more emergency funding when crises hit, stronger legal protections for artists and really robust international networks where people can support each other.

Because at the end of the day, the fundamental right to create, to tell our stories and to imagine different ways of living – that's something we absolutely need to protect. Culture isn't just another thing to be bought and sold and artists aren't disposable. The time to step up and take action is right now.

Afreaka Festival, São Paulo (2014). © Aya Tarek

# Protecting artists and culture at risk: bolstering resilience, peace and security

**Patty Gerstenblith**
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# Overview

01. Culture is under threat: armed conflicts, terrorism (and the threat of terrorism) and violence in every global region are coupled with the climate crisis and reduced capacity of Governments and civil society to act. This is leading to heritage sites being destroyed, the cultures of descendant communities and those living in or close to conflicts often being subject to repression and active destruction from aggressors.

02. The UNESCO Culture Conventions provide a framework for prohibiting and reducing these types of threats to culture and for encouraging states to commit to preventing them. Although not perfect solutions for preventing these types of destruction of tangible and intangible heritage, these Conventions are broadly adopted and establish the fundamental principles for protecting the world's cultural heritage. Other international laws and treaties also enforce the protection of cultural heritage, including prohibition of illicit trafficking. However, states' and their partners' lack of capacity to act and the scale of destruction and plunder of cultural heritage mean that much is lost, even if some is eventually recovered or rebuilt.

03. Threats to and losses of intangible cultural heritage are a global tragedy, with minorities in particular vulnerable to cultural repression and the denial of cultural rights. These threats are most acute in times of crisis, but they persist in every global region as minority cultures and specific groups such as women, LGBTIQ+ and disabled people face discrimination and persistent barriers to cultural expression – whether artists and cultural heritage professionals or everyday participants in their own cultures. This includes threats that continue in times of peace, where the resilience of artists and culture professionals, while often remarkable, is under threat every day. However, not all expressions of intangible heritage are respectful of cultural rights, such as the promotion of acts that harm women or minorities. The protection and promotion of a diversity of cultural expressions cannot perpetuate traditions that damage other people's rights and human dignity.

04. Culture is a driving force for social inclusion, dialogue and resilience and is thus essential to recovery, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Culture and creativity can promote a stable and lasting peace. However, where inequalities persist, especially with regard to women and minorities, as well as for children and young people, cultural dialogue is weakened and post-conflict recovery a distant proposition. This raises the need for gender mainstreaming in recovery efforts, as well as inclusive and equitable approaches which support communities as active custodians to cultural heritage.

05. Digital technology is generating new ways to preserve and protect cultural heritage. Remote sensing, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and, most recently, AI are increasingly being harnessed for the documentation and monitoring of cultural heritage at risk. However, access to such technologies is unequal and digital preservation is not a replacement for lost heritage monuments and objects or indeed lost cultural expressions.

# Introduction

In 2025, UNESCO celebrated six years' work on a major campaign, Revive the Spirit of Mosul, supporting the recovery of the Iraqi city of Mosul following its liberation from Daesh in 2017. One of the oldest cities in the world, Mosul and its surrounding region are home to diverse communities. The city sits at a crossroads of cultures and is a melting pot of Iraq's pluralistic society where diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups had coexisted for millennia. However, under Daesh rule, mosques, churches, tombs, shrines, museums and archaeological sites were deliberately destroyed, while artists – especially musicians (Jalabi, 2018) – were specifically targeted. With US$115 million in funding and partnerships with 15 international supporters – particularly the United Arab Emirates and the European Union – the Revive the Spirit of Mosul project has successfully restored key historic landmarks, including the iconic Al-Nouri Mosque and its Al-Hadba Minaret, the Convent of Our Lady of the Hour, Al-Tahera Church and Al-Aghawat Mosque. Over 7,700 jobs were created as part of the reconstruction effort, with a strong focus on youth and women. Gender mainstreaming was central to the hiring process for all reconstruction related jobs. More than 500 women participated in UNESCO's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) program, with the result that on-the-job training reached 44% of the women in construction and 30% of the women in engineering.

Beyond physical restoration of its heritage architecture, the project has focused on reviving the city's cultural and social fabric. Over 100 heritage houses have been rebuilt for returning families. Spaces for creativity are part of the newly reconstructed Al-Ekhlas School in the Old City; a FilmLab at the Institute of Fine Arts now trains young filmmakers; The Station, a creative hub for culture professionals, opened in 2021; and, the Mosul Traditional Music Festival, its first production since the city's liberation, was held in March 2022, with another planned for 2025. Mosul's revival – driven by heritage, cultural life and education – stands as a beacon of hope. This revival demonstrates the transformative role of culture in post-conflict stability, resilience and socioeconomic development and in peacebuilding, as well as the power of international cooperation in crisis response (UNESCO, 2025).

This region has significant cultural sites, including World Heritage properties and sites on the Tentative Lists,[125] such as the Ancient City of Nineveh and Nimrud, both of which were attacked. The Shrine of Nebi Yunus (the Prophet Jonah), sacred to both Christian and Muslim communities was also destroyed. Daesh was also responsible for large-scale looting of archaeological sites in both the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. In 2015 in the Syrian Arab Republic, Khaled al-Asaad, a respected cultural guardian of the ancient site of Palmyra, was reportedly killed for defending Palmyra's treasures and legacy against violent military extremists (ICCROM, 2023). Numerous Christian monasteries and church complexes and Lalish, the holiest sanctuary of the Yazidis, are located here. The communities in this region based much of their cultural identity on the Mesopotamian heritage, including songs, folktales, recipes, as well as their endangered Aramaic language. Extensive displacement of these minority groups since 2003 has endangered their intangible heritage through the loss of prayers, songs, historic narratives and other traditional practices that are often tied to both the immovable heritage and the cultural landscape of the region.

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[125] *A Tentative List is an inventory of those sites situated on its territory which each State Party considers suitable for nomination to the World Heritage List. States Parties should therefore include in their Tentative Lists details of those sites which they consider to be of potential Outstanding Universal Value and which they intend to nominate during the following years (Paragraph 62 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention).*

The UNESCO Culture Conventions provide a framework for prohibiting and reducing these types of threats to culture and for encouraging states to commit to preventing them. Although not perfect solutions for preventing these types of destruction of tangible and intangible heritage, these Conventions are broadly adopted and establish the fundamental principles for protecting the world's cultural heritage. Other actions of UNESCO, such as the Unite4Heritage campaign, demonstrate that non-legal avenues can provide an additional impetus to preserve heritage and to promote and guarantee its protection and safeguarding. The importance of heritage to the diverse cultural groups in Iraq demonstrates that preservation of culture and cultural heritage is an essential element in forming identity, promoting psycho-social benefits, especially during traumatic events, and building foundations for resilience, peace, security and sustainability of communities.

As evident in Mosul's revival, culture is a driving force for social inclusion, dialogue and resilience and is thus essential to recovery, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Culture and creativity can promote a stable and lasting peace. But as the example of Mosul also clearly shows, cultural heritage is especially susceptible to damage and destruction (both intentional and collateral), as well as looting and thefts, during conflict. These threats to cultural heritage are often accompanied by the persecution of individuals based on their cultural, ethnic or religious identity. Artists and culture professionals, including cultural heritage defenders such as Khaled al-Asaad, are increasingly recognized as a vulnerable group that requires protection measures tailored to their particular needs and to their type of work. The result of these threats and harms is not merely the erasure of history but also poses a direct threat to cultural diversity and cultural rights including the safeguarding of diverse cultural expressions. Of particular concern is the increasing systematic and deliberate targeting of cultural heritage in numerous conflicts around the world in recent years, including in Ukraine and Sudan (UN Secretary-General, 2023, Para. 35). The looting and trafficking of movable heritage are exacerbated by armed conflicts and political instability as well as crises such as natural disasters, intensified by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to suppress cultural expressions, which in turn heighten the risks and challenges for artists and culture professionals, including legal hurdles, attacks, murders, displacement, trauma and the disruption of their livelihoods, also often occur during times of crisis (Whyatt, 2024).

While cultural heritage protection in armed conflict has established legal frameworks to preserve cultural heritage, there is now a growing recognition that culture plays a vital role in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (UN Secretary-General, 2023, Para. 35). Landmark resolutions and decisions within UNESCO and various UN bodies recognize that the destruction of cultural heritage endangers cultural rights, abets terrorism, and poses a critical threat to peace and security. As a result, cultural heritage protection – including the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property – is now considered an integral part of global security and peacebuilding efforts (Kersel and Gerstenblith, 2024).

The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration called for the protection of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as of cultural expressions, especially in times of crisis. The Declaration also called for dialogue for the return and restitution of cultural property as an ethical imperative to uphold the rights of peoples and communities to the enjoyment of their cultural heritage. This reflects a significant global consensus particularly on cultural heritage at risk. The 2024 Pact for the Future also underlined the importance of culture for sustainable development, the need for increased investment and the need for strengthened international cooperation on the return of cultural objects. A new international agenda is emerging for the protection of culture at risk and in emergency situations. There is a clear and unequivocal call to fully integrate culture into social development as well as humanitarian, security, peacekeeping and human rights policies and operations. This agenda also underscores the vital role of culture in fostering intercultural dialogue and fostering gender responsive approaches which ensure gender mainstreaming.

Palmyra, Syrian Arab Republic© JOE Planas / Unsplash.com

# Cultural heritage at risk from conflict, violence and climate change

Tangible, immovable and movable cultural heritage is at risk from armed conflict – both of an international and non-international character – as well as from other forms of violence including civil unrest and natural disasters, often intensified by climate change. In recent years, natural disasters have led to the loss and damage of heritage in countries such as Myanmar, the Solomon Islands and Thailand. Ongoing conflicts in Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine and Yemen have resulted in the destruction of cultural heritage – including archaeological sites, historical monuments and buildings, religious sites, museums, libraries, archives and historic urban landscapes. These attacks have escalated beyond collateral damage to systematic targeting. As early as 2016, the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights condemned the intentional destruction of cultural heritage and the looting and trafficking of movable heritage and called for 'recognition of the protection of cultural heritage as an important component of humanitarian assistance' (OHCHR, 2016).

While damage to and destruction of cultural heritage have long been a collateral result of armed conflict, current conflicts demonstrate that cultural heritage may also be the object of deliberate attack with the goal of erasing the distinct cultural heritage and memory of peoples and communities (Shydlovskyi et al., 2025). At the same time, the use of technological advances to monitor these attacks and to pinpoint their effects assists in the identification of perpetrators that may later be used to achieve accountability and has increased the prospects for post-conflict reconstruction (Bassett et al., 2024).

# Legal frameworks and protection of cultural heritage from threats due to armed conflict, violence and natural disaster

Recognizing that 'damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all [hu]mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world', the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, with its two Protocols of 1954 and 1999, establishes the basic international legal framework for protection of tangible cultural heritage during armed conflict. While applying to conflicts of both an international and non-international character, these legal instruments speak only to situations of armed conflict and not to other forms of violence or climate change, which can have significant negative effects as well.

The 1954 Hague Convention prohibits carrying out acts of hostility against cultural property (unless excused by military necessity), as well as the theft or misuse of cultural property. The core requirements of the Convention are to safeguard and respect cultural property, defined to include immovable structures and sites, movable cultural objects and repositories for cultural objects. The First Protocol (1954) prohibits the export of cultural objects from occupied territory and mandates their return, The Second Protocol (1999) strengthens enforcement by narrowing what constitutes military necessity, defining criminal liability and command responsibility, introducing enhanced protection status for significant cultural sites and establishing measures for international cooperation in heritage protection. Together, these instruments form the core international legal framework for protecting cultural heritage in conflict zones. As of July 2025, the 1954 Convention has been ratified by 138 States, with 115 States also parties to the First Protocol (1954) and 92 States Parties to the Second Protocol (1999).

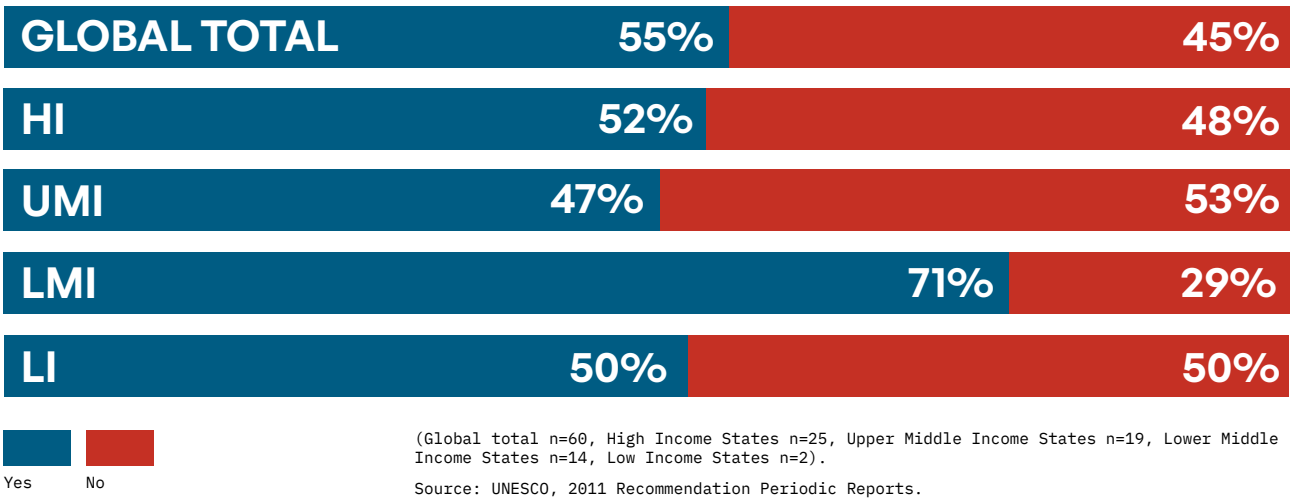
Article 3 of the 1954 Convention indicates that contracting Parties undertake to prepare in time of peace for the safeguarding of cultural property situated within their own territory against foreseeable effect of an armed conflict. As elaborated in the Second Protocol to the 1954 Convention, a key measure of preparedness is the preparation of inventories, lists and registries for different types of movable cultural objects and plans for protection and possible removal in case of conflict. The majority of states have established these, while less than 5% of countries indicating they do not have such inventories (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). However, two-thirds of countries indicate frequent use of these inventories, lists and registers for protection of cultural and natural heritage (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). There are significant gaps in low-income countries, Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (1972 Convention Periodic Reports), signalling ongoing gaps in coordination, funding and capacity (UNESCO, 2022). The digitization of inventories, collections, archives, images, maps and other cultural assets is emerging as a priority for preparedness, both as a means of preventing irreversible loss of valuable cultural information if these items are lost in a crisis and ensuring continued access to experts and the public in the face of emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The extended public health emergency and related lockdowns between 2020 and 2022 – which saw cultural heritage sites face loss of tourism revenue, increased looting, conservation delays and job losses – have prompted new strategies for emergency preparedness in many countries (Kenney, 2021). The latest Conflict Intensity Index indicated a two-thirds increase over the past three years in the proportion of the world subject to conflict, necessitating further need for preparedness (Ahmed, 2024). Contingency and risk-preparation plans are increasingly recognized as essential for enhancing the resilience and long-term sustainability of cultural heritage against both natural and human-made emergencies. For example, Lithuania's National Crisis Management Centre developed a wartime cultural heritage protection plan in 2024 to prepare for sudden attacks. It has identified 100,000 movable heritage items of special value that would be given priority and has planned mobilization drills (Skėrytė, 2024).

In Ukraine, threats to World Heritage properties have intensified, particularly in major cities such as Kyiv, L'viv and Odesa. In 2023, three World Heritage properties in Ukraine were inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger: The Historic Centre of Odesa (simultaneously inscribed on the World Heritage List during the 18th extraordinary session of the Committee in January 2023); Kyiv: Saint-Sophia Cathedral and Related Monastic Buildings, Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra; and, L'viv – the Ensemble of the Historic Centre (at the 45th session in Riyadh in September 2023). In accordance with Article 11, paragraph 4, of the 1972 Convention, the World Heritage Committee may inscribe a property on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The List of World Heritage in Danger is designed to inform the international community of conditions which threaten the very characteristics for which a property was inscribed on the World Heritage List, and to encourage corrective action. As of July 2025, 53 properties are on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

In addition to armed conflict, emergencies triggered by civil unrest, political instability, natural disaster and social upheaval – which can degrade or destroy heritage assets – underscore the critical need for comprehensive emergency preparedness on a broader scale. Through a collaboration in 2022 between UNESCO, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and AECOM, a global infrastructure consulting company, a Cultural Heritage Addendum was added to the Disaster Resilience Scorecard for Cities. The purpose of this is to improve cultural heritage integration into national and local disaster risk-reduction strategies in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. This scorecard addresses operational and policy gaps in integrating cultural heritage into national and local disaster risk reduction strategies. Based on the periodic reports of the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, a little more than half of the respondents indicated that they have disaster risk reduction plans in place including mainstreaming of sustainable development in historic urban areas. West Asia and North Africa respondents indicated a high level of such plans (78%). The income group with the highest response rate for these plans is the low middle income States.

**Figure 27. Member States reporting the use of Disaster Risk Reduction Plans to promote mainstreaming of sustainable development in historic urban areas, by income group.**



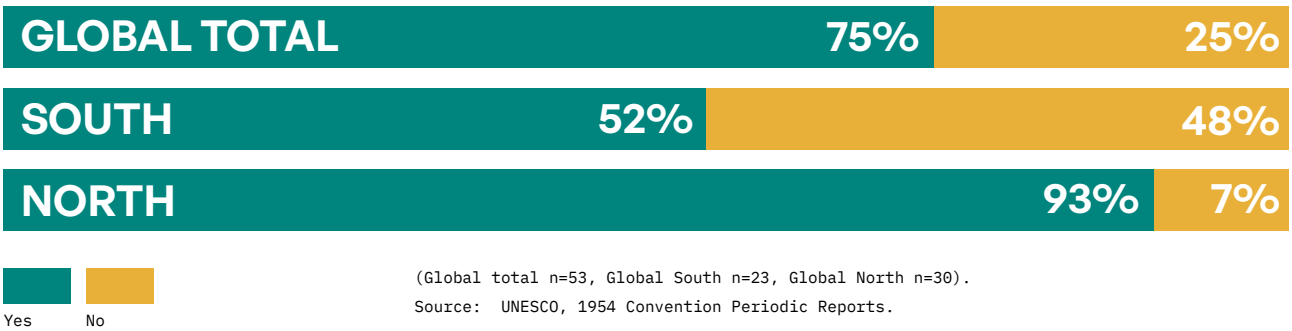

(Global total n=60, High Income States n=25, Upper Middle Income States n=19, Lower Middle Income States n=14, Low Income States n=2).

Source: UNESCO, 2011 Recommendation Periodic Reports.

An important mechanism under the Second Protocol of the 1954 Hague Convention is the enhanced protection granted to designated and provisional sites. As of 2024, 29 properties were on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection. 25 properties in Ukraine are under provisional protection and 1 property is in the State of Palestine. In November 2024, UNESCO placed an additional 34 properties in Lebanon under provisional enhanced protection. Further, one-fifth (18%) of reporting countries globally intend to request such protection for their World Heritage sites within the next three years – signalling that this mitigation measure is actively used by states to secure an elevated level of legal safeguarding in armed conflict – with an expected 83 properties intended for protection (79 in the Global South and 4 in the Global North) (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).

The 1954 Convention mandates training of military personnel to protect cultural heritage during armed conflict. Expanded training programmes for military personnel and security forces on cultural property protection include the use of UNESCO's military manual and national-level adaptations. For example, Botswana is preparing workshops for its Defence Force and has nominated a military officer to its Thematic Working Group on the Convention. Australia is taking into account the protection of heritage as an integral part of sustainable strategies to build peace and security. It has integrated cultural risk assessments into peacetime operations with a dedicated Command Cultural Advisor since 2021. The Advisor is responsible for providing expert guidance on the effects of military activities on Indigenous cultural matters in northern Australia, particularly with respect to military exercises and activities undertaken outside established military exercise areas. Despite such progress, only 58% of countries have introduced provisions in their military regulations to ensure respect for cultural property (1954 Convention Periodic Reports). A majority of countries still face challenges in implementing such training effectively including due to lack of appropriate educational materials (1954 Convention Periodic Reports). States that have ratified the Second Protocol are required to enact corresponding criminal provisions, including defining serious breaches of the Second Protocol as criminal offenses in their national laws, ensuring such violations are punishable by appropriate penalties. 85% of respondent countries reported having introduced penal measures for conduct contrary to the obligations contained in the Convention (1954 Convention Periodic Reports), while 75% indicated they have established as criminal offences serious breaches of the Second Protocol (1954 Convention Periodic Reports).

**Figure 28. Member States reporting whether they have established as criminal offences in their domestic law offences constituting serious breaches of the Second Protocol, by Global North/Global South.**




(Global total n=53, Global South n=23, Global North n=30).
Source: UNESCO, 1954 Convention Periodic Reports.

From a political and practical standpoint, adoption of implementing legislation, particularly with respect to the criminalization of conduct by their militaries, is difficult, as such measures are often politically unpopular. Even when such measures have been adopted into law, prosecutions for violations are rarely taken. There are examples of militaries taking cultural objects during armed conflict or occupation as souvenirs, but there are no apparent examples of prosecution.

## Complementary legal frameworks for cultural heritage protection

Subsequent provisions of international law, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), condemn or criminalize the intentional targeting and destruction of tangible cultural property. This Statute entered into force in 2002 and has been ratified by 125 states. It makes it a war crime to '[i]ntentionally direct attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, [and] historic monuments, ... provided they are not military objectives' (Article 8(b)(ix) (applying to international armed conflict) and Article 8(e)(iv) (applying to armed conflicts not of an international character). While it may not prevent destruction, this legal framework provides a means for punishment of violations after the fact.

In 2016, the ICC prosecuted Ahmed Al Faqi Al Mahdi for the war crime of destruction of mausolea and a mosque in Timbuktu, to which he subsequently pled guilty. It was the first and, so far, only example of a prosecution by an international tribunal where destruction of cultural property was the single violation. In June 2021, the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor published a comprehensive Policy on Cultural Heritage, which, while recognizing the limited jurisdiction of the ICC, mandates tailored investigative procedures for cultural heritage crimes. It also encourages the involvement of specialized experts – such as archaeologists, art historians and conservation professionals – at all stages of the investigation and prosecution process. Importantly, it stresses the importance of including victim perspectives in investigations and ensuring that reparations address not only material loss but also the cultural and communal damage suffered (ICC, 2021). However, challenges remain including limited jurisdiction; reliance on cooperation from states for arrests

and enforcement; and, restriction of cultural heritage crimes to attacks on a narrow category of cultural properties, including a limitation to immovable tangible heritage and limitation to attacks during armed conflict, leaving a gap in international criminal law regarding the peacetime destruction of cultural property.

The 2021 provisional measures order of the International Court of Justice *in Armenia v. Azerbaijan* under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination has reinforced the understanding that the destruction of cultural sites may constitute a discriminatory breach of international human rights law. The use of this Convention helps to shift to recognizing such acts as violations of the fundamental rights of the peoples and communities for whom these sites hold cultural and historical significance. It also provides a path toward protecting cultural heritage even when the questioned conduct is purely internal to a country, rather constituting an international issue.

Traditional glass blowing

## Safeguarding intangible heritage in times of crisis

Tangible and intangible heritage exist in a symbiotic relationship, with tangible cultural heritage providing the settings of sites and structures and intangible heritage – that is, traditions, customs, practices, spiritual beliefs, folklore, languages and artistic expressions – giving it meaning. Both form essential and individual elements by which the right to culture may be actualized. The tragic events affecting the Yazidi community in Iraq in 2014, including mass violence and displacement, also led to the destruction of religious sites and shrines, eroding the community's cultural identity. Yazidi religious and social life is deeply rooted in these sacred spaces, where rituals and oral traditions are passed down through generations. Daesh targeted both the population and their cultural and religious heritage; cultural preservation and rehabilitation are therefore essential for the community's recovery, alongside humanitarian assistance, education, restoration of services and infrastructure and psychosocial support. To support cultural preservation and mental health recovery, the Yazidi Cultural Archives was launched in October 2022. Available in English and Arabic, it features four permanent online exhibitions showcasing works, photography and films created by 16 women Yazidi survivors. This initiative – developed collaboratively by the CSO Yazda, Community Jameel, the UN, CULTURUNNERS, the WHO Arts & Health Program, Open Mind Project and Nobody's Listening – builds on post-genocide research from Rwanda, emphasizing the role of gender responsive artistic expression and community-led archiving in addressing trauma and fostering healing.

Intangible cultural heritage also plays a crucial role in post-conflict recovery by strengthening cultural identity, fostering social cohesion and providing communities with tools for healing and sustainable development. In 2023, UNESCO supported a community-led initiative in Colombia aimed at revitalizing traditional weaving and textile practices in areas affected by decades of armed conflict. The project, carried out in collaboration with local cooperatives and cultural associations, focused on preserving the ancestral knowledge of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian women weavers, who have historically transmitted cultural narratives, symbols and social values through their craft. Workshops were organized to train younger generations in weaving techniques, combining the restoration of traditional practices with income-generating opportunities. Storytelling and oral histories embedded in the designs were documented and shared as part of a wider effort to strengthen cultural identity, healing and reconciliation. This initiative demonstrates how living heritage can play a vital role in post-conflict recovery, providing affected communities with both a sense of continuity and a pathway to sustainable livelihoods. It also serves as a model for integrating cultural heritage safeguarding with peacebuilding and socioeconomic development strategies.

## Harnessing technology: a game-changer for heritage at risk

From remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and, most recently, artificial intelligence, technology is increasingly being harnessed as a digital mechanism for the documentation and monitoring or cultural heritage at risk. Remote sensing, which refers to the collecting

of data from a distance using various technologies, was first used on a large scale to document the looting of archaeological sites in southern Iraq following the 2003 invasion (Stone, 2015). Since then, these technologies have become increasingly vital for monitoring and restoration: in 2022, the World Monuments Fund used the EU's Copernicus satellite data to assess the impact of the powerful earthquake of August 2021 on the historic coastal town of Jacmel, Haiti, a site on a Tentative List. Following the 2019 earthquake in Albania, LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) was used to assess the structural stability of cultural heritage sites, like the Castle of Gjirokastra, by creating high-resolution 3D models for risk analysis. 3D Laser Scanning was used to capture precise data on the Notre-Dame Cathedral's structure after the devastating fire of 2019, allowing for more accurate restoration work. Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR), which can penetrate clouds, operate at night and capture data in all weather conditions, was used to monitor Palmyra, when it was an active conflict zone and access was therefore limited.

Beyond remote sensing technologies, tools like GIS – used for analysing, storing and visualising spatial data – are being used regularly. It was used in Timor-Leste in 2021 to assess the impact of Cyclone Seroja and to help authorities plan for the protection and rehabilitation of vulnerable heritage locations. Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) are helping create immersive experiences of historical sites in the Syrian Arab Republic, like the Great Mosque of Aleppo, allowing experts and the public to visualise the site before and after destruction.

Several technologies are often deployed together as is the case of the work of the Heritage Monitoring for Recovery Project (HeMo) established in 2022 to create a comprehensive database. This documentation will aid in restoration efforts as well as providing forensic analysis for legal proceedings concerning cultural heritage violations, combined with documentation on the ground carried out by Ukraine culture professionals. This project provides a means of verifying on the ground the data derived from remote imagery, due to the bravery and diligence of the HeMo project members who document destruction within a short time of the attacks.

New advances in AI technology are also proving helpful in the monitoring and reconstruction of cultural heritage that has been destroyed or damaged. In 2023, in the aftermath of the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes, Google collaborated with UNESCO to use AI tools for analysing satellite images and monitoring ancient ruins in Gaziantep and surrounding areas. In Mosul, AI has been used to reconstruct 3D models of heritage sites destroyed by Daesh in Iraq. Through crowdsourced photos and machine learning algorithms, AI recreates digital versions of lost cultural monuments, helping in planning future restoration.

# Box 8.
# Advancing digital technologies for heritage in Africa

UNESCO's proactive engagement is reflected in two recent workshops held in the Africa region: Women. Heritage. Digital Technology (March 2025) and Digital Technologies to Empower World Heritage in Africa (June 2025). These events brought together 300 heritage stakeholders, including World Heritage site managers, policymakers, women, youth and other key actors. Feedback and evaluations highlighted the transformative potential of digital technologies for heritage – particularly in Africa – where participants valued hands-on exposure to tools such as 3D modelling, laser surveying, virtual reality, camera traps and digital mapping.

However, the full adoption of these technologies remains constrained by limited access to equipment, insufficient funding and a lack of technical expertise or training. Evaluations revealed that 81% of participants identified technical training and capacity building as a top priority, followed by funding for digital infrastructure (74%), while policy frameworks (33%), mentorship and expert support (30%), and access to software and platforms (26%) were also noted as essential.

Significantly, there is a strong interest in establishing a 'regional community of practice on digital heritage in Africa', with 100% of respondents expressing support. Participants underscored the value of regular training and capacity-building sessions (22%) and shared digital tools and resources (20%) within such a platform. The expressed willingness to contribute to future initiatives signals a committed and engaged community, ready to drive the digital transformation of heritage preservation and promotion across Africa.

Global multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential for protecting heritage at risk. Since 2022, UNESCO's Heritage Emergency Fund (HEF) has supported 40 projects across 36 countries, providing $3 million in funding for emergency response and policy development in conflict situations. Another key mechanism is the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH), a public-private partnership that combines contributions from governments, private donors and international organizations to provide emergency assistance, fund restoration projects and strengthen resilience strategies by leveraging local expertise to safeguard cultural heritage worldwide. Funding for documentation, restoration and repair as the result of armed conflict was provided by the J.M. Kaplan Fund, the Mellon Foundation, the Whiting Foundation and several governments, including the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as the European Union. The Smithsonian Institution's Cultural Recovery Initiative worked to document and restore the Mosul Museum and has ongoing projects documenting destruction in Ukraine. Blue Shield International, an international CSO with over thirty national committees, has conducted several military and civilian training sessions and has assisted in documenting destruction in Ukraine.

While collateral damage to cultural heritage is not new, a troubling trend is that intentional and targeted destruction of cultural heritage sites in conflict zones has escalated. The need for stronger legal protections and greater emergency preparedness cannot be overstated. The 1954 Hague Convention and its protocols provide a foundational international legal framework for safeguarding cultural heritage in armed conflicts, with increasing global participation. In particular, more states need to ratify the Second Protocol, which has the advantage of requiring adoption of specific provisions for criminal enforcement.

Gaps in enforcement, funding and coordination persist: while emergency funding mechanisms exist, they remain limited, and many affected regions still lack adequate financial and technical resources for heritage protection and recovery. Encouraging progress has been made in maintaining inventories and registries, yet many states still lack adequate resources and systematic implementation. Enhanced protection under the Second Protocol is gaining traction, with a growing number of heritage sites receiving special safeguarding status. Perhaps the greatest weakness is the failure to hold perpetrators accountable. Despite the Al Mahdi case before the ICC, most instances of intentional destruction go unpunished, thereby demonstrating a lack of deterrent effect. Strengthening global collaboration, ensuring sustainable funding and integrating cultural heritage into broader disaster risk reduction strategies will be key to addressing these ongoing challenges. Similarly, integrating culture-sensitive tourism into recovery and development plans can serve multiple objectives, including by supporting economic revitalization, reinforcing heritage protection efforts and fostering intercommunity dialogue that contributes to sustainable peace and resilience.

## Combatting the illicit trafficking of cultural property

Operation Pandora IX, coordinated by Spain's Guardia Civil, was carried out during 2024 and led to 80 arrests and the recovery of over 37,727 cultural objects across Europe, with 258 cases pending in the participating countries. The operation demonstrates the results that can be achieved through coordination of law enforcement and customs officials from twenty-three countries (INTERPOL, 2025). Among the objects seized was a large number of archaeological artifacts, including those looted from underwater shipwrecks. These high-profile seizures highlight the escalating theft, looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property – most commonly coins, metals and archaeological artifacts, followed by paintings, sculptures and religious and historical objects. As advocated in the Pact for the Future, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly last year, there is an ever-increasing demand for the return of looted and stolen cultural property to their countries and communities of origin. In July of 2024, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York repatriated fourteen looted sculptures to Cambodia while a bronze statue of the Champa statue of the goddess Durga was returned from London to Viet Nam. Art dealer Douglas Latchford, who was later indicted, had trafficked these sculptures. There repatriations were yet another reckoning with the past, as Cambodia's culture minister hailed their return as 'welcoming home the souls of ancestors' and Viet Nam's Director of the National Museum of History, Dr Nguyen Van Doan, stated that the Durga statue is 'a rare antique of great value to Vietnamese culture and fine arts throughout historical periods' (Minh, 2024).

Underwater sites and particularly sunken historic shipwrecks are also vulnerable to looting and to natural disaster. Climate change increases these vulnerabilities through both revealing and eroding sites, particularly near the shoreline. Infrastructure constructed along the coast and exploitation of minerals on the seabed also pose threats (UNESCO, 2024a). Wrecked sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ships often carried precious metals, such as gold and silver, from colonized areas of South America back to Spain, and now fall prey to salvors, despite the fact that these wrecks are also gravesites and sometimes military sovereign property. Shipwrecks in the Baltic, particularly off the coast of Sweden, have also suffered from looting by both hobbyists and those seeking to sell more valuable objects on the international market (Bryant, 2023). Looting from more recent contexts has been seen as when Malaysian authorities accused a Chinese salvage operation of looting two iconic Second World War shipwrecks (Barrett, 2023). The 2001 UNESCO Convention on Underwater Cultural Heritage aims to minimize these risks, largely through establishing best practices in the accompanying Appendix to the Convention.

The theft of cultural property from cultural, religious and secular institutions and the looting of cultural artifacts from archaeological sites and from Indigenous communities have imposed serious detrimental effects on communities and countries of origin and on the broader universal understanding of our past. The detrimental effects of these illegal activities may be summarized. First, these actions deprive countries and communities of origin or descendant communities of access to their own heritage around which their identities and sense of communal belonging may be formed. Second, theft and looting deprive countries of origin and communities

P31 ship wreck in Malta © Jellyman Photography / Shutterstock.com*

of access to educational opportunities and skills training that would come from having these tangible manifestations of their cultural identity available to them. Through thefts from institutions, such as museums and destruction of archaeological sites, these communities are deprived of sources of pride and of sustainable economic support through cultural tourism. Third, in particular, the looting of archaeological sites to provide artifacts saleable on the international market destroys their original contexts. This significantly reduces our ability to reconstruct and understand the past.

Finally, in recent years, thefts and looting have been recognized as possibly providing funds for armed conflict and terrorism and may be linked to other forms of criminal activity, such as money laundering. Cultural property trafficking is one of the largest black markets, alongside arms, drug trafficking and human trafficking, with growing intersections among the illegal antiquities trade, organized crime, and terrorism and conflict financing (UNESCO, 2019). Criminal networks that dominate the illegal trade use intermediaries to sell objects through galleries, private collectors and online auctions. Preventing trafficking in cultural property is an essential element in obtaining security, as was recognized by UN Security Council Resolution 2347 in 2017 (Kersel and Gerstenblith, 2024). This was reaffirmed by UNGA Resolution A/79/L.16 Return or Restitution of Cultural Property to Countries of Origin in 2024, which highlighted the impact of looting and smuggling in conflict-affected regions.

These losses pose a serious risk to the collective memory of future generations, while also weakening the prospects for peace, social cohesion and post-conflict reconciliation (UN Secretary-General, 2023, Para. 37). The illicit trafficking of cultural property is a global issue affecting all regions with countries acting as the points of origin, market intermediaries and destination market countries (INTERPOL, 2022). These losses are exacerbated by armed conflicts and political instability as well as emergencies such as natural disasters and COVID-19 (UN General Secretary, 2023, Para. 37; European Union, 2021). Conflict zones, particularly in West Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe, remain current hotspots for looting (UNESCO, 2023c). The conflict in Ukraine is a case in point, with an increase in smuggling attempts from Ukrainian museums and historical sites of stolen religious artifacts, manuscripts and archaeological objects, many of which have been intercepted at international borders (World Customs Organization, 2022). In 2023, the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in Ukraine drained the lake and revealed archaeological sites. These sites thereby became accessible and scavenger hunters and looters competed with archaeologists to become the first to retrieve the artifacts (Gettleman, 2023). When government forces recovered the National Museum of Sudan from rebel forces in early 2025, it became apparent that the museum collection, particularly its collection of gold artifacts, had been stolen (Copnall, 2025).

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The 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property is the premier international legal instrument for regulating the international movement of cultural property. As of September 2025, 148 States have ratified it with most States adopting domestic legislation to implement its provisions through civil law, criminal law or a combination (1970 Convention Periodic Reports). For example, France, Germany, Canada and Australia have stringent laws prohibiting the import of cultural property that were illegally exported from their country of origin. Japan's Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties mandates state approval for the export of designated cultural goods. The United States' Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act requires a supplemental bilateral agreement under Article 9 of the Convention to prevent the import of illegally exported archaeological and ethnological materials. Similarly, Switzerland also requires an additional bilateral agreement to restrict the import of cultural property. Following the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, illicit trafficking of cultural property has gained prominence as a crisis-related issue, prompting several countries to update their laws in line with the 1970 Convention to strengthen prevention and prosecution (UNESCO, 2025b).

Another effective means of disincentivizing the looting of archaeological sites is through the mechanism of vesting ownership of undiscovered artifacts in the state. UNESCO and UNIDROIT adopted a model state ownership law in 2011 (UNESCO-UNIDROIT, 2012). When a state vests ownership of undiscovered archaeological artifacts and they are taken without permission, such artifacts are characterized as stolen property in a destination market country. This characterization is now accepted in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and, most recently, in France where a dealer was convicted for dealing in artifacts stolen from Egypt (Noce, 2022).

A significant weakness in many national laws is the lack of strong criminal penalties for cultural property crimes. Traffickers often face minimal legal risks, making illicit trade a low-consequence crime (UNODC, 2022). Some countries, however, have taken steps to address this. In March 2022, Italy enacted Law No. 22, Provisions on Crimes against the Cultural Heritage. This law implemented Italy's ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Offences relation to Cultural Property (the Nicosia Convention) and introduced stricter penalties for cultural heritage crimes, consolidated existing provisions and extended corporate liability to entities involved in illicit trade, such as auction houses, galleries and museums. France and Switzerland have also increased penalties for falsified provenance documents in response to high-profile cases involving illicit antiquities.

To further aid countries in strengthening their legal frameworks, UNESCO is proposing draft Model Provisions on the Prevention and Fight Against the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property. These provisions, though non-binding, offer a legal toolkit incorporating principles from the 1954 Hague Convention, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on the Return of Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects (which addresses the return of stolen or illegally exported cultural objects through the mechanism of private international law) and the Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property (Nicosia Convention), the only treaty explicitly criminalizing cultural property trafficking. While not yet finalized, these Model Provisions mark a significant step in also recognizing Indigenous cultural heritage as part of cultural property, with Provision 4 defining Indigenous cultural heritage as including property of cultural or spiritual interest to Indigenous Peoples (UNESCO, 2024c).

Many states regulate the import and export of cultural properties, with export controls generally stronger than import restrictions. Greece, for example, issues export licenses for temporary export for two years for specific cultural goods. For the first time, the United States imposed export restrictions on illegally-obtained Native American cultural materials and archaeological artefacts through the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act of 2022. The European Union's Regulation 2019/880, which took full effect on June 28, 2025, will for the first time regulate import of cultural goods entering the Union from non-EU Member States. These regulations mandate import licenses or declarations for cultural goods to verify legal export from the country of origin.

The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), in force since 2003, serves as the primary legal tool against transnational crime, including large-scale art smuggling and fake provenance documentation. With 193 States Parties and 143 ratifications, UNTOC is one of the most widely-adopted UN treaties, offering a powerful enforcement mechanism against trafficking networks. Recognizing the links between conflict financing and illicit cultural trade, UNTOC State Parties adopted Resolution 11/4 in October 2022, reinforcing crime prevention efforts to protect cultural property during crises, including armed conflicts and natural disasters.

Specialized cultural heritage services for the protection of cultural property have been established in almost all reporting Member States (1970 Convention Periodic Reports). Leading examples include Italy's Carabinieri for Cultural Heritage Protection, Spain's Guardia Civil Art and Antiquities Unit, and the Netherlands' Cultural Heritage Protection Team. Countries in East and Southeast Asia, such as Mongolia, Thailand and Cambodia, have also developed dedicated investigative units (UNESCO, SEA, 2019).

Many thefts and looting of cultural properties are done for economic benefit through selling objects on the international art market. How the art market responds to both legal and voluntary measures is a key element in responding effectively to this problem. The global art market has faced growing scrutiny over its role in illicit trafficking, as weak provenance checks have allowed stolen and otherwise illegal artifacts to enter museums and private collections. Recent high-profile repatriations include cases involving the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which returned looted artifacts to Cambodia, Italy and Egypt, following investigations into falsified provenance records, and the Louvre in Paris, which repatriated artifacts linked to international networks trafficking in antiquities from the Middle East. In response, key art institutions and private collectors have implemented self-regulation measures. Both the Metropolitan Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago set up provenance research teams in 2023 to review new

acquisitions and objects in the museum's existing collections. The 2022 Code of Conduct for Contemporary Art Collectors established ethical guidelines for buyers. Blockchain and AI-based provenance tracking are increasingly being adopted to ensure transparency in transactions.

The rise of digital platforms has significantly altered the landscape of the illegal trade. Online marketplaces, including social media, e-commerce sites and dark web platforms, have enabled anonymous, rapid and cryptocurrency-based transactions, making regulation difficult. Monitoring efforts track the sale of looted artifacts on social media (Hashemi and Waddell, 2022; Wartenberg and Dmitricenko, 2022). UNESCO, INTERPOL and EUROPOL analyse and monitor online platforms for stolen items. Despite these initiatives, low regulation of online sales in most regions remains a major loophole for illicit trafficking.

The lack of effective monitoring of trafficking is particularly concerning during conflicts and natural disasters. Budget constraints hinder efforts such as creating national cultural property inventories, digitizing records and ensuring their security, and developing emergency evacuation plans for heritage sites. Although most reporting countries have legislation, policies or guidelines requiring cultural property inventories, only two-thirds enforce a standardized national system (2015 Recommendation).[126] Even where inventories exist, coverage of protected artifacts remains inconsistent. More training of law enforcement agents and, in particular, prosecutors on how to build and carry out prosecutions is needed. As the theft and looting are transnational crimes, more coordination among the individual national frameworks and cooperation among both national and intergovernmental law enforcement agencies are needed.

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## Turning awareness into action against illicit trafficking and fostering international cooperation

Raising public awareness, including through media coverage, is a key strategy in combatting illicit trafficking in cultural property. UNESCO established the International Day against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property on 14 November 2020 to promote global awareness. It is set to launch a Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects in 2025, featuring 3D models and detailed histories of stolen cultural objects, with the unique mission to 'empty its collections' as recovered items are returned to their rightful owners. In line with the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, many countries have emphasized the need for continuous education initiatives targeting various stakeholders, including local communities, buyers, collectors and institutions, to reduce demand for illegally-obtained items (UNESCO, 2025b; UNESCO, 2023c; Michel, 2021). In 2021, for example, Germany implemented major reforms to its Cultural Property Protection Act (Kulturgutschutzgesetz – KGSG), originally enacted on 31 July 2016. One key change mandates that cultural heritage institutions and private collectors label Nazi-looted artworks when they are exhibited. This measure enhances transparency and raises public awareness about the provenance of cultural objects. However, challenges remain, particularly in raising awareness within the private sector about the risks associated with cultural property trafficking.

Law enforcement training and public education campaigns play a crucial role. INTERPOL's 2022 global communication campaign, conducted in collaboration with national police agencies in the Netherlands, Romania and France, is an example of coordinated law enforcement awareness-raising efforts (Countering the Illicit Trading of Cultural Goods, 2023). Beyond reporting stolen artifacts, local communities play a critical role in site protection. Political instability and economic hardship have historically fuelled looting, with rural communities engaging in illegal excavations as a means of survival (DAFA, 2023). In Afghanistan, for example, the illegal excavation has worsened since 2018, shifting from small-scale manual digs to mechanized looting, indicating greater organization and financial backing.

[126] *However, it is important to note that these findings are based on a relatively small sample size of responses, with 40 Member States respondents in the first case, and 21 Member States in the second.*

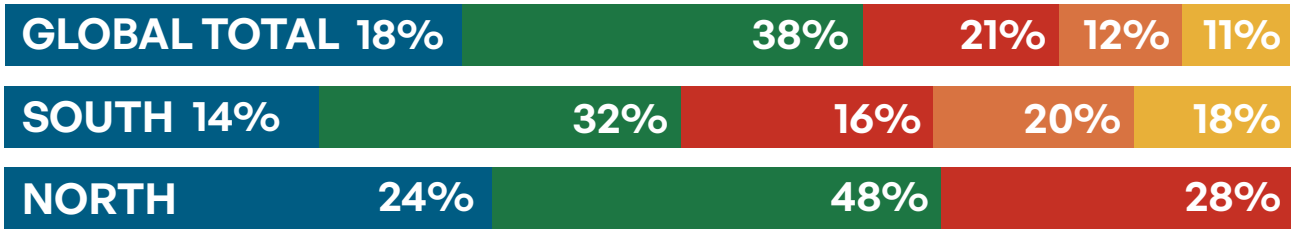
Community engagement and economic alternatives have proven effective in mitigating looting. In Afghanistan, agreements with local elders and religious leaders have successfully curbed illegal excavations in exchange for development projects, such as schools. Similarly, employment programmes in archaeology and sustainable income sources from tourism and museum development have provided alternatives to looting (DAFA, 2023). A comparable challenge was seen in Jordan's Early Bronze Age sites (3600–2000 BCE) along the Dead Sea Plain, where economic hardship drove local involvement in illicit excavation networks. While Jordan's Department of Antiquities attempted a buyback programme to purchase looted artifacts, this measure alone did not stop illegal digging. Fencing off sites and deploying guards also failed, highlighting the need for a community-centred approach. Research shows that raising awareness and fostering local pride in cultural heritage reduces looting more effectively than enforcement alone (Kersel, 2019).

Despite these successes, integrating communities into heritage protection strategies remains a challenge, particularly in countries with limited resources and expertise (UNESCO, 2025b). A multi-pronged approach – including community education, integrating cultural priorities into education, employment and development policies, alongside law enforcement and technological monitoring – is essential. This further underscores the importance of international cooperation, Official Development Assistance and collaboration with regional and local civil society organizations in safeguarding cultural heritage.

Continuous international cooperation is essential in combating illicit cultural trafficking, requiring partnerships with organizations like UNESCO and INTERPOL, the sharing of best practices and the establishment of bilateral and regional agreements. As transnational organized crime networks adapt to enforcement and geopolitical shifts (Arts Economics, 2024), joint initiatives such as Operation Pandora provide a strong model. Europe remains the largest recipient region for trafficked cultural goods, often serving as a redistribution hub (INTERPOL, 2022).

Alongside strengthened intelligence-sharing, border control and cross-border law enforcement, digital monitoring has proven to be a key tool in mitigating illicit trade. INTERPOL's ID-Art mobile application, launched on May 6, 2021, allows users to directly access the Stolen Works of Art Database, first established in 1995 alongside the adoption of the UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. However, global database integration remains inconsistent. Currently, 38% of reporting countries maintain independent databases not linked to INTERPOL's system, 18% have interconnected databases and 21% rely solely on INTERPOL's database (1970 Convention Periodic Reports).

**Figure 29. Member States reporting using a database of stolen cultural property, by Global North/Global South.**




"Yes, we have our own national or/and regional database that is linked with the INTERPOL database"

"Yes, we have our own national or/and regional darabase that is not linked with the INTERPOL database"

"Yes, we use the INTERPOL database (and do not have our own national database)"

"No, we do not currently have a national database or use the INTERPOL database"

"We would request assistance to establish such a database"

(Global total n=73, Global South n=44, Global North n=29).

Source: UNESCO, 1970 Convention Periodic Reports.
Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to label rounding.

The ICOM Red Lists, used by UNESCO and the EU, also aid in verifying provenance and raising awareness about at-risk cultural properties, though they do not list individual stolen items but instead highlight categories of at-risk cultural goods.

Given that trafficked property often resurfaces decades after being looted, long-term intelligence gathering and continuous monitoring are critical (Puskás, 2022). Many countries have entered into formal cooperation agreements, but regional disparities remain. In Africa, international cooperation on illicit trade remains limited, with few bilateral agreements between states (UNESCO, 2023). As Africa remains a key region of concern for the trafficking of cultural property, strengthening partnerships between African and European agencies is increasingly urgent (Puskás, 2022; INTERPOL, UNESCO, WCO). Expanding regional and international collaboration will be vital in curbing illicit trade and ensuring the restitution of stolen cultural heritage to its rightful communities.

The return and restitution of cultural property with spiritual, ancestral, historical and cultural significance is a growing priority in international cooperation, as outlined in the Pact for the Future, enabling countries of origin to reclaim and safeguard their heritage. In 2021, Germany introduced significant reforms to its Cultural Property Protection Act (Kulturgutschutzgesetz – KGSG), originally enacted in 2016, to strengthen protections for cultural property and streamline restitution processes. By 2023, Germany had expanded its restitution policies, returning more artifacts to their countries of origin, particularly those taken during colonial rule. Structured agreements were developed with Namibia, Cameroon and Tanzania to facilitate the return of stolen heritage from public institutions.

France has also taken steps in this direction, launching a new legal framework for the restitution of cultural artifacts in 2023. This national law simplifies repatriation processes, removing the need for case-by-case legislative approval, which was previously required for each restitution request. The reform builds on France's 2021 return of the Abomey Treasures to Benin, setting a precedent for future restitutions (Courier UNESCO, 2020). However, these legislative reforms have not yet addressed the restitution of cultural property dating back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of colonial rule. Meanwhile, China made a significant policy shift in 2023 with the publication of a revised draft of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics, which includes a restitution clause. This provision affirms the state's right to repatriate cultural relics lost overseas due to theft or illegal export, with no statute of limitation (Arts Economics, 2024). Across Africa, the importance of restitution has also been elevated, recognizing its economic and social dimensions. The African Union has reinforced efforts to reclaim cultural heritage, while the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) 2019–2023 Action Plan provided a framework for regional cooperation on the return of looted artifacts (UNESCO, EU, 2021).

Many museums and private institutions worldwide are responding to these developments by reassessing their collections and addressing colonial-era acquisitions, reviewing their holdings and engaging in restitution claims. Since 2021, institutions such as the University of Aberdeen, Jesus College Cambridge and the Smithsonian Institution returned several objects to Nigeria. Similar actions have been undertaken by museums in Germany and the Netherlands, marking a significant shift toward ethical stewardship and proactive restitution of culturally significant objects to their rightful owners. Consideration of the return of cultural objects acquired during periods of colonialism and imperialism are also being incorporated into policies of ethical returns and ethical stewardship. Such policies include, the Collaboration, Collections and Restitution Best Practices for United States Museums Holding African Objects adopted by the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (Arts Council of the African Studies Association 2024); the policy on shared stewardship and ethical returns adopted by the Smithsonian Institution in 2022 (Smithsonian, 2022); and, the Qingdao Recommendations (Xi, 2024). A new draft of the code of ethics of the International Council of Museums includes provisions for relationships with communities of origin and calls for 'deliberation and dialogue regarding the restitution, repatriation and return of heritage' (ICOM, 2025).

Combating illicit cultural property trafficking requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach, with stronger collaboration among law enforcement, customs agencies and the art market (European Union, 2021). Despite recent legal reforms and high-profile seizures, cultural property trafficking remains a major under-regulated and under-prosecuted crime, often linked to organized crime

and money laundering. While multinational operations like Pandora and emerging legislation signal are progressing, weak market regulations, enforcement gaps and loopholes in online trade continue to facilitate illegal activities. Addressing this issue demands stronger legal frameworks, digital tracking systems and tighter provenance requirements to improve monitoring of cultural property transactions. Enhanced international cooperation, public awareness and the adoption of advanced technologies will also be crucial in dismantling trafficking networks and ensuring the protection and rightful restitution of cultural heritage worldwide.

## Safeguarding creativity and diversity: strengthening support for culture professionals at risk

The right to culture has only gradually received recognition within the international human rights framework. The slow recognition of cultural rights makes protecting at-risk artists, other creative producers and cultural heritage workers more difficult within the system of granting protections to human rights defenders. Additionally, it should be recognised that artists and creative producers create not only tangible but intangible heritage as well. Since the adoption of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the intersection between culture, cultural heritage and human rights added a new focus on intangible heritage and cultural expressions. The bearers and producers of tangible and intangible cultural expressions and practices are often at considerable risk from multiple sources, but they are also becoming increasingly protected as regards themselves and their rights to continue their creativity. There are significant differences between at-risk artists and creative producers, on the one hand, and cultural heritage professionals, on the other. Creative producers may be at risk due to the nature of their productions, which are often critical of political and other developments. However, when the question of relocation for purposes of safety arises, cultural heritage professionals are far less mobile as they are often tied to the tangible sites, monuments and collections for which they care. Artists and creative producers may be more mobile, yet they are at greater risk of losing their identity through the process of relocation. For these reasons, the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration made protecting at-risk artists and cultural heritage professionals a priority.

This includes an emphasis on the gender dimension of artists and cultural heritage professionals at risk. This is due to the fact women face disproportionate risks, including heightened risk of gender-based violence, loss of livelihood, pay gaps and reduced access to funding, economic insecurity and other relevant challenges. UNESCO's Call for Action Art for All at the Heart of Tomorrow's Cultural Policies prioritizes gender equality by advocating for the protection and promotion of women artists and culture professionals in emergencies. This includes supporting their safety, livelihoods, psychosocial well-being and creative capacity through solidarity mechanisms, relocation measures (including dependents when necessary) and grants to sustain cultural expressions critical to community resilience. The initiative emphasizes establishing international safe corridors for exhibiting and selling their work, alongside fostering support networks and providing gender-sensitive trauma training for organizations to better assist women artists.

Similarly, through the Strategy for World Heritage in Africa (2022–2029), integrating entrepreneurship offers a powerful avenue for safeguarding creativity and diversity on the continent. The Strategy explicitly aims to strengthen the capacities of communities, including women, youth and Indigenous Peoples, to increase their engagement in heritage-related processes, foster creative industries and enhance conservation and sustainable practices at World Heritage properties. It also seeks to develop gender-responsive policies and frameworks to support inclusive development around these properties, and to encourage investment in sustainable heritage-related businesses and entrepreneurship. This approach provides direct economic benefits to culture professionals, reducing their risk and vulnerability, and incentivizes the preservation and transmission of heritage knowledge and skills to future generations, transforming safeguarding from a passive protection into a dynamic, economically viable and community-driven endeavour.

## Increasing risks for culture professionals amid global crises

The world is currently experiencing several worsening crises caused by the pandemic, climate change, refugee crises, an increase in authoritarian and illiberal governments, and multiple armed conflicts. These crises have exacerbated risk both for those who work in the cultural and creative industries worldwide – including artists and heritage workers – and for the diversity of cultural expressions being created, produced and enjoyed (IFACCA & SAC, 2023). These crises are affecting the status of the artist and the viability of their professions as a means to earn a living (UNESCO, 2023a). Culture professionals are losing their livelihood, artworks are being censored and artists are defunded, restricted, surveilled, abused, silenced, imprisoned, tortured, killed, or forcibly exiled. Their lives and work may become so constricted as to force self-imposed exile (Salzburg Seminar, 2023). At the same time, culture and the arts are global public goods that play a crucial role in offering hope, fostering social cohesion and providing diverse perspectives, which are critical in times of crisis (IFACCA, 2024). Nowhere was this irony more evident than during the COVID-19 public health emergency. As observed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, just when people were turning to culture as a coping mechanism during the pandemic, the very creators of that culture were facing unprecedented risks and challenges with at least 10 million jobs lost in 2020 alone (Bennoune, 2021; UNESCO, 2022c). While the 2024 World Trade Report noted that global cultural exports had rebounded to 95% of their 2019 levels by the end of 2023, employment recovery remains uneven, with significant gaps persisting in low- and middle-income countries.

The need to make culture professionals more resilient in the face of disasters, conflicts and emergencies has been actively acknowledged in the global agenda on culture, with the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration reiterating the call for the protection of cultural expressions, notably in times of crisis. This call goes hand in hand with a growing recognition of the particular risks, particularly the precarious economic situation, that many cultural workers face. Many artists are self-employed or undertake intermittent work or work in the informal sector. These aspects exacerbate their vulnerability in times of crisis as they may not qualify for traditional forms of social and economic protection, leading to a disproportionate impact compared to workers in more structured sectors (UNESCO, 2022c). This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the pre-existing precariousness of working conditions among artists and culture professionals.

In response to the pandemic, an overwhelming majority of states extended emergency support aimed at protecting the social and economic rights of artists and culture professionals (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports), with some like Norway drawing on those lessons to embed culture in emergency preparedness. Many countries adopted a range of financial support mechanisms for artists during the pandemic with a continuation post-pandemic of policies to encourage both public and private support (OECD, 2020). Most European countries introduced various support measures for artists and the culture sector during the pandemic, including deferred tax payments. Some EU Member States, such as Slovakia, used the EU Social Fund to support self-employed people, including artists and cultural workers. France modified its rules concerning its unemployment scheme for artists and made available to artists and authors lump sum payments from a solidarity fund. Germany assigned €50 billion of support for freelance artists and cultural and creative entities. The EU Commission recommended several additional support measures (European Parliament, 2020). The pandemic also exacerbated preexisting challenges, financial precarity and inequities in the status of artists. This led to a series of proposals to improve the working conditions of artists and other culture creatives, including support for short-term work schemes (European Parliament, 2021). For example, Chile and Colombia have incorporated cultural and human rights protections into their post-pandemic recovery strategies. Some artists used the time during the pandemic to find creative ways to raise necessary funds. Patreon noted that cultural creators and their fans opened 30,000 new accounts during the first three weeks of March 2020, the start of the pandemic (Madsen, 2020).

Artists and other culture professionals are at risk from overt and covert threats from state and non-state actors (including religious extremists, private individuals and arts communities themselves) that seek to stifle dissent and artistic depictions of behaviours that do not comply with religiously or politically-dictated norms. These risks intensify during emergencies – especially periods of social upheaval, political

violence, or armed conflict – when governments frequently impose restrictions on expression, significantly affecting artists' livelihoods and, crucially, endangering their freedom (UNESCO, 2022c). The Freemuse report for 2024 confirms increased risks for artists during conflict, increasing political influence over the arts and expanded use of foreign agent laws to restrict freedom of expression (Freemuse, 2025).

Armed conflict and other types of violence put cultural creatives and cultural heritage professionals at great threat. Since the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022, cultural workers – including creatives and cultural heritage professionals – have faced heightened risks (Kishkovsky, 2024), alongside a dramatic shift in the cultural landscape. The war has affected the 'diversity and richness of culture and cultural heritage', causing damage to cultural infrastructure and assets, reducing livelihoods for cultural creators, bearers and practitioners, limiting access to culture and impeding the exercise of cultural rights (World Bank et al., 2023). Internal and external displacement have affected cultural production as well: cultural heritage workers who are documenting the damage and destruction done to cultural property have also been targeted. Despite these challenges, cultural activities have continued in some regions, with some cultural institutions reopening and sponsoring temporary exhibitions. Despite the loss of funding, Ukraine's culture sector has demonstrated resilience and its importance for 'reestablishing a sense of normalcy and collective well-being' (World Bank et al., 2023).

In Latin America, culture professionals are increasingly being forcibly displaced due to pressures from organized crime spreading to countries where narco-violence didn't exist or had been quashed (Fundación Cartel Urbano, 2023). In Myanmar, an aerial attack against a music concert held in Kachin State reportedly resulted in the killing of popular Burmese singer Aurali Lahpai and at least eighty other people (Paddock, 2022).

UNESCO's 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist (covered in Chapter 2 for more detail) and its subsequent reports monitoring the Recommendation's implementation indicate states' continuing commitment to promote these principles. The 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, sets out the requirement of its 160 States Parties (as of July 2025) to safeguard the artist's freedom to create and to support cultural expression. In particular, the Convention's guiding principles state 'cultural diversity can be protected and promoted only if human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose cultural expressions, are guaranteed' (Article 2.1). These instruments promote recognition of the arts and culture as drivers of the economic sector, while at the same time being crucial components of diverse and pluralistic cultures.

## Culture professionals as human rights defenders: a path to greater protection

A key to protecting artists and cultural heritage workers is recognising their status as cultural rights defenders and therefore as human rights defenders. This recognition is crucial to enable them access to broader support frameworks, including the right to seek asylum in countries that are considered safe. The Office of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights has played a central role in the increased global awareness of the issue of freedom of artistic expression and its relationship with other human rights (OHCHR, 2019). The Special Rapporteur explicitly called for the recognition of cultural rights defenders as human rights defenders – those who defend cultural rights in accordance with international standards and are a core part of international human rights law. These cultural rights defenders fulfil an essential role in the universal human rights framework (Benoune, 2020). This framework is based on the human rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, to take part in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts. Additional legal instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, give more specific protections to the arts as part of the freedom of expression and the right to take part in cultural life. UNESCO's publication Defending Creative Voices: Artists in Emergencies, Learning from the Safety of Journalists (2023) underscores the need for dedicated measures to protect artists, emphasizing that they often face threats similar to journalists but with fewer established safeguards. The report calls for stronger networks of support, emergency assistance mechanisms and international cooperation to ensure the safety of artists, while highlighting the importance of recognizing artistic expression as a fundamental component of cultural rights. However, gaps remain in the legal and institutional mechanisms specifically protecting artists within human rights frameworks, especially when compared to the recognition routinely given to journalists (UNESCO, 2023b).

The growing emphasis on learning and collaboration between the cultural and creative industries and the human rights sector is encouraging. UNESCO's Art Lab for Human Rights and Dialogue has strengthened links with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to raise awareness of the transformative power of art in humanitarian work and to facilitate exchanges between artists and cultural workers and humanitarian workers (UNESCO Art Lab, 2020). Examples of collaborations, such as the establishment of shared frameworks for protecting artists at risk or arts organizations training human rights groups to recognize and support persecuted artists, could serve as models for future efforts. The Human Rights Film Network uses the creative medium of film to present the struggle for human rights and dignity in an effective manner. The Network is a partnership of more than 40 independent film festivals presented throughout the world (Human Rights Film Network, 2023).

However, it must be acknowledged that not all artists may identify as, or wish to be described as, human rights defenders (Cuny, 2021). While this framework can offer valuable protection and advocacy, some artists perceive it as placing them in an activist role to qualify for protection, rather than allowing them to be recognized solely for their artistic expression; others remain unaware of ongoing advocacy efforts being conducted on their behalf under this label. Additionally, the expectation to adopt a political or activist identity to receive protection can create added pressure, particularly for artists already working in precarious circumstances.

Research suggests that artists who are perceived as social leaders or policy watchdogs often face heightened risks (Fundación Cartel Urbano, 2023). Nevertheless, artistic and cultural practices, even when not explicitly framed as human rights work, can have a profound impact on promoting human rights and fostering dialogue (Bennoune, 2018).

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## Protecting the rights of at-risk artists and culture professionals

There are three approaches to protecting the rights of at-risk cultural workers. The first focuses on legislative reform to strengthen the rights of freedom of expression and associated rights, including artistic freedom and on the integration of the cultural and creative industries into emergency and disaster preparedness and response mechanisms. The second approach is providing support to artists and creatives in situ – that is, providing advisory, logistical and financial support. In addition, where relevant, access to legal representation may be provided within the artists' existing countries and communities, such as, for example, that provided by Avant Garde Lawyers, who provide innovative legal strategies and representation for artists facing risks.

The third mechanism is providing support and services to those who must leave their current location. Temporary International Relocation Initiatives (TIRI) continue to effectively meet the immediate protection needs of at-risk culture professionals for a safe environment including through the academic model of relocation to a university for specialized courses or placements, the municipality-based model of city-led support (such as the twenty-four cities in the Netherlands under the Shelter City programme) and the residency-based model providing creative space and community within which artists can continue to create (Blackmore, 2021). The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) is the largest global network of cities and regions providing temporary protective residences for writers, artists and journalists in 87 cities. The significance of increasing availability of safe havens for cultural rights defenders facing threats cannot be underestimated.

However, temporary relocation is not without its challenges and disadvantages, particularly for artists. Access to relocation opportunities is uneven and financial support for family and dependents is often insufficient, even when the relocation opportunities exist. As professionals removed from their productive, cultural or creative environments, artists may suffer a decrease in their creative capacity, while home communities lose potential for artistic creation (Blackmore, 2021). Artists are reliant on the ability to create, communicate and display their work. Artists are often part of a creative community and leaving that community may impinge on the ability of the artist to continue to create. Moving to a different country may put an artist in limbo or at risk of losing cultural legitimacy – no longer being an artist of the country of origin or milieu. Because of their reluctance to leave, when it becomes necessary for artists to leave, they must do so quickly, which poses additional obstacles to their safe movement.

A recent positive development in this regard is the increase in regional relocations, offering important alternatives to the long-standing trend of relocation primarily to Western Europe and North America. Excellent examples are the work of Ubuntu Hub Cities of African Defenders (Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network), the Shelter City programme of the Africa Human Rights Network and Artists-at-Risk Connection that has supported relocations in cities such as Abidjan, Tunis and Bamako (Blakemore, 2021). Funding made available by the Martin Roth Initiative supports relocation within artists' regions of origin including neighbouring countries. Artist-led initiatives include the Artists' Shelter in Mae Sot, Thailand, which was established by Myanmarese artists. International funding and support programmes remain essential, but there is a growing call for better coordination among them as well as for broader awareness of their programmes (Artists at Risk Connection, 2023). Latin American artists, for example, continue to remain underrepresented in safe havens across Europe and North America, highlighting the importance of expanding access and outreach efforts (Cuny, 2021).

The most robust approach to temporary relocation has proven to be a comprehensive framework of emergency interventions (including the establishment of safe houses and emergency non-immigrant visas). Collective efforts by state and civil society actors, as well as holistic approaches, remain critical. These emergency actions are complemented by structured, long-term support beyond the initial relocation from well-prepared host organizations, which recognize that artists' struggles do not end when the artist is in exile but instead present new challenges. Such support includes access to professional networks, career planning, financial aid, mental health services and access to social integration programmes that mitigate cultural and linguistic barriers and improve local awareness about the value of artists in their community (Müller, 2019). The Artistic Freedom Initiative, which is devoted to assisting artists who are at

risk, provides many services, including legal representation, relocation assistance and housing, employment and fellowship opportunities. Information sharing, collaboration and coalition building within the culture sector, as well as with human rights organizations, are more important than ever (Müller, 2019). Regular and continuous emergency funding streams exist. However, compared to journalists, for instance, there is a lack of robust emergency mechanisms for evacuating and relocating artists at risk, leading to insufficient immediate support (UNESCO, 2023b). Addressing this funding gap is crucial given the increasing risks to artists and artistic freedom.

The example of Afghanistan and the efforts to resettle refugee artists and cultural heritage Professionals in Germany illustrate what can be achieved through cooperative efforts. After the fall of the government in Afghanistan in 2021, artists and cultural workers were particularly vulnerable and efforts to relocate them became urgent (Artistic Freedom Initiative and Berkeley School of Law, 2023). Refugee visa programmes are one method of achieving resettlement, with an alternative to refugee visas in the talented worker visa. However, these require sponsors such as academic institutions and museums and skew toward older individuals. Germany played an innovative role in adopting a specific visa program, Bundesaufnahmeprogramm or the German federal admission programme for Afghanistan, which included those who work in culture. Under this program, about 120 artists and cultural heritage workers were resettled in Germany.

Afghans are identified as being at particular risk due to their commitment to human rights or their work in justice, politics, the media, education, culture, sports, or academia, as assessed by German civil society organizations through a nomination process. The Humanitarian Admission Program (HAP) engaged in advocacy by human rights groups and organizations. AFI's advocacy for Afghan resettlement under HAP is dependent on multiple organizations in Germany lobbying the government (Artistic Freedom Initiative and Berkeley School of Law, 2023). The Goethe Institute is setting up the Afghanistan Cultural Fund as a long-term fund open to Afghan artists, ensembles, organizations and initiatives within the diaspora and exile communities. Women and newcomers are especially encouraged to apply (Afghanistan Cultural Fund, 2024).

Afghan women artists and musicians have been particularly targeted. These women have continued to defy the restrictions imposed upon them and have used their creative endeavours to amplify marginalized voices, safeguard ancient musical legacies and perpetuate Afghanistan's artistic essence (CFFP, 2023). The Paranda network is an active, informal virtual space for Afghan women writers, including those resettled in Germany since 2021. It is supported by KfW Stiftung and the CSO Untold Narratives. The network enables the writers to continue working as a group (Paranda Network, 2024).

Sabina Haupt, a writer and literature professor at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, illustrates how individual advocacy can make a difference. The Swiss immigration laws are particularly onerous. Applicants for humanitarian visas must demonstrate that their 'life and physical integrity is directly, seriously and tangibly endangered in their home country'. Belonging to an at-risk group – such as artists or cultural workers – is not enough to qualify for a Swiss humanitarian visa, as the threat must be individualized. Out of 1,759 applications for humanitarian visas made by Afghans, only 98 were granted in 2022. Despite the low approval rate, Sabina Haupt, with assistance from the Swiss-German PEN Center (DSPZ) and other Swiss writers, has aided dozens of Afghan intellectuals and artists in their humanitarian visa applications. In February 2022, the DSPZ submitted humanitarian visa applications for 43 Afghan writers and their families, who have since safely relocated to Switzerland. While not a lawyer, Sabina Haupt prepared a dossier with documents and evidence for every application and sought institutional backing from the DSP. This individual initiative demonstrates the impact that a single person willing to organize, advocate and build a coalition on behalf of vulnerable populations can have (Artistic Freedom Initiative and Berkeley School of Law, 2023)

The success of relocation efforts depends significantly on the preparedness and engagement of host organizations (Yazaji, 2025). Many artists struggle to integrate due to a lack of structured support, inadequate orientation and the perception that they are being treated as guests rather than as equal professionals (ARC, 2023). Additionally, host organizations need experience in conflict transformation, particularly as artist communities themselves can be polarized and diverse. Ensuring that artists' contributions are valued in their new communities is essential.

A powerful example of this is the 2024 LIMBO Festival, a collaborative art and culture project between Myanmar and Thai artists, held in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Spearheaded by The LIMBO Collective – a group of creatives from both Thailand and Myanmar – the festival emerged from a year-long dialogue among artists and human rights activists from both countries as a platform to transform anger and desperation into a hopeful, safe and diverse community through food, art, culture and humour (Wei, 2024). The Voice of Women is the Voice of Freedom is an art installation created by Kurdish artists Khanda Hameed and Nabaz Samad to preserve Kurdish language and cultural identity in a location removed from their homeland of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is on display at the ZKM Karlsruhe (Germany) exhibition space as part of Fellow Travelers, which brings together artists, scientists, communities and citizens to collaborate and learn from each other. Hameed and Samad focus on the role of women in the struggle to preserve the Kurdish language and the structural connections between the oppression of women, language and culture, thereby highlighting the resilience of Kurdish women (Artists at Risk, 2025).

While many organizations assist in relocating at-risk individuals, very few provide support for their return once it is safe (Müller, 2019). One organization, Ettijahat, has supported Syrian artists in the diaspora and their mobility. It is now turning to support the arts and artists who are returning to the Syrian Arab Republic after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 (Alkafri, 2025).

## Increasing efforts to monitor artistic freedom in a fragile ecosystem

The monitoring of artistic freedom violations remains crucial for emergency support as well as for longer term advocacy and change. On the positive side, there is a growing recognition that monitoring violations of artistic freedom requires specialized expertise and systematic approaches (IFACCA & SAC, 2023; IFACCA, 2024). Civil society organizations increasingly engage in structured documentation. One such initiative is the Arts Equator's Southeast Asian Censorship Database, which systematically tracks violations across the region through local expertise (Arts Equator, 2025). Another example is Koalisi Seni's initiative in Indonesia empowering local communities to document and report violations. The Building Bridges project, implemented by UNESCO in partnership with Freemuse, builds on existing initiatives and experiences to analyse threats to artistic freedom in order to improve and develop joint documentation, monitoring and advocacy, nationally, regionally and internationally (UNESCO, 2024b).

However, the challenges that monitoring organizations face, particularly when working under restrictive regimes, remain insufficiently understood and are exacerbated by project-based funding models rather than sustainable longer-term support. Shortcomings in knowledge, data and awareness concerning the challenges of artistic freedom worldwide were the subject of a report by the Forum for International Cultural Relations (Reitov and Whyatt, 2024). Sustainable funding, including for core operational and human resource costs, is now urgently needed to ensure the long-term viability of monitoring organizations. This need applies both to organizations dedicated specifically to monitoring of artistic freedom violations and to broader cultural policy observatories (such as the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends). Stable support is crucial to effectively address under-reporting and to bridge significant knowledge gaps, particularly in countries with restrictive regimes or weak legal frameworks (IFACCA, 2024). Designation of monitoring organizations as foreign agents further complicates their operations. Systematic and global collaboration among monitoring organizations needs to be strengthened (UNESCO, 2022c).

# Conclusions and key takeaways

The protection of artists and culture professionals at risk has seen limited progress despite increased policy commitments, including emergency support measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and recognition in the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration of the importance of protection of culture professionals during emergencies. There has been an increase in safe havens, improved monitoring of artistic freedom violations and a growing call to recognize artists as cultural rights defenders. However, significant challenges remain particularly amid ongoing global crises, particularly ins-

tances of armed conflict and the growth in authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies. The reduction of international funding for humanitarian and human rights projects has led to decreased resources for related operations, with some grant recipients redirecting funds away from the arts when these are not central to their mandate. This situation poses challenges for the future viability of civil society organizations working in the field of artistic and cultural rights. Challenges include the lack of sustained funding and limited access to emergency visas. Strengthening long-term funding for CSOs working in the realm of promoting and protecting artistic and cultural freedoms and holistic interventions, expanding regional safe havens and fostering structured collaborations between cultural and human rights organizations are essential to ensuring sustainable support for at-risk culture professionals.

A key finding is that relocation and post-relocation support is needed: as the 1980 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist pointed out and as remains true today, the protection of artists at risk or in exile requires greater attention, financial support and collective action by both governments and non-governmental organizations. Recognition of artists and cultural heritage workers as human rights defenders can assist in these methods of reducing the risks that they face, with gender responsive measures particularly needed.

This chapter focuses on certain key questions with respect to whether artists and cultural heritage workers receive adequate protection in carrying out their professions, whether cultural heritage is adequately protected during armed conflict, violence and natural disasters spurred on by climate change, and whether efforts are being taken to prevent the trafficking of cultural objects. The chapter concludes that the current international legal framework found primarily in the UNESCO culture conventions provide an adequate framework for pursuing these goals. The chapter also examines the extent and manner of ratification and implementation of these conventions by States and other steps taken by governments, sub-State actors and CSOs to promote the goals of protecting artists, cultural heritage defenders and cultural heritage at risk from armed conflict, other forms of violence, climate change and threats from theft, looting and trafficking of cultural objects. More can and needs to be done in line with the recommendations that follow, while at the same time recognizing that much has already been accomplished to achieve these goals.

- **Support the active coalitions of organizations working on cultural rights that would coordinate efforts to protect artistic freedom.** The coalition would be premised on the recognition of artists, other creatives and cultural heritage workers would receive the same levels of recognition and protection as other human rights defenders. This should have a strong commitment to gender responsive approaches to support cultural rights, including targeted gender responsive activities where women artists and cultural workers are most under threat.

- **Recognize the unique needs of cultural rights defenders within the human rights framework,** particularly with respect to the relocation option. Develop a model of best practices for preparing to relocate artists and other cultural rights defenders when necessary.

- **Concretize international cooperation, knowledge exchange and investment to tackle illicit trafficking of cultural goods.**

- **Strengthen the implementation and ratification of the appropriate international legal instruments, especially the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention,** and adoption of effective national implementing legislation for the 1954 Hague regime and the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Continue encouraging effective implementation of the UN instruments that protect artistic freedom, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

- **Member States must adopt and implement comprehensive risk reduction plans and strategies** to counter the effects of all forms of natural disasters, climate impacts, armed conflict and other forms of violence against all forms of heritage. These strategies should include taking into consideration the siting and retrofitting of cultural repositories and the retrofitting of repositories to mitigate potential damage and losses from both natural disasters and armed conflict. While it is not possible to change the siting of immovable heritage, harm can be mitigated through the placement of military targets away from cultural

institutions and the seeking of Enhanced Protection status for sites, structures and repositories. Recognize the importance of integrating the cultural and creative industries into emergency preparedness and response mechanisms.

- **The international legal framework needs to be updated and oriented toward solving the problem of online sales of cultural property.** This is a multi-faceted problem which requires multilateral solutions and significant innovation in identifying, tracking and responding to online sales of cultural property.

- **Building on the clear demand for digital capacity, it is recommended to establish a regional community of practice focused on digital heritage,** which could be pioneered in Africa, fostering collaboration and the sharing of tools and resources. This community should prioritize training and capacity-building sessions, along with promoting the sharing of digital tools and resources and exploring joint project opportunities.

- **Furthermore, to address the identified challenges in integrating technology, significant investment is needed in technical training and capacity building, alongside securing increased funding for digital infrastructure.** This support should also encompass policy frameworks, mentorship and expert guidance, and improved access to essential software and equipment, ensuring a holistic approach to empowering heritage professionals with the necessary digital tools and expertise.

# Policy Brief
## *Angela Martins*

Acting Director for Social Development, Culture and Sport and Head of the Culture and Sport Division at the African Union Commission

## Protecting artists and culture at risk and bolstering resilience, peace and stability

Culture is not only a reflection of who we are as a people, but it is also a powerful tool to build a sense of shared identity, shared values, social cohesion, culture for peace and collective understanding in a community. It also plays a key role in socioeconomic development, innovation, resilience and stability.

Artists and cultural workers are essential contributors to sustainable development and the socioeconomic fabric of our societies. Their talent, creativity, technical and soft skills enable them to express themselves, communicate ideas and communicate to society through various art disciplines and cultural practices.

However, at times, artists and the culture sector at large, can be at risk due to various factors including precarious working conditions, limited access to financial resources, lack of diversity and inclusion, potential for censorship or restrictions on freedom of expression. In addition, the non-prioritization of the sector in terms of resources allocation at various levels can also pose challenges for the achievement of its full potential.

A clear example of an element of culture at risk are some of the world's languages at risk of extinction and loss due to several factors including policies of assimilation, dispossession of lands, discriminatory laws and actions, colonization and government policies.

Another example is the plundering and looting of culture assets during conflict times and in the past during colonial times. The restitution of these heritage resources is a matter of urgency for the benefit of its communities and to enable the transmission of a people's history, rich heritage and culture to generations to come.

It is our role as policy makers, independent cultural experts, governments and ultimately the artists and cultural workers themselves, to ensure that we bolster resilience to curb the impact of risk in the sector, by creating an optimum environment for creativity and artistic work to grow, prosper and be protected as well as promoting the preservation of our languages and heritage. Resilience should be bolstered proactively and reactively, and it should be a continuous process of capacity building and adaptation to change.

The inclusion of culture and the arts in key blueprint and international development frameworks can strongly support our cause in protecting our cultures and artists. A call to enhance the ratification, domestication and implementation of key international instruments in this area should be our starting point.

Below are key elements which can also support this important cause:

**01.** Enhance the global policy landscape in the protection of artists and culture and its implementation at various levels.

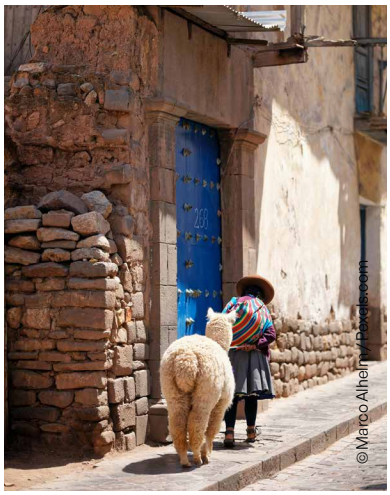
**02.** Advocate for a stand-alone goal for culture in the post 2030 global development agenda which will strengthen reporting on culture issues and contribute to its prioritization and visibility.

**03.** Strengthen the advocacy for the ratification and implementation of international instruments including the UNESCO 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist, the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

**04.** Encourage the development of all dynamic values of cultural heritage that promote human rights, social cohesion and human development.

Flamenco dance, Seville, Spain © EdgarSerrano / Unsplash.com.

# Conclusion – Integrating culture as a stand-alone goal for sustainable development, peace and security[127]




Cuzco, Peru

## A growing global momentum for the recognition of culture

The global understanding of development has undergone profound shifts over the past five decades – shifts that have brought the role of culture increasingly into focus. The growing concept of sustainable development, defined by the UN in 1987 as development that 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', profoundly influenced both theory and practice. This was reinforced by the cultural turn of the 1980s, which underscored a vital truth: development policies and programmes often fail when they disregard the local cultures, knowledge systems and values of the people they seek to serve.

From UNESCO's first Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Venice (1970), to the landmark MONDIACULT 1982 in Mexico City, and through the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988–1997), the foundational role of culture in shaping human development has been repeatedly affirmed. Yet over time, as the global policy landscape evolved – bringing with it new crises and complexities – a growing global consensus emerged that the dominant development models, often blind to cultural dimensions, have reinforced inequalities, including gender inequalities and imperilled the planet.

Against this backdrop, a new momentum has emerged – one that recognizes that culture is not just a sector of society, but a system of meaning, belonging, creativity and care. Culture enables diverse multilateralism, animates context-sensitive climate action, supports representative digital transformation and contributes to gender equality and inclusive economic growth. Its integration into sustainable development is no longer a conceptual aspiration – it is a practical imperative.

In recent years, this recognition has been expressed with greater clarity and urgency. In 2022, 40 years after the original MONDIACULT, delegates from 150 Member States gathered again in Mexico City to adopt a bold new declaration: to affirm culture as a global public good and call for its inclusion as a specific goal in future development frameworks. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration identified six priority areas for action and marked a historic turning point, acknowledging the multiple ways culture contributes to addressing the world's most pressing challenges – from climate change and biodiversity loss to armed conflicts and unsustainable development patterns. Furthermore, the implementation gaps revealed in the 2030 Agenda have underscored the urgency for more inclusive, localized and rights-based approaches –areas in which culture can provide unique and impactful contributions.

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[127] *Patrick Kabanda, international researcher linking the arts and international affairs, and author of The Creative Wealth of Nations, provided a valuable input to the initial drafts of the conclusion.*

This momentum has since accelerated across the multilateral landscape. In 2023, the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration called for the full recognition and protection of culture as 'a transformative driver and enabler for the achievement of the SDGs', explicitly urging its inclusion as a stand-alone goal in post-2030 discussions. The following year, G7 Culture Ministers echoed this call, emphasizing the role of culture and the creative economy in building inclusive, future-oriented development policies.

At the United Nations level, the adoption of the Pact for the Future in 2024 reaffirmed this shift. While it fell short of naming culture as a stand-alone goal, it acknowledged culture and sport as integral to sustainable development and committed Member States to integrating culture into economic, social and environmental strategies. Regional frameworks – from the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the CELAC Culture Agenda to the European Work Plan for Culture – have likewise elevated culture as a transformative force.

National and local governments have responded by embedding culture in climate strategies, post-COVID recovery plans, gender equality policies and social inclusion initiatives. Many now measure the contribution of cultural and creative industries to GDP, employment and well-being. Civil society, Indigenous leaders, artists, youth networks and local communities are uniting around a shared demand: culture must be visible, valued and structurally supported – not only as an enabler of development, but as a foundation of human flourishing. New platforms for policy dialogue and knowledge sharing, including South-South and triangular cooperation mechanisms, have fostered innovation and solidarity among States with diverse cultural ecosystems.

As this Global Report demonstrates, culture is increasingly being operationalized in public policy: from urban regeneration to post-disaster recovery, from conflict prevention to digital access and cultural rights. Yet, the scaffolding to sustain this work remains fragile: institutional mechanisms, funding systems and regulatory frameworks have not kept pace with the realities on the ground. Culture also faces a data challenge: while there has been considerable progress in recent years to boost the quality and consistency of cultural data, much of it presented in this report, there is still an urgent need to upgrade the approach to data capture and thus evidence-based policymaking. This is a particular challenge in Member States with limited resources and limited track record in data collection for culture. Better data will bring enhanced policy instruments and be vital to unlocking both public and private financing for culture. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to systematically integrate gender equality into cultural policies and their implementation. This is crucial to drive societal transformation and to ensure that girls can create and fully participate in cultural life, by protecting their safety, livelihoods and psycho-social well-being and by providing them with equal opportunities, including access to cultural leadership roles.

The current convergence of political will, community leadership and data-driven insight signals a critical juncture. The recognition of culture as a driver and enabler of development and equality is no longer theoretical. It is being operationalized in public policies and funding strategies around the world – albeit unevenly and often without adequate institutional support.

The question is no longer whether culture belongs in sustainable development – but how it can be recognized, measured and resourced as a pillar of the next global agenda. As this concluding chapter will argue, only a stand-alone goal can provide the visibility, coherence and ambition that the cultural field urgently requires.

## Weaving culture into the policy fabric

This evolving recognition is also reflected in the increasing integration of culture across a range of policy areas. At UN level, culture has been recognized as an essential prerequisite for peace and security, as evidenced by the New Agenda for Peace presented by UN Secretary-General António Guterres in July 2023 and the UN Human Rights Council Resolutions. At local and national levels, public bodies beyond the culture sector are including culture in planning, implementation and legislation, echoing UNESCO's vision for peace: 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'.

However, such integration often remains fragmented. Many interventions and policies focus on specific aspects of the cultural and creative industries – such as the protection of cultural property or the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage –

rather than addressing the cultural and creative industries as a whole (UNESCO, 2024). Moreover, the depth and scope of the integration of culture into broader development strategies vary significantly depending on the policy area, regional context and the level of economic development.

For example, while notable progress has been made at the national level in connecting culture, heritage and cultural protection with supporting post-conflict reconciliation efforts – highlighting culture's role in fostering social cohesion – there is relatively less emphasis on linking culture to climate action agendas. Economic disparities further influence the scale and implementation of culture-based initiatives: 90% of high-income Member States reported implementing cultural industry-led regeneration initiatives at regional, urban, or rural levels in the past four years, compared to only 69% of low-income Member States (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

The strategic role of culture is also increasingly acknowledged in national sustainable development plans, with 93% of reporting Member States[128] recognizing culture as a key element in their development strategies. However, fewer Member States recognize the more specific contributions of the cultural and creative industries (80%) and of creativity and innovation (77%), indicating a gap between broad recognition of culture and its operational integration into sector-specific policies (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). There are also noticeable nuances and differences in how various aspects of culture are prioritized. Within the domain of heritage, for example, the objective of 'protecting biological and cultural diversity and providing ecosystem services and benefits' is the most widely integrated strategic element in national plans. In contrast, 'protecting heritage during conflict' and 'contributing to post-conflict recovery' are the least integrated (1972 Convention Periodic Reports), revealing gaps in policy attention to culture's role in crisis response and peacebuilding.

While the importance of intangible cultural heritage is recognized in development interventions by a majority of Member States – 88% of the Global North and 87% of the Global South – this recognition does not consistently extend to development cooperation strategies. Only 58% of Global South and 46% of Global North Member States report that their development cooperation strategies recognize the strategic role of creativity and diverse cultural expressions (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). This persistent gap underscores a broader trend: although culture is widely valued within development discourse, it remains underrepresented in development cooperation strategies and in Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding frameworks.

# Culture: the missing piece

The case for a stand-alone goal for culture is rooted in both principle and necessity. The world is navigating an era of profound uncertainty: ecological crisis, digital transformation, conflict, rising inequality and eroding trust in institutions. In this context, culture offers tools – through memory and innovation, identity and dialogue, continuity and imagination. It equips societies not only to endure change but to shape it.

As demonstrated throughout this report, fully integrating culture into sustainable development practices and policies yields significant benefits. It fosters culturally diverse and inclusive governance, enhances the localization of development through context-specific values and knowledge systems, and promotes peaceful coexistence by strengthening mutual understanding, gender equality and social cohesion. Culture also enables a rights-based approach to development by advancing cultural and human rights, addressing disparities, such as gender inequalities, and empowering communities to shape their own futures.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the vulnerabilities of the culture sector. Cultural venues shuttered, livelihoods were lost, and transmission of living heritage was disrupted. Emergency support – though vital – proved uneven and short-lived. The crisis made clear what many already knew: culture is vital, but vulnerable, and without long-term policy frameworks, its contributions risk being overlooked or lost.

At the same time, the crisis demonstrated culture's role in resilience. People turned to music, stories and digital cultural content for meaning and connection, artists created space for collective mourning, hope and critique, and communities relied on traditional knowledge to adapt to new challenges. Culture was able to support society, not accessorily, but as infrastructure.

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[128] *This assessment was based on the quadrennial periodic reports of the 2005 Convention, submitted between 2019 and 2024, with a global total of 111 reporting Member States.*

Yet today, new pressures demand new responses. Climate change, displacement, digital monopolies and shrinking civic space have a disproportionate impact on women and girls. They also endanger cultural rights and expressions, especially of Indigenous Peoples, youth and marginalized communities. Without a coordinated global commitment, these threats risk further entrenching inequality and cultural loss.

# Box 9.
# Art for all: recommendations to put gender equality at the heart of tomorrow's cultural policies.

01. **Embed gender equality in cultural policies to drive societal transformation and design cultural policies to empower women and girls to create and fully participate in cultural life.** This starts with an analysis of the systemic barriers and challenges they face, examining their access to funding opportunities and resources, to networks and platforms for artistic expression, to leadership roles and decision-making positions, to social security protection and decent working conditions as well as to digital and entrepreneurship skills.

02. **Invest in robust data collection and develop a monitoring framework that links gender equality to cultural policy outcomes.** This system should ensure consistent, verifiable, and sex-disaggregated data to inform policy decisions and measurable indicators to track progress that can inform the design, implementation and monitoring of impactful gender equality initiatives in the culture sector.

03. **Protect and promote women artists and cultural professionals at risk in emergency situations** by supporting their safety, livelihoods, psycho-social well-being, and ability to create, notably through solidarity mechanisms and relocation measures for them and their dependents when necessary. Provide support for the continuation of their cultural expressions in situations of emergency in recognition of the role that culture and the arts play in the resilience of communities. Establish safe corridors for their work to be exhibited and sold internationally and offer grants to support their creative endeavors in exile. Strong support networks at all levels are essential, along with gender sensitivity and trauma training for organizations to better support women artists.

04. **Develop comprehensive programmes to support women's transition into cultural leadership roles,** particularly in creative functions and culture sector where they are underrepresented, by providing career progression opportunities, connecting emerging talents with established leaders and role models, expanding funding opportunities and recognizing their essential role in the global creative economy.

05. **Amplify the visibility of women's talents and contributions to the culture sector** through awards, exhibitions, and platforms that recognize women's creative talents and innovations that can help shift and restore the narrative around women's role in safeguarding heritage and contributing to the development of the cultural and creative industries. This is vital to promote diverse representation in artistic narratives, including in public spaces and in the digital realm, and diversify museum collections as well as art history.

06. **Leverage artificial intelligence and digital technologies to create innovative pathways for women content creators** to produce and distribute their artistic works, ensuring fair remuneration and protecting intellectual property rights while actively combating online harassment and

gender bias in AI through diverse data sets and development teams, notably in emergency situations where their digital rights and freedoms are more at risk.

07. **Provide safe and adequate infrastructure and facilities for women and girls** within cultural and artistic exhibition spaces and venues, ensuring dedicated areas and protocols for women creators and performers.

08. **Promote safety and well-being in the culture sector** and implement zero tolerance policies and measures to eliminate harassment, gender-based violence and abuse within cultural and creative organizations and workplaces, including in the digital environment.

09. **Acknowledge and take action with the cultural and creative industries as partners to eliminate the distribution of stereotypes, violent acts and images harming women and girls** and introduce media literacy approaches in arts and cultural education curricula to provide girls and boys with the critical thinking tools they require to decipher the negative images and messages about women that can be conveyed through cultural content.

Addressing these challenges also requires stronger data systems and accountability mechanisms. As highlighted by the authors in this report – and reaffirmed by over 50 experts at the UNESCO Workshop on Rethinking Cultural Measurement (April 2025, in collaboration with UIS and the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi) – culture remains inconsistently defined, weakly measured and underrepresented in development indicators. A stand-alone goal would catalyze investment in longitudinal impact studies and culturally relevant indicators, enabling a more evidence-based and equitable policy environment.

Moreover, a stand-alone goal would serve as a lever for coordinated national and international action. It would ensure that cultural dimensions are meaningfully embedded across key sectors – education, environment and the economy – by fostering alignment and commitment across ministries. It would also strengthen intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation, creating space for shared strategies and joint investment. Crucially, it would catalyze the systematic integration of culture into broader policy domains, such as disaster risk reduction, urban development, peacebuilding and climate adaptation – areas where culture's potential remains vastly underutilized yet urgently needed.

Critically, a stand-alone goal would not isolate culture – it would anchor its cross-cutting relevance. By setting shared objectives and indicators, it would promote intersectoral collaboration and elevate cultural dimensions across other goals. This is not a duplication – it is a strategic commitment to coherence, clarity and inclusion.

As this report demonstrates, when culture is prioritized, societies are more inclusive, resilient, sustainable and humane. But these impacts will remain partial – and often invisible – without the political will, institutional visibility and long-term investment that only a dedicated global commitment can provide.

A stand-alone goal for culture is not a symbolic gesture. It is a practical necessity for the world we must build together.

## Culture: a goal worthy in its own right

Across every chapter of this Global Report – from cultural rights to the digital transition, sustainable economies to heritage safeguarding – there is a unifying message: culture is already driving sustainable development. What is missing is a unified, visible and adequately resourced framework to support this momentum at scale.

A stand-alone goal would address this gap by creating coherence where there is currently fragmentation, visibility where there is partial recognition and investment

where there is underfunding. This section synthesizes the key findings and data across the six thematic chapters and the consolidated analytical report, providing a comprehensive rationale for elevating culture as a development priority on par with health, education and the environment.

**Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life**

Chapter 1 of this report demonstrates that cultural rights – such as the right to participate in cultural life, express one's identity and access heritage – are fundamental to building inclusive and resilient societies. These rights are not abstract ideals – they are essential enablers of social cohesion, individual agency and collective well-being. Yet, despite growing international recognition, many communities continue to face significant barriers to exercising their cultural rights. Displacement, discrimination and the absence of legal recognition or enforcement remain persistent challenges, particularly for marginalized groups, Indigenous Peoples and cultural practitioners. The findings presented in this chapter highlight the continuing gap between normative commitments and operational realities.

Nonetheless, progress is evident: there is growing recognition of the rights of culture professionals, along with an increased focus on gender and diversity considerations within cultural policies. Member States are also taking stronger action to prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural property and to support its restitution and repatriation. Encouragingly, more governments are developing legal instruments to support the status of the artist, acknowledging the vital contributions of artists and cultural workers to society.

Yet these efforts are not sufficient. Legal protections for cultural actors remain uneven, and access to culture is still far from equitable – particularly for Indigenous communities, women and groups facing structural exclusion. Where cultural rights frameworks exist, enforcement is often weak, especially in politically sensitive or resource-constrained environments.

A stand-alone goal for culture in the post-2030 development agenda would serve as a critical lever to address these shortcomings. It would provide a clear and measurable framework for supporting the development and enforcement of legal protections that uphold cultural rights, including those that affirm the status of the artist and safeguard cultural participation. Such a goal would also validate the right to culture as a universal human right – one that applies across all socioeconomic, gender and geographic contexts.

Moreover, by establishing shared indicators and targets, a stand-alone goal would enhance monitoring and accountability, helping to ensure that commitments translate into action and that cultural rights are not only recognized but also realized. In doing so, it would provide governments with the tools and incentives needed to bridge the gap between principle and practice, and to ensure that culture remains a cornerstone of inclusive, rights-based development.

**Leveraging digital technologies to reduce inequalities and stimulate innovation**

The digital shift is reshaping the entire cultural ecosystem, fundamentally altering how culture is created, accessed, valued and governed. As Chapter 2 demonstrates, digital transformation offers both profound opportunities and complex risks for the cultural and creative industries.

On the one hand, digital technologies have helped democratize access to culture, expanded creative markets and introduced innovative tools for the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage. Artificial intelligence is increasingly used for heritage documentation, data analysis and creative content generation. Many governments are investing in digital platforms and infrastructure, and some are beginning to develop ethical guidelines for the use of AI in cultural contexts.

On the other hand, these advancements come with major challenges. The rapid expansion of digital culture has exacerbated the digital divide, particularly in the Global South, where many artists, institutions and communities still lack access to basic digital tools, training and infrastructure. In many contexts, cultural workers face barriers in accessing AI tools and are under-protected in terms of digital rights, intellectual property and data privacy. The dominance of a few global platforms reinforces asymmetries in content visibility and monetization, marginalizing cultural expressions in non-dominant languages and limiting the diversity of voices represented online.

While some UNESCO Member States have adopted national digital strategies for culture, few Member States report any policies, programmes or funding schemes that address the needs of artists working with artificial intelligence (Empowering Creativity, UNESCO). This lack of structural digital policy – particularly in the Global South – risks reinforcing existing inequalities and limiting the full potential of digital transformation in the cultural field.

A stand-alone goal would help address these asymmetries by providing a vital framework to guide, facilitate and monitor digital transformation in the cultural and creative industries with a view to ensuring digital rights, access and inclusion across the cultural field.

It could support equitable and inclusive access to digital platforms and cultural content, helping to address the risks of cultural homogenization and the exclusion of local and Indigenous knowledge systems. A stand-alone goal would also support a transparent and just governance of digital cultural ecosystems, grounded in principles of human rights, ethical innovation and fair access.

Importantly, such a goal would enable a rethinking of cultural data as a public good – advocating for the fair redistribution of the economic, cognitive and cultural value derived from digital cultural production and use. In doing so, it would contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and just digital future, one in which cultural diversity is not only protected but thrives.

**Fostering culture and arts education**

Chapter 3 highlights the vital role of culture-based education and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge in building resilient, inclusive societies. This is particularly true for Indigenous and rural communities, where cultural identity, traditional knowledge and community cohesion are closely interlinked. However, formal education systems around the world continue to underrepresent or exclude local cultural knowledge, oral traditions and mother-tongue learning – missing a crucial opportunity to strengthen identity and promote more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

As demonstrated in Chapter 3, many countries increasingly expect that integrating culture into education and development planning will enhance social cohesion and strengthen collective identity. But these outcomes require deliberate policy frameworks and sustained investment. Without them, cultural knowledge systems remain undervalued, underfunded and at risk of being lost – particularly in marginalized and remote communities.

Chapter 3 notes encouraging progress in several areas. More countries are introducing policies that promote arts education within national curricula, and there is a growing convergence between arts disciplines and STEM education. Collaborative networks linking cultural and educational institutions are expanding and new investments in cultural infrastructure – such as creative hubs and arts centres – are helping to anchor cultural learning at the community level.

Nonetheless, important challenges remain. Arts and culture education still receive limited funding relative to other disciplines. Access to these opportunities remains highly uneven across regions and socioeconomic groups, and cultural competencies are often weakly integrated into broader education policies. These gaps are particularly pronounced in under-resourced schools and education systems, where access to arts, heritage and creative learning is far from guaranteed.

A stand-alone goal for culture in the post-2030 development agenda would provide a much-needed framework to systematically integrate the cultural dimension into education policy and practice. It could help elevate intercultural education, support the inclusion of arts and cultural literacy across school curricula, and promote the use of mother tongues in teaching and learning. A standardized UNESCO definition within the Fields of Study classification could help set global benchmarks and enable the creation of explicit targets and indicators for cultural education – ensuring that culture is not only acknowledged but measured and resourced within education systems.

Such a goal would also contribute to the safeguarding of community-based knowledge systems as public goods, affirming their value in shaping inclusive learning and strengthening intergenerational bonds. By linking education with creativity, identity and local knowledge, a stand-alone goal would reinforce both cultural rights and educational equity – laying the foundation for a more inclusive, resilient and culturally-rooted future.

**Enabling an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem and driving economic development**

Chapter 4 of this report underscores the rising importance of culture and the cultural and creative industries in driving inclusive and sustainable economic development. Today, culture contributes an estimated 3.39% to global GDP[129] and supports the livelihoods of nearly 50 million people worldwide. From traditional crafts and festivals to digital innovation, creative industries are among the fastest-growing sectors in many economies. Yet despite this momentum, structural challenges remain: public investment in culture is declining in many countries and cultural workers – particularly women, youth and minorities – continue to face insecure and informal working conditions.

While governments increasingly acknowledge the economic value of culture, this recognition is often not matched by robust policy support. As evidenced in this report, only a minority of Member States have legal or fiscal frameworks that link intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to entrepreneurship or social protection. Many countries support the creative economy in principle, but few embed it into long-term development strategies with dedicated budget allocations or institutional mechanisms.

The gaps are particularly acute for micro and small creative enterprises, which struggle to access financing and are often excluded from broader economic policies due to perceptions of culture as low-growth or non-profit. The disconnect between education systems and creative labour markets also persists, limiting pathways for cultural employment – especially for women, minorities and youth.

A stand-alone goal for culture would directly address these challenges. It could help position culture not only as a means of economic development but as a valuable end in itself, rooted in rights, identity and diversity. It could also support the creation of coherent policy ecosystems that integrate cultural entrepreneurship into broader development strategies – including those focused on circular economies, climate-resilient tourism, urban regeneration and social enterprise.

Importantly, a stand-alone goal would encourage more consistent measurement of cultural labour, value chains and informal economies – areas that are often neglected in national statistics and policy design. It would also promote the development of fair remuneration models and improved intellectual property frameworks to better protect the creators and producers who drive the creative economy.

In reframing culture's value beyond GDP contribution, a dedicated global goal would affirm the role of diverse cultural expressions in building resilient, just and inclusive economies, and would guide public and private investment towards more sustainable and equitable cultural futures.

**Tackling climate change and promoting environmental sustainability through culture**

As Chapter 5 of this report makes clear, the culture sector is both deeply vulnerable to and strategically vital in responding to the global climate crisis. Cultural practices, values and Indigenous knowledge systems have long played a role in the stewardship of ecosystems, the conservation of biodiversity and the development of adaptive strategies in the face of environmental change. These contributions are increasingly recognized in climate policy discourse – but not yet adequately supported by formal mechanisms or financing.

Chapter 5 reveals that while nearly 80% of countries report having policies linking intangible cultural heritage with environmental sustainability, they still consider environmental outcomes to be the least significant result of integrating culture into national sustainable development plans and strategies (2003 Convention: Periodic Reporting).

This policy gap is particularly consequential for Indigenous communities, Small Island Developing States and other regions that are disproportionately impacted by climate-related risks. In these contexts, culture is not a peripheral concern but a critical asset for resilience and continuity.

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[129] *Estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.*

Despite recent progress – including the promotion of sustainable cultural tourism and the recognition of traditional ecological knowledge in adaptation efforts – several persistent challenges remain. These include inadequate funding for culture-based climate strategies, weak coordination between cultural and environmental ministries, and the underprotection of heritage sites increasingly threatened by climate-related disasters. Women and minority communities face additional barriers, both in terms of participation in environmental governance and access to resources for adaptation.

A stand-alone goal for culture in the post-2030 development agenda would help bridge these gaps by placing culture at the centre of sustainable environmental action. It would enable the formal recognition of Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems as critical resources in climate strategies. It could also contribute to unlocking targeted investment in culture-led resilience, including infrastructure, risk preparedness and education. Moreover, such a goal could enhance advocacy for the integration of cultural heritage into climate finance mechanisms, with a view to ensuring that both tangible and intangible cultural assets are protected and mobilized in mitigation and adaptation plans.

Importantly, a stand-alone goal would also strengthen the evidence base for culture's environmental role, encouraging the development of data and indicators to track how cultural practices contribute to behavioural change, biodiversity protection and community resilience. In doing so, it would not only advance more coherent and inclusive climate policies – it would also reaffirm that culture is not a passive victim of environmental degradation, but an active force for the sustainability of our planet.

**Protecting artists and culture at risk and bolstering resilience, peace and security.**

Chapter 6 of the report underscores the indispensable role of culture in fostering resilience, healing and social cohesion in times of crisis. Across diverse contexts, culture has been a lifeline – preserving identity, sustaining continuity and enabling recovery. National and local strategies for cultural heritage protection are increasingly being developed, and specialized units for cultural emergency response are being established. Digital technologies are also being used to document and safeguard cultural assets, while greater attention is being paid to the specific risks faced by women and minority groups.

Yet, major challenges remain. Funding for post-crisis recovery of cultural heritage is limited and often unpredictable. Coordination among agencies during emergency responses is frequently insufficient, and many cultural institutions lack the training or resources to effectively prepare for or respond to emergencies. These gaps are especially acute in contexts where culture and identity are under threat, with women and historically underrepresented groups continuing to bear the brunt of vulnerability.

Chapter 6 also affirms that cultural participation contributes significantly to reducing polarization, rebuilding civic trust and reinforcing democratic resilience. Culture enables societies to mourn, reflect, imagine and rebuild – essential components of peace and stability. However, as highlighted by MONDIACULT 2022 and the IFACCA Culture as a Global Public Good report, the shrinking of civic space, the fragmentation of the digital sphere and the misuse of cultural narratives in conflict settings threaten to undermine culture's peace-building potential.

In this context, a stand-alone goal for culture would be a powerful tool. It would provide a clear framework for safeguarding artists, institutions and cultural practices at risk – before, during and after crises. It could strengthen monitoring and response mechanisms, notably by supporting the allocation of human and financial resources to integrate culture in reconstruction processes and promoting systems that protect artistic freedom and equitable access to culture. Just as importantly, it could encourage governments to adopt long-term strategies for cultural diplomacy, intercultural dialogue and post-conflict healing – anchoring culture as a foundation for peace instead of being a casualty of conflict.

# Box 10.
# Culture – a shared force

The science-fiction movie Arrival depicts a deep crisis in human knowledge. Against time, our best scientists learn to interact with a message from outer space, its accurate translation becomes an existential threat to humanity. If you have seen the movie (directed by Denis Villeneuve in 2016), or read the novel Story of Your Life (written by Ted Chiang in 1998) you will recall the discussions around the words weapon, tool, means and resource. If you have not, spoiler, it ends well: the deep crisis is overcome after a process of research and trust-building.

The film can be understood as a metaphor of many things. Also, a metaphor of the Culture Goal. The current crises of humanity are not science-fiction, though: we are actually facing an existential threat. In conflict with our planet and with ourselves on almost every continent. More than ever, the founding commitment of UNESCO is needed, because 'since wars begin in the minds' of human beings, it is in our minds that 'the defences of peace must be constructed'. A Culture Goal is, today, a force we need. Say 'a' and not 'the'. Say frame, scaffold. Say an explicit and operational place in the global conversation on our future, with measurable cultural targets and indicators that are fully connected with the other Goals that foster sustainability and peace.

The absence of a Culture Goal in the MDGs and the SDGs has worsened the global conversation on sustainability. Will our grandchildren say we lost almost three decades? The absence has prevented discussions on the meaning of development, the danger of digital monopolies and their wicked algorithms, and the direct connection of heritage and creativity with the circular economy and social justice. It has not enabled the connection between scientific evidence, human development, democracy, rights and freedoms. This absence cannot happen again.

At a local level, the Culture Goal is already a reality. This has two reasons. The first is based on principles. The never-ending conversation between people, place and change is always local and it blurs the cultural, social, environmental and economic components of development. Locally, a resource, an infrastructure, an event is a bit of everything. A place is sustainable only if its governance allows discussing power, meaning, ownership and context. Nationally and internationally, when actors and interests grow and complexity increases, the conversation is not as immediate, but it needs to happen too. The second reason is based on strategy, and it is being developed by cities and local governments: cultural rights and sustainability are connected, in an explicit way, with user-friendly guides and frames, at least since the birth of UCLG's Agenda 21 for culture, now 21 years ago. The local scaffolding for the successful implementation of the Culture Goal exists, and it needs to be reinforced with better multi-level frames.

The Culture Goal is also a reality when cultural actors are fully involved in development processes at a national level. This involvement improves accountability, galvanizes political will and guarantees more policy coherence. Even better, when national policies are aligned with cultural rights (as advised since 2009 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights and by UNESCO since Mondiacult 2022), then, the involvement of cultural actors in national processes makes a huge contribution to the imperative of 'leaving no one behind'. If policies are cultural rights-based, everyone is invited to shape the future. Since 2015, we have several 'proxies' to the national implementation of the Culture Goal. Several, and growing. Incomplete, but improving.

Both threads have led to important progress in the global conversation, now engaging UNESCO, G20 and the General Assembly. The conclusions of this UNESCO Report are very clear. The need for a Culture Goal is today obvious to many. The new multilateral landscape can become an opportunity. The Culture Goal, this force, can only be a reality if it is shared, in its creation and its implementation. As in many other policy domains (human rights, equity, environment…), the role of civil society is decisive. Today, the main global cultural networks (Arterial, CAE, ICOM, ICOMOS, IFCCD, IFLA and IMC) are leading the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, which published a manifesto in 2012 and a zero-draft of a Culture Goal in 2022. The next step is a full proposal with targets and

indicators, to be published in September 2025. Realistic and ambitious. A challenge for human knowledge, fully achievable if based on existing frames, designed as a process that reinforces trust, founded on scientific evidence and focused on imagining the future with the imperative of peace. Let's make it possible.

Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of the Committee on culture of the world organization of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

**Data and policy integration: evidence for a goal**

The Global Report highlights a significant shift in national policymaking: over 90% of Member States now reference culture in their national sustainable development strategies. This trend reflects a growing awareness of culture's contributions to economic vitality, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. However, as the findings show, such references are often broad and aspirational, lacking clear targets, indicators and implementation mechanisms.

Most national strategies fall short of addressing the specific needs and nuanced realities of cultural ecosystems – particularly the cultural and creative industries, Indigenous knowledge systems and the status of artists. Critical gaps persist in areas such as dedicated legislation, long-term financing and interministerial coordination. Culture remains frequently overshadowed by other development priorities and underrepresented in development cooperation, despite its recognized value.

The report demonstrates that countries associate the inclusion of culture in development plans with outcomes such as youth empowerment, environmental stewardship and social cohesion – core dimensions of the SDGs. Yet without a stand-alone goal, culture's contribution remains largely invisible in global measurement systems and marginal in budget allocations.

A stand-alone goal would provide the necessary structure to turn recognition into results. It would anchor culture within the post-2030 development agenda, building on existing tools such as the 2025 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics and enabling harmonized indicators across policy areas. It would also support the development of context-sensitive, rights-based cultural policies, strengthen institutional capacity for data collection and promote regional and international benchmarking of cultural impact.

Ultimately, a stand-alone goal is not simply a symbolic gesture – it is a strategic necessity. It would allow culture to be fully integrated into sustainable development planning, not as an ancillary element, but as a transformative force in its own right. It would affirm culture both as a means of achieving the SDGs and as a fundamental development objective – ensuring that cultural resources are protected, valued and mobilized for the benefit of current and future generations.

The findings of this report are clear: culture is already shaping the future of sustainable development, often in the absence of the institutional scaffolding needed to support and sustain it. Culture is not simply a sector among others – it is a living system of meaning, belonging, creativity and well-being. And like any system, it requires sustained investment, coordination and vision. Firmly embedding culture in international development frameworks would send a powerful signal to governments and stakeholders that culture must no longer be treated as secondary. Rather, it must be understood as a foundational pillar of sustainable development, essential to achieving inclusive, just and resilient futures.

A stand-alone goal would affirm culture's transformative role across the SDGs – from quality education and gender equality to climate action and decent work – while also ensuring that culture is not merely used as a means, but recognized as an end in itself. It would embed culture holistically in global and national policy agendas, where it would no longer be at risk of being overshadowed or sidelined.

Fundamentally, a dedicated goal would elevate culture's intrinsic value – the vitality of cultural expressions, heritage and creative practices that define who we are and how we coexist. It would help dismantle structural barriers faced by cultural actors and communities, address the underinvestment in culture, and support much-needed legal, institutional and financial reforms, including better protections for artists, cultural rights and fair labour conditions. It would also help evidence and elevate the impact of culture, including its contribution to sustainable development and economic growth. In turn, this will strengthen multilateral and multi-agency approaches to cultural financing, including public-private partnerships.

At the same time, a stand-alone goal would help ensure the long-term and sustainable use of cultural resources, from heritage protection to equitable access to cultural content and participation. It would promote locally meaningful development, foster culturally grounded governance and amplify voices too often excluded from decision-making. It would also lay the groundwork for a more rights-based approach to development, affirming cultural rights as human rights and recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems, languages and traditions as essential components of sustainable and equitable futures.

By empowering cultural actors and strengthening policy coherence, the goal would foster deeper engagement, ownership and accountability in the development process. It would also galvanize political will, driving greater investment in cultural infrastructure and institutions and strengthening data systems that are essential for evidence-based policymaking.

In short, the evidence presented in this report – from statistics to narratives, from policies to lived experiences – points to one conclusion: culture must be recognized not only as a powerful means, but also as a vital end in itself.

Embedding culture through a stand-alone goal is not only timely, it is necessary. It will allow us to build more coherent, resilient and human-centred development frameworks that respect diversity, strengthen inclusion and imagine alternative futures. If the world is serious about leaving no one behind, it must also leave no culture behind.

Now is the moment – as the culture ministers of the world gather at MONDIACULT 2025 in Barcelona to reflect and pave the way for the next four decisive years – to affirm this vision and act on it, as the international community begins to shape the future of sustainable development beyond 2030.

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Humanist artist, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Cultural Diversity

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**Dr Jamil Salmi**
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**Dr César Augusto Guadalupe Mendizábal**
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**Daiara Tukano – Creative voices**
Visual artist, activist, and educator.

**Lucina Jimenez – Policy brief**
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**CHAPTER TWO:**
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**Leonardo Garnier – Policy brief**
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**Mo Abudu – Creative voices**
Founder and CEO of EbonyLife Group.

**Simon Brault – Policy brief**
Independent art consultant.

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Researcher and creative producer advancing culture-based approaches to climate action.

**Oto Hudec – Creative voices**
Visual artist and teacher, Technical University of Košice, Slovakia.

**Frances C. Koya Vaka'uta – Policy brief**
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**Dr Patty Gerstenblith**
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**Aya Tarek – Creative voices**
Painter and multidisciplinary artist

**Angela Martins – Policy brief**
Acting Director for Social Development, Culture and Sport and Head of the Culture and Sport Division at the African Union Commission

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**Patrick Kabanda**
International researcher linking the arts and international affairs, and author of The Creative Wealth of Nations.

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# Methodology

## Organizational structure and editorial process

The 2025 edition of the Global Report on Cultural Policies was developed through an inclusive, participatory and evidence-based process, grounded in strategic guidance, regional expertise and multi-stakeholder contributions. Its structure brought together diverse actors from across the culture and development ecosystem to ensure the report's methodological rigour, global relevance and analytical depth.

At the strategic level, the process was guided by an Advisory Board, established in line with UNESCO Executive Board Decision 219 EX/ 11. The Advisory Board was entrusted to oversee the overall methodology and framework for the collection of information and data of the Global Report. Comprising the UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture, the Director of the Gender Equality Division, representatives of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, UN system partners, key experts in the field of culture and sustainable development, and regional experts designated by the Chairs of UNESCO's Electoral Groups. Meeting five times over the course of the drafting process, the Advisory Board played a key role in shaping the overall structure of the Global Report, validating the methodological framework, identifying key thematic priorities and ensuring alignment with UNESCO's strategic vision.

The Editorial Board, which convened on three occasions, was tasked with coordinating the research and drafting of the report's chapters. It consisted of the Principal Editors, the ten commissioned authors and chapter contributors, selected in consultation with the Advisory Board and the UNESCO Global Report coordination team. The Editorial Board worked to ensure coherence across the chapters, consolidate cross-cutting findings and 'red thread' the narrative and data throughout the report. It was supported by a group of seven contributing UNESCO Chairs, selected through an open call, who provided additional research, data, analysis and regional insights in support of the chapter authors.

Reflecting the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the Global Report, contributions also included testimonies and forward-looking briefs from a diverse group of artists, culture professionals, policymakers and representatives of trade unions in the culture sector, offering grounded perspectives and policy reflections from the field. To ensure the analytical rigour and normative alignment of the report, a group of nine ad honorem expert peer reviewers was engaged to independently review draft chapters. These reviewers brought expertise in key monitoring areas, including gender equality; tangible, intangible and underwater cultural heritage; artistic freedom; the diversity of cultural expressions in the digital environment; intercultural education; climate action; culture in emergencies; and youth and cultural policies in Africa. Their critical feedback strengthened the analytical quality of the report and helped ensure its consistency with the objectives and principles of UNESCO's normative instruments.

## Data sources, analysis and representation

This first edition of the UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies – Culture: The missing SDG is based on a review of qualitative and quantitative data collected primarily through UNESCO's reporting mechanisms between June 2019 and July 2024. This period corresponds to the latest reporting cycle across UNESCO normative instruments and programmes in the field of culture, as well as follow-up actions to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration.

The core data sources include over 1,200 national, local and stakeholder reports submitted under five UNESCO Culture Conventions and Recommendations, as well as monitoring frameworks such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators and the UNESCO Surveys on the Follow-up to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration. All reporting tools and frameworks considered for this edition are listed in detail in the table below, including their respective timeframes and volume of contributions.

Where countries submitted more than one report during the reference period – such as through voluntary cycles to update their information – the most recent submission was considered for the analysis. In total, the Global Report analysed contributions from:

- 196 countries,
- 116 cities,
- 116 NGOs and INGOs, and
- 127 artists and culture professionals.

**Table 7. Summary of the data considered for the Global Report on Cultural Policies per normative instrument and programme.**

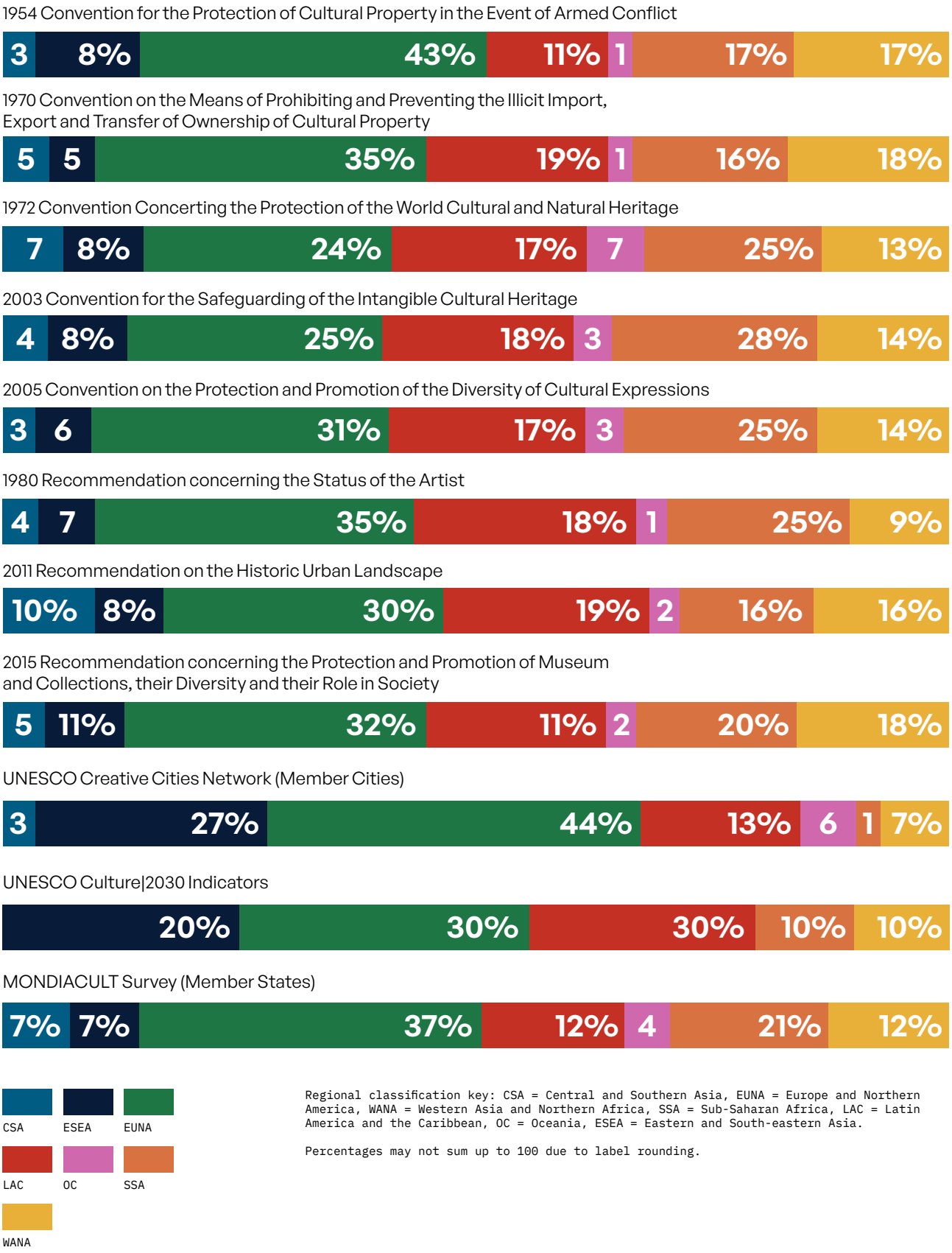
| Normative Instrument / Programme | Questionnaire(s) considered | Timeframe considered | Number of reports |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954)** | Questionnaire for national reports on the implementation of the 1954 Convention and its two Protocols. | **2017 – 2020** cycle (deadline for submissions 30 June 2021)<br><br>**2024** voluntary submission (deadline for submissions 31 July 2024) | 72 national reports |
| **Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970)** | Questionnaire for National reports on the 1970 Convention | **2019 – 2022** cycle (deadline for submissions 24 February 2023) | 91 national reports |
| **Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)** | Questionnaire for the Third Cycle of Periodic Reporting to the 1972 Convention – Section I | **Third cycle.** Deadline for submissions:<br><br>**Arab States:** July 2019<br>**Africa:** July 2020<br>**Asia Pacific:** July 2021<br>**Latin America and the Caribbean:** July 2022<br>**Europe and North America:** July 2023 | 191 national reports |
| **Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)** | Questionnaire for the implementation of the 2003 Convention – excluding Section C. | **First regional cycle of reporting.** Deadline for submissions:<br><br>**Latin America and the Caribbean:** 15 December 2020<br>**Europe and North America:** 15 December 2021<br>**Arab States:** 15 December 2022<br>**Africa:** 15 December 2023<br>**Asia and the Pacific:** 15 July 2024 (voluntary submission) | 157 national reports |
| **Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)** | Questionnaire for the Periodic Reporting to the 2005 Convention | **2019 – 2024** cycle (deadline for submissions 15 July 2024) | 118 national reports<br>1 regional report |
| **Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist (1980)** | Questionnaire for the Implementation of the 1980 Recommendation<br><br>Questionnaire for INGOs and NGOs for the 1980 Recommendation | **2018 – 2022 cycle** (deadline for submissions 15 November 2022) | 68 national reports<br>72 INGOs and NGOs reports |
| **Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, including a glossary of definitions (2011)** | Questionnaire for the Implementation of the 2011 Recommendation – Section A National Level Survey | **2018 – 2022 cycle** (deadline for submissions 1 October 2022) | 63 national reports |
| **Recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of museums and collections, their diversity and their role in society (2015)** | Questionnaire on the Implementation of the 2015 Recommendation | **2018 – 2022 cycle** (deadline for submissions 31 October 2022) | 44 national reports |
| **UNESCO Creative Cities Network** | UCCN Reporting Exercise PART II: Creative Cities' contribution to sustainable development, in line with the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration and UNESCO Culture Sector's priorities | **2023 – 2024** (deadline for submissions 15 July 2024) | 109 local reports |
| **UNESCO Culture\|2030 Indicators** | UNESCO Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda | **Cycle 1 from 2021 – 2024** (deadline for submissions 31 July 2024) | 10 national reports<br>10 local reports |
| **Surveys on the follow-up to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration** | UNESCO Survey on the Follow-up to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration<br><br>UNESCO Survey on the Follow-up to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration – Contributions from Organized Civil Society<br><br>UNESCO Survey on the Follow-up to the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration – Contributions from Artists and Culture Professionals | **2022 – 2024** (deadline for submissions 9 August 2024) | 62 national reports<br>61 NGOs reports<br>127 artists and culture professionals reports |

Regional representation varied across normative instruments and programmes. On average, Europe and North America was accounted for the largest share of national and local data (33%), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (19%), Latin America and the Caribbean (17%) and Western Asia and Northern Africa (13%). Eastern and Southeastern Asia (10%), Central and Southern Asia (5%) and Oceania (3%) were the least represented. As a result, comprehensive and longitudinal data remains predominantly available from the Global North, reflecting broader imbalances in cultural data collection. However, the Global South featured more prominently across most normative instruments.

While these sources provide valuable insights into policy trends and regional dynamics, they also present limitations. The quality and completeness of data varies significantly between countries and instruments, and reporting is not universal. As such, the findings of this report should not be interpreted as exhaustive or statistically representative of global realities. Instead, they aim to highlight emergent patterns, regional trajectories, innovative practices and areas requiring further policy attention and support.

This data is further contextualized by the contributions of expert authors, regional advisors and thematic peer reviewers, ensuring that the quantitative trends are accompanied by interpretive analysis and forward-looking takeaways.

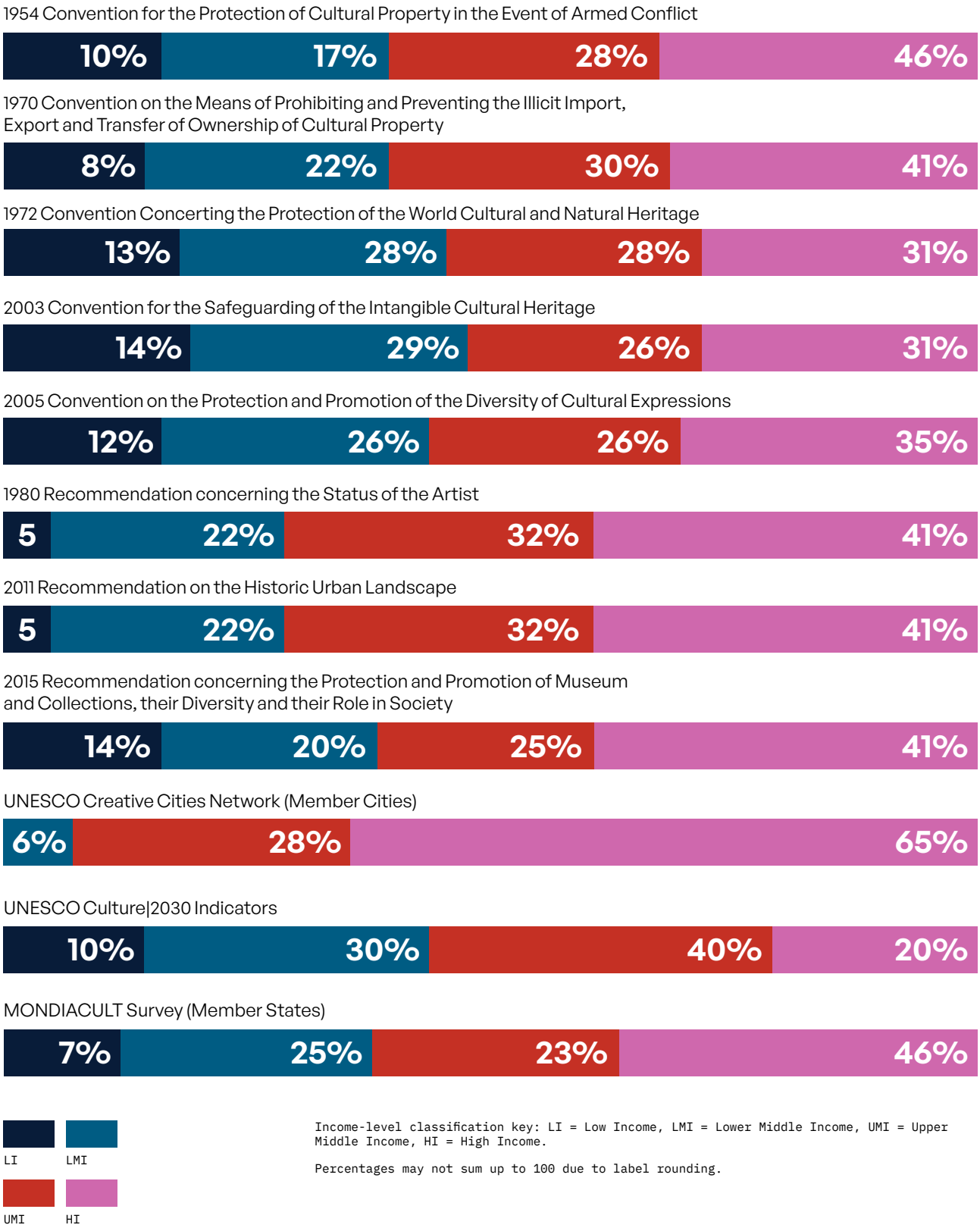
**Figure 30. Proportion of total submitted reports within the timeframe of the Global Report to each normative instrument, by regional group.**




Regional classification key: CSA = Central and Southern Asia, EUNA = Europe and Northern America, WANA = Western Asia and Northern Africa, SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa, LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean, OC = Oceania, ESEA = Eastern and South-eastern Asia.

Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to label rounding.

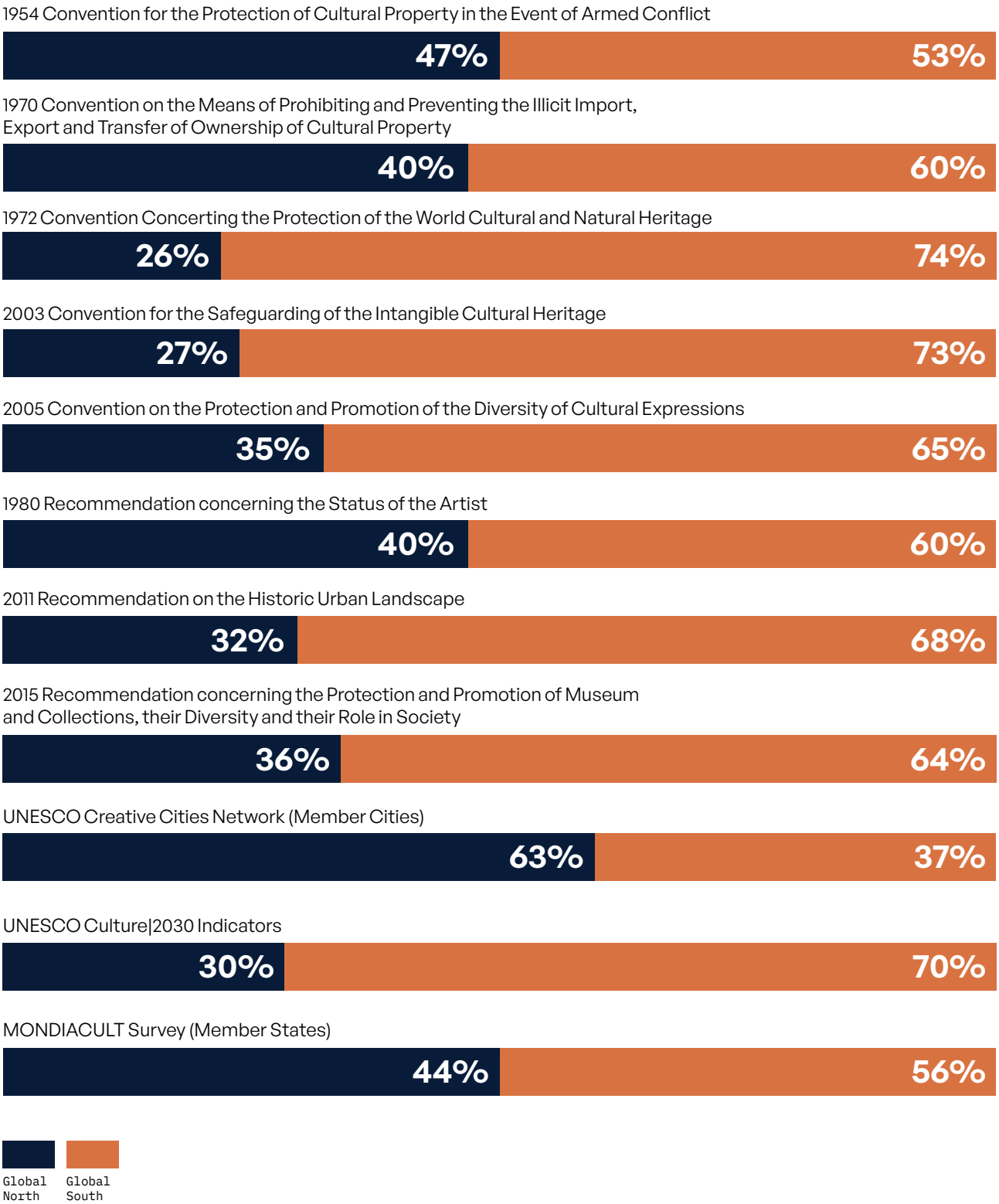
**Figure 31. Proportion of total submitted reports within the timeframe of the Global Report to each normative instrument, by income group.**




Income-level classification key: LI = Low Income, LMI = Lower Middle Income, UMI = Upper Middle Income, HI = High Income.

Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to label rounding.

**Figure 32. Proportion of total submitted reports within the timeframe of the Global Report to each normative instrument, by Global North and Global South**

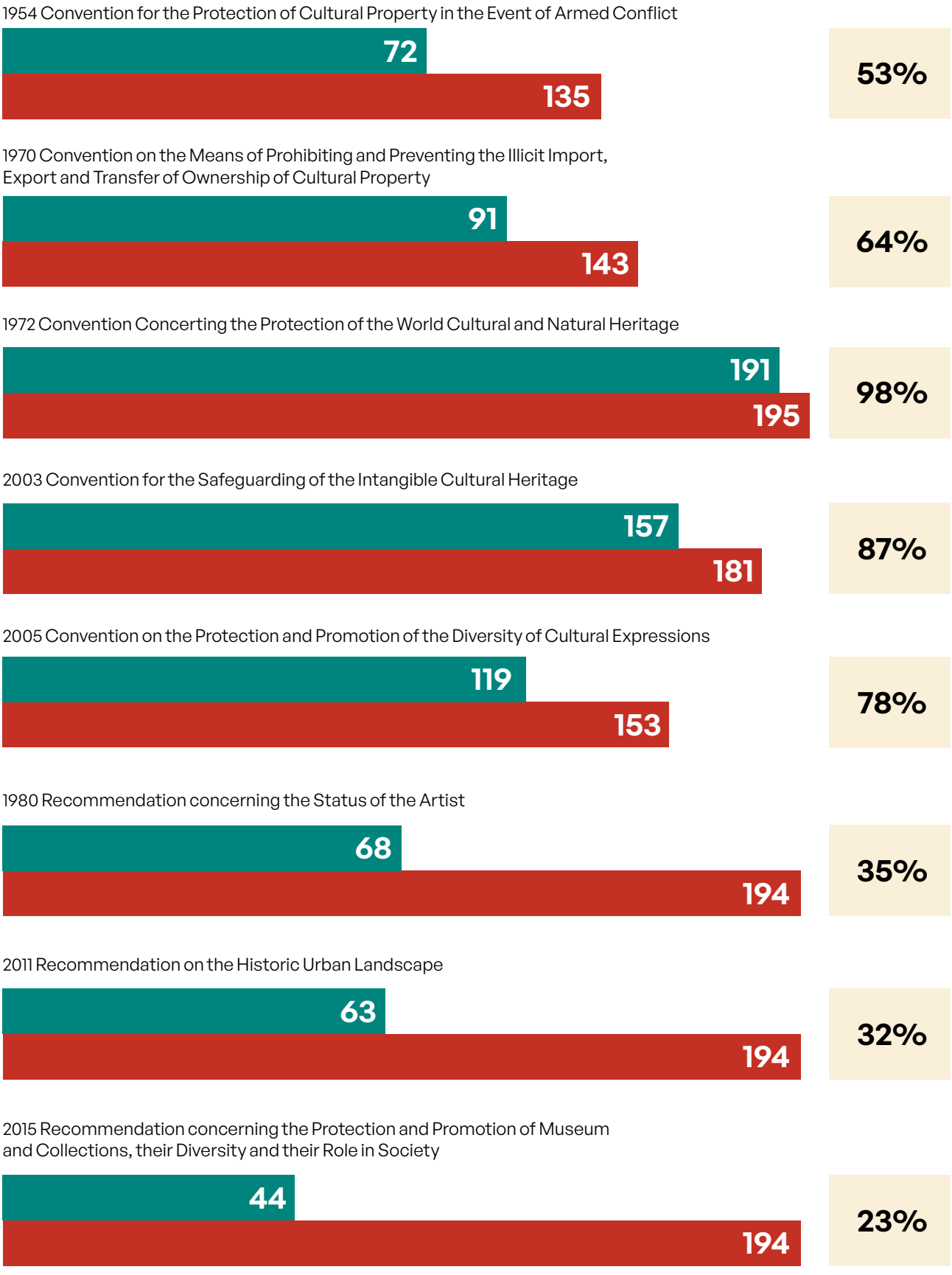


Regarding the representation of cultural sub-domains, the level of data coverage varied depending on the ratification status of UNESCO's normative instruments and the extent of periodic reporting during the 2019–2024 cycle. The most comprehensive data was available for the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, with 98% of Member States submitting reports. This was followed by the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage at 87% and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions at 78%. By contrast, reporting under the UNESCO Recommendations – such as those on the Status of the Artist (1980), Historic Urban Landscape (2011) and Museums (2015) – remains voluntary and non-binding, resulting in significantly lower submission rates by Member States.

In addition, while the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage does not currently include a formal periodic reporting mechanism, efforts were made to ensure that its key themes and policy relevance were addressed in the Global Report. To that end, a dedicated expert from a UNESCO Category 2 Centre specializing in underwater cultural heritage was invited to contribute background information, relevant policy examples and technical guidance in the drafting of relevant chapters.

As a result, data coverage across cultural sub-domains is uneven, and reflects both the binding nature of the instrument and the maturity of its implementation and monitoring mechanisms.

**Figure 33. Total number of reports submitted within the timeframe of the Global Report by Member State vs. number of ratifying parties as of July 2024,[130] and proportion of ratifying Member States submitting reports, by UNESCO instrument.**




[130] *The number of ratifying parties for all instruments is based on the official list in July 2024, when the data analysis for the Global Report was completed. For the UNESCO Recommendations, which are not subject to ratification, the total number of Member States is included.*

While limitations in data availability, regional balance and consistency across reporting cycles must be acknowledged, targeted efforts were made to bridge data gaps by incorporating complementary data sources, including from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, United Nations agencies (WIPO, ILO, UNCTAD, FAO, UNDRR, UNFCCC, IPCC, the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion), international organizations (OECD, World Bank, IUCN, ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, EUROPOL), NGOs and INGOs (World Economic Forum, World Resources Institute, Freemuse The Nature Conservancy, Human Rights Watch), Civil Society Organizations and international actors from the culture sector (CISAC, Society of Audio-visual Authors, European Group on Museum Statistics, World Alliance for Arts Education, Julie's Bicycle, AKO Foundation, Artistic Freedom Initiative, World Higher Education Database), as well as the private sector (Patreon, GSMA, BOP 500, McKinsey & Company).

Prior to the data analysis, a comprehensive Global Report Results Framework was developed by BOP Consulting, a global research and consulting practice for culture and the creative economy, in close collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Global Report's Advisory Board, with a view to monitoring the progress of cultural policies in relation to the priorities identified by Culture Ministers in the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration. The Results Framework includes 6 impact areas, 12 outcomes, 19 outputs and some 100 indicators covering all cultural sub-domains and all regions. A gender equality perspective was also ensured with the collaboration of UNESCO's Gender Equality Division, resulting in the inclusion of 28 indicators related to gender equality.

The data collected from the periodic reports submitted under UNESCO's normative instruments and programmes in the field of culture was consolidated, cleaned and analysed in alignment with the Report's Results Framework with the support of BOP Consulting. This exercise aimed to provide the authors with robust evidence to support their analysis. The process followed a structured methodology: each reporting form was reviewed to map relevant questions to specific indicators using dedicated chapter data sheets, indicating the source, question type and analytical lens. Indicators with limited or no corresponding data were identified as 'aspirational'. All report response datasets were then cleaned and harmonized to address discrepancies and inconsistencies, and to apply classification designations – such as regional grouping, income level and Global North/South.

Most of the data analysis focused on the answers provided by Member States and State Parties to closed questions (either binary 'yes/no' or multiple choice), as well as analysis of a smaller number of numerical/data questions. This data was visualised through graphs aligned with each indicator. Additional analysis of qualitative data from open-ended responses was undertaken. The volume of text in the open-ended questions (given the large number of reports) meant that these were analysed with the support of a language processing tool, Dataiku, which provided a platform to centralize data from all the UNESCO instruments. The centralized database was prompted using AI tools to extract key themes and typologies from Member State or State Party responses, where applicable.

The estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP was conducted using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries, combining the information provided by States Parties to the 2005 Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions between 2021 and December 2024 and the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators with secondary data, notably from the OECD, Ministries of Culture statistics and Creative Industries Satellite Accounts. The estimated mean share of employment of the cultural and creative industries was based on 61 countries for which there was available data on the periodic reports submitted by States Parties to the 2005 Convention during the same timeframe, in combination with secondary data, notably 2023 Eurostat data.

The analysis in this first edition of the Global Report on Cultural Policies used the United Nations M49 statistical classification system. Regional classifications followed the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report model, based on UN SDG regional groupings, with the exception that Australia and New Zealand were included under Oceania rather than treated as a separate region. In line with UN practice, the Report adopted the terminology 'Global North/Global South' in place of 'developed/developing countries'.

The analysis used three distinct classification systems to report on the impact of countries / Member States at the indicator level, as outlined below:

01. Regional classification (based on the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report's adaptation of the UN SDG regions):
    - Central and Southern Asia (CSA): 14 countries
    - Europe and Northern America (EUNA): 49 countries
    - Western Asia and Northern Africa (WANA): 24 countries
    - Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA): 48 countries
    - Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC): 40 countries
    - Oceania (OC): 18 countries
    - Eastern and South-eastern Asia (ESEA): 16 countries

02. Income-level classification (based on gross national income (GNI) per capita, as published by the World Bank in 2022. Income thresholds are based on those of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as shown in the figure below):
    - Lower income (LI): 26 countries
    - Lower-middle income (LMI): 54 countries
    - Upper-middle income (UMI): 53 countries
    - High income (HI): 68 countries

03. Global North/South classification (used in line with UN practice to replace 'developed/developing' terminology).

**Figure 34. Member State Income Classification**

| Developing / Developed classification | Income classification | GNI per capita range |
|---|---|---|
| Developing | Low income countries (LI) | Less than $1,135 |
| | Low middle income countries (LMI) | $1,136 - $4,465 |
| | Upper middle income countries (UMI) | $4,466 - $13,845 |
| Developed | High income countries (HI) | Greater than $13,846 |

Source: World Bank, 2024 (https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025)

# Countries and cities included in the analysis

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| Afghanistan* | CSA | LI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Åland Islands** | EUNA | | North | | | | | | | | | | |
| Albania* | EUNA | UMI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Algeria* | WANA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Andorra* | EUNA | HI | North | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Angola* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | ● |
| Anguilla** | LAC | | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Antigua and Barbuda* | LAC | HI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Argentina* | LAC | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | |
| Armenia* | WANA | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Aruba** | LAC | HI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Australia* | OC | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | ● | | ● |
| Austria* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | ● |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Azerbaijan* | WANA | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Bahamas* | LAC | HI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Bahrain* | WANA | HI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● | | |
| Bangladesh* | CSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Barbados* | LAC | HI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Belarus* | EUNA | UMI | North | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Belgium* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | ● |
| Belize* | LAC | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Benin* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Bhutan* | CSA | LMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | ● |
| Bolivia (Plurinational State of)* | LAC | LMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | | ● | | | | ● |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina* | EUNA | UMI | North | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Botswana* | SSA | UMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Brazil* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| British Virgin Islands** | LAC | HI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Brunei Darussalam* | ESEA | HI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Bulgaria* | EUNA | UMI | North | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Burkina Faso* | SSA | LI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | |
| Burundi* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Cabo Verde* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Cambodia* | ESEA | LMI | South | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | ● | ● | | ● |
| Cameroon* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | |
| Canada* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | ● | | |
| Cayman Islands** | LAC | HI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Central African Republic* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Chad* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | ● | | |
| Chile* | LAC | HI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| China (People's Republic of)* | ESEA | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | ● | | |
| Colombia* | LAC | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Comoros* | SSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Congo* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Cook Islands* | OC | | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Costa Rica* | LAC | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● |
| Côte d'Ivoire* | SSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Croatia* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Cuba* | LAC | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | ● |
| Curaçao** | LAC | HI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cyprus* | WANA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Czechia* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Democratic People's Republic of Korea* | ESEA | LI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Democratic Republic of the Congo* | SSA | LI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | | |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| Denmark* | EUNA | HI | North | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| Djibouti* | SSA | LMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Dominica* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Dominican Republic* | LAC | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | | |
| Ecuador* | LAC | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Egypt* | WANA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | |
| El Salvador* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Equatorial Guinea* | SSA | UMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | ● |
| Eritrea* | SSA | LI | South | ● | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Estonia* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Eswatini* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Ethiopia* | SSA | LI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| European Union*** [131] | EUNA | HI | North | | | | | ● | | | | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Faroes** | EUNA | HI | North | | | | | | | | | | |
| Fiji* | OC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | ● | | | |
| Finland* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| France* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Gabon* | SSA | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Gambia* | SSA | LI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Georgia* | WANA | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | |
| Germany* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| Ghana* | SSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Greece* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Grenada* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Guatemala* | LAC | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Guinea* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Guinea-Bissau* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| Guyana* | LAC | HI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Haiti* | LAC | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Holy See***[132] | EUNA | | | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Honduras* | LAC | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | |
| Hungary* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | ● |
| Iceland* | EUNA | HI | North | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| India* | CSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Indonesia* | ESEA | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| Iran (Islamic Republic of) * | CSA | LMI | South | | | ● | | | | ● | ● | | |
| Iraq* | WANA | UMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | | | ● | | | |
| Ireland* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| Israel***[133] | WANA | HI | | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Italy* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jamaica* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Japan* | ESEA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Jordan* | WANA | LMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | ● |
| Kazakhstan* | CSA | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Kenya* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | |
| Kiribati* | OC | LMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Kuwait* | WANA | HI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Kyrgyzstan* | CSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Lao People's Democratic Republic* | ESEA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Latvia* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Lebanon* | WANA | LMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | | | | ● | | |
| Lesotho* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Liberia* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Libya* | WANA | UMI | South | ● | | ● | | | | | | | |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| Liechtenstein***[134] | EUNA | HI | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lithuania* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Luxembourg* | EUNA | HI | North | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| Madagascar* | SSA | LI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| Malawi* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Malaysia* | ESEA | UMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | | | ● | ● | | |
| Maldives* | CSA | UMI | South | | | ● | | | | ● | | | |
| Mali* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Malta* | EUNA | HI | North | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Marshall Islands* | OC | UMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Mauritania* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Mauritius* | SSA | UMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | ● |
| Mexico* | LAC | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Micronesia (Federated States of) * | OC | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Monaco* | EUNA | HI | North | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Mongolia* | ESEA | LMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | |
| Montenegro* | EUNA | UMI | North | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Montserrat** | LAC | | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Morocco* | WANA | LMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● | |
| Mozambique* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| Myanmar* | ESEA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | ● |
| Namibia* | SSA | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | ● | | |
| Nauru* | OC | HI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Nepal* | CSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | | |
| Netherlands (Kingdom of the)* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| New Caledonia** | OC | HI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| New Zealand* | OC | HI | North | | | ● | | ● | | | | | ● |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| Nicaragua* | LAC | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |
| Niger* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Nigeria* | SSA | LMI | South | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | |
| Niue* | OC | | South | | | ● | | ● | | | | | |
| North Macedonia* | EUNA | UMI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Norway* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | |
| Oman* | WANA | HI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | |
| Pakistan* | CSA | LMI | South | ● | | ● | | | | ● | | | |
| Palau* | OC | UMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Palestine (State of)* | WANA | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | ● |
| Panama* | LAC | HI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Papua New Guinea* | OC | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Paraguay* | LAC | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Peru* | LAC | UMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Philippines* | ESEA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | ● | |
| Poland* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | ● |
| Portugal* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | | | ● | |
| Qatar* | WANA | HI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | ● |
| Republic of Korea* | ESEA | LMI | North | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| Republic of Moldova* | EUNA | UMI | North | | | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Romania* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | |
| Russian Federation* | EUNA | UMI | North | | ● | ● | | | | ● | | | ● |
| Rwanda* | SSA | LI | South | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Saint Kitts and Nevis* | LAC | HI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Saint Lucia* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Saint Vincent and the Grenadines* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Samoa* | OC | LMI | South | | | | ● | ● | | | | | |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| San Marino* | EUNA | HI | North | | | ● | | | | ● | | | |
| Sao Tome and Principe* | SSA | LMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Saudi Arabia* | WANA | HI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | ● | | ● |
| Senegal* | SSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Serbia* | EUNA | UMI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | |
| Seychelles* | SSA | HI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Sierra Leone* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | | | | ● | | | |
| Singapore* | ESEA | HI | South | | | ● | ● | | | ● | | | |
| Sint Maarten** | LAC | HI | South | | | | | | | ● | | | |
| Slovakia* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| Slovenia* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | ● |
| Solomon Islands* | OC | LMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Somalia* | SSA | LI | South | | | | ● | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| South Africa* | SSA | UMI | South | | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | | | |
| South Sudan* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | ● | | |
| Spain* | EUNA | HI | North | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Sri Lanka* | CSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● | | |
| Sudan* | WANA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | | | | | |
| Suriname* | LAC | UMI | South | | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Tonga* | OC | UMI | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | |
| Trinidad and Tobago* | LAC | HI | South | | | ● | | ● | | ● | | | |
| Tunisia* | WANA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| Türkiye* | WANA | UMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | ● |
| Turkmenistan* | CSA | UMI | South | | ● | ● | | | | ● | | | ● |
| Tuvalu* | OC | UMI | South | | | | | | | | | | |
| Uganda* | SSA | LI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Ukraine* | EUNA | LMI | North | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |

| Name | Regional group | Income group | Global North and South | Convention | | | | | Recommendation | | | Culture|2030 Indicators | MONDIACULT 2024 Survey |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 1954 | 1970 | 1972 | 2003 | 2005 | 1980 | 2011 | 2015 | | |
| United Arab Emirates* | WANA | HI | South | | | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● | | | |
| United Republic of Tanzania* | SSA | LMI | South | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | | ● |
| United States of America* | EUNA | HI | North | ● | | ● | | | | | | | |
| Uruguay* | LAC | HI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| Uzbekistan* | CSA | LMI | South | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | | | | ● |
| Vanuatu* | OC | LMI | South | | | ● | | | | ● | | | |
| Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) * | LAC | | South | | | ● | ● | | | | | | ● |
| Viet Nam* | ESEA | LMI | South | | | ● | | ● | ● | | | ● | ● |
| Yemen* | WANA | LI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | | | ● | | |
| Zambia* | SSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Zimbabwe* | SSA | LMI | South | | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | | | | |
| **Total** | | | | 72 | 91 | 191 | 157 | 119 | 68 | 63 | 44 | 10 | 62 |

**UNESCO Creative Cities Network**

Adelaide, Ambon, Angoulême, Asahikawa, Auckland, Baghdad, Baguio City, Bandar Abbas, Bandung, Barcelona, Barcelos, Beijing, Belém, Belfast, Belo Horizonte, Bergamo, Bergen, Berlin, Bida, Biella, Bilbao, Bogota, Bologna, Brno, Cairo, Cebu, Chengdu, Daegu, Dénia, Doha, Dunedin, Edinburgh, Exeter, Fabriano, Florianopolis, Gaziantep, Gdynia, Geelong, Gimhae, Gothenburg, Graz, Hamamatsu, Hanover, Helsinki, Huai'an, Ibague, Icheon, Jinju, João Pessoa, Kargopol, Karlsruhe, Kaunas, Kermanshah, Kingston, Kırşehir, Kobe, Kolding, Kortrijk, Kosice, Kuching, Leeuwarden, Limoges, Liverpool, London, Macao, Mérida, Metz, Mexico City, Muharraq, Mumbai, Nagoya, Namur, Nanjing, Nassau, Östersund, Paducah, Panama City, Parma, Perth, Phuket, Portoviejo, Potsdam, Prague, Quebec City, Rome, Saint Petersburg, Salvador, San Antonio, Sapporo, Sasayama, Shanghai, Sharjah, Sheki, Shenzhen, Shunde, Tallinn, Tongyeong, Tsuruoka, Turin, Ulyanovsk, Usuki, Utrecht, Valladolid, Viborg, Vilnius, Whanganui, Wonju, Xalapa, Yamagata.

**UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators (cities)**

Alajuela, Baguio City, Bogota, Cluj-Napoca, Elvas, Essaouira, Hue, Leskovac, Mérida, Ouagadougou.

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**: UNESCO Member States*
***: UNESCO Associated Members*
****: Other State Parties with ratified conventions*

*[131] The European Union is a State Party to the 2005 Convention.*

*[132] Israel is a State Party to the 1954 Convention and its First Protocol, and the 1972 Convention.*

*[133] Since 1952, there is a permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to UNESCO, which is a State Party to the 1954 Convention and its First Protocol, and the 1972 Convention.*

*[134] Liechtenstein is a State Party to the 1954 Convention and its First and Second Protocols.*

*1954 Convention: the States Parties to the 1954 Hague Convention and its two (1954 and 1999) Protocols were encouraged to submit national periodic reports, by July 2024, on a voluntary basis, in order to contribute to the Global Report on Cultural Policies with updated data.*

*2003 Convention the States Parties from Asia and the Pacific, whose submission of periodic reports was scheduled for 15 December 2024, were encouraged to provide an early submission by July 2024 on a voluntary basis in order to contribute to the Global Report on Cultural Policies*

*2005 Convention: since States Parties submit quadrennial periodic reports based on their individual ratification dates, this analysis uses the most recent report available for each State Party as of the July 2024 deadline for the Global Report (Following Resolution 9.CP 7 adopted at the ninth session of the Conference of Parties in 2023, all Parties are asked to submit their next periodic report according to a single global submission date on 30 June 2027 and every four years thereafter).*

*Some countries have not been classified by income-level or Global North/South designation. For income-level, this includes: Åland Islands, Anguilla, Cook Islands, Holy See, Montserrat, Niue, Tokelau, and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). For Global North/South designation, this includes: Holy See, Israel, and Liechtenstein. These countries have been included in the global analyses but not in the analyses by the classification groups from which they are absent.*

# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| 5G | Fifth Generation |
| ACCA | Art Charter for Climate Action |
| ACE | Action for Climate Empowerment |
| ACUS | Conservation and Sustainable Use Area |
| ADMA | Africa Digital Media Academy |
| AI | Artificial intelligence |
| ALIPH | International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas |
| AR | Augmented Reality |
| ARA | Artist Rights Alliance |
| ARR | Artist's Resale Right |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| ASPA | Asia Pacific Screen Awards |
| AU | African Union |
| AWE | American Academy for Women Entrepreneurs |
| BIA | Basic Income for the Arts (Ireland) |
| CAF | Corporación Andina de Fomento (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean) |
| CBD | Convention on Biological Diversity |
| CBDR-RC | Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities |
| CCAT | Creatives for Climate Action Thailand |
| CCIS | Cultural and Creative Industries |
| CCI | Cultural and Creative Industry |
| CECC-SICA | Coordinación Educativa y Cultural Centroamericana (Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination) |
| CEDART | Centro de Educación Artística (Mexico) (Centre for Artistic Education) |
| CELAC | Community of Latin American and Caribbean States |
| CENART | Centro Nacional de las Artes (Mexico) (National Center for the Arts) |
| CESCR | United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights |
| CHN | Climate Heritage Network |
| CISAC | Confédération internationale des sociétés d'auteurs et compositeurs (International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers) |
| CITES | Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora |
| CMOS | Collective Management Organizations |
| CO2E | Carbon dioxide equivalent |
| COP | Conference of the Parties |
| CSA | Central and Southern Asia |
| CSOS | Civil Society Organization |
| CWG | Culture Working Group |
| DFIS | Development Finance Institutions |
| DICE | Digital Intercultural Exchange |
| DSM | Digital Single Market |
| DSPZ | Swiss-German PEN Center |
| ESEA | Eastern and South-Eastern Asia |
| ECCA | Entertainment and Culture for Climate Action |
| ECL | Extended Collective Licensing |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |

| | |
|---|---|
| EIU | Economist Intelligence Unit |
| EMAV | Escola de Mitjans Audio-visuals (Barcelona) (Municipal Audio-visual School) |
| ERDF | European Regional Development Fund |
| ESD | Education for Sustainable Development |
| EU | European Union |
| EUNA | Europe and North America |
| EUROPOL | European Union Agency for Enforcement Cooperation |
| EWA | European Women's Audio-visual Network |
| FESAC | Fédération des entreprises du spectacle vivant, de la musique, de l'audiovisuel et du cinéma (Federation of live performance, music, audio-visual and cinema companies) |
| G20 | Group of Twenty |
| G7 | Group of Seven |
| GCC | Gallery Climate Coalition |
| GCED | Global Citizenship Education |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| GEO | Group on Earth Observation |
| GFCBCA | Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action |
| GGA | Global Goal on Adaptation |
| GHG | Greenhouse Gas |
| GIS | Geographic information systems |
| GNH | Gross National Happiness |
| GNLC | UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities |
| GSMA | Global System for Mobile Communications Association |
| GST | Global Stocktake |
| GVA | Gross Value Added |
| HAP | Humanitarian Admission Program |
| HEF | UNESCO Heritage Emergency Fund |
| HEMO | Heritage Monitoring for Recovery Project |
| HI | High income |
| HVO | Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil |
| IADB | Inter-American Development Bank |
| IAWG | International Affiliation of Writers Guild |
| ICC | International Criminal Court |
| ICCPR | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights |
| ICCROM | International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property |
| ICESCR | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights |
| ICH | Intangible Cultural Heritage |
| ICIP | Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property |
| ICOMOS | International Council on Monuments and Sites |
| ICORN | International Cities of Refuge Network |
| ICPRCP | UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property |
| ICT | Information and Communications Technology |
| IFACCA | International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies |
| IFCD | International Fund for Cultural Diversity |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organization |
| INR | Indian Rupee |
| INTERPOL | International Criminal Police Organization |
| IPCC | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| IPRS | Intellectual Property Rights |
| IRI | Interactive Radio Instruction |
| ISP | Internet Service Provider |
| ITK | Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge Systems |
| ITU | International Telecommunication Union |
| JWD | Joint Work Decision |
| KAWF | Korean Artists Welfare Foundation |
| KSVY | Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana (India) |
| LAC | Latin America and the Caribbean |
| LAION | Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network |

| | |
|---|---|
| LDCS | Least Developed Countries |
| LI | Lower-income |
| LIDAR | Light Detection and Ranging |
| LMI | Lower-middle income |
| MEA | Multilateral Environmental Agreements |
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa |
| MESC | Media and Entertainment Skills Council (India) |
| MGIEP | UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Peace and Sustainable Development |
| MLE | Multilingual Education |
| MONDIACULT | UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development |
| MSMES | Micro, small and medium enterprises |
| MUPROSI | Mutual Social Protection Scheme for Workers in the Informal Sector (Togo) |
| NAPS | National Adaptation Plans |
| NBSAP | National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans |
| NCF-SE | National Curriculum Framework for School Education (India) |
| NCQG | New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance |
| NDCS | Nationally Determined Contributions |
| NEP | National Education Policy (India) |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| NOFBI | National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure |
| NORAD | Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation |
| NSW | New South Wales |
| OC | Oceania |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| OEI | Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (Organization of Ibero-American States) |
| OUV | Outstanding Universal Value |
| PISA | Programme for International Student Assessment |
| PPPS | Public-private partnerships |
| RE-HEED | Reframing Heritage Education (Egypt) |
| ROVS | Remotely Operated Vehicles |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| SEP | Secretaría de Educación Pública (Mexico) (Secretariat of Public Education) |
| SIDA | Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency |
| SIDS | Small Island Developing States |
| SSA | Sub-Saharan Africa |
| STEAM | Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics |
| STOP | Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony |
| TDM | Text and Data Mining |
| TELCO | Telecommunications company |
| TIRI | Temporary International Relocation Initiatives |
| TNC | The Nature Conservancy |
| TPSS | Tsomgo Pokhri Sanrakshan Samiti |
| TRIPS AGREEMENT | Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UCCN | UNESCO Creative Cities Network |
| UIS | UNESCO Institute for Statistics |
| UK | United-Kingdom |
| UMI | Upper-middle income |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNCTAD | United Nations Conference on Trade and Development |
| UNDHR | Universal Declaration of Human Rights |
| UNDRIP | United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples |
| UNDRR | United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction |
| UNFCCC | United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change |
| UNGA | United Nations General Assembly |

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|---|---|
| UNIDROIT | International Institute for the Unification of Private Law |
| UNITWIN | University Twinning and Networking Programme |
| UNTOC | United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime |
| USA | United States of America |
| USD | United States Dollars |
| VNRS | Voluntary National Reviews |
| VR | Virtual reality |
| WAAE | World Alliance for Arts Education |
| WANA | Western Asia and Northern Africa |
| WIF | Women in Film |
| WIPO | World Intellectual Property Organization |
| WMO | World Meteorological Organization |
| WTO | World Trade Organization |
| YETAM | Youth Empowerment Through Arts and Media |

# Glossary

**AI-automation.** Pertaining to a process or system that, under specified conditions, functions without human intervention (ISO).

**Art Market.** Depending on the national context, the term 'art market' refers to the market of cultural property, dealers in cultural property, antique dealers, museums or any other professionals engaged in commercial transactions in cultural property, including online (UNESCO).

**Artist Mobility.** Refers to the ability of artists and culture professionals to travel regionally or internationally to access new career opportunities, markets and audiences, to participate in events, to develop collaborations, and to benefit from cultural exchanges that can inspire their creative processes. Measures and policies may support the inward mobility of artists (inviting or enabling foreign artists to visit a host country) and the outward mobility of artists (supporting national artists to travel abroad) (UNESCO).

**Artistic Expression.** Freedom of artists to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions, free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors. Includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the well-being of societies (UNESCO).

**Artistic Freedom.** Artistic freedom is the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the well-being of societies (UNESCO).

**Collective Management Organizations (CMOs).** CMOs are, in most cases, not-for-profit entities; their legal form can be either private or public. Depending on the repertoire they represent, they can also be called Music Licensing Companies (MLCs), Mechanical Rights Organizations (MROs), Performers' Collective Management Organizations (PMOs) or Reproduction Rights Organizations (RROs).

Various types of collective management approaches exist, including statutory/mandatory collective management, as well as contractual/voluntary collective management (WIPO).

**Copyright.** Copyright (or author's right) is a legal term used to describe the rights that creators have over their literary and artistic works (WIPO).

**Creative Economy.** The creative economy is an evolving concept based on the contribution and potential of creative assets to contribute to economic growth and development. It embraces economic, cultural and social aspects interacting with technology, intellectual property and tourism objectives: it is a set of knowledge-based, and thus more localized, economic activities with a development dimension and cross-cutting linkages at macro and micro levels to the overall economy. There is not a single definition of creative economy, and the different definitions usually overlap. A common characteristic is that the creative economy has a multitude of dimensions, making contributions to economic, social, cultural development and has a potential for contributing to achieving the sustainable development goals (UNEN).

**Cultural Activities, Goods and Services.** Refers to those activities, goods and services, which at the time they are considered as a specific attribute, use or purpose, embody or convey cultural expressions, irrespective of the commercial value they may have. Cultural activities may be an end in themselves, or they may contribute to the production of cultural goods and services (UNESCO).

**Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs).** Industries whose principal purpose is the production or reproduction, promotion, distribution, or commercialization of goods, services and activities of a cultural, artistic or heritage value (UNESCO).

**Cultural Content.** Refers to the symbolic meaning, artistic dimension and cultural values that originate from or express cultural identities (UNESCO).

**Cultural Diversity.** Refers to the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression. These expressions are passed on within and among groups and societies. Cultural diversity is made manifest not only through the varied ways in which the cultural heritage of humanity is expressed, augmented and transmitted through the variety of cultural expressions, but also through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used (UNESCO).

**Cultural Employment.** Total of all persons that have a cultural or non-cultural occupation in the culture sector and all persons that have a cultural occupation in the non-cultural sector (UIS).

**Cultural Expressions.** Those expressions that result from the creativity of individuals, groups and societies, and that have cultural content (UNESCO).

**Cultural Goods.** Consumer goods that convey ideas, symbols and ways of life, i.e. books, magazines, multimedia products, software, recordings, films, videos, audio-visual programs, crafts and fashion (UIS).

**Cultural Occupations.** Occupations that involve creative and artistic production, and heritage collection and preservation. They involve tasks and duties that are carried out to:

01. Generate, develop, preserve or reflect cultural or symbolic and spiritual meaning;

02. Create, produce and disseminate cultural goods and services, which generally contain intellectual property rights; and

03. For the purpose of artistic expression (e.g. visual, music, writing, dance or dramatic arts) (UIS).

**Cultural Rights.** Cultural rights protect the rights for each person, individually and in community with others, as well as groups of people, to develop and express their humanity, their world view and the meanings they give to their existence and their development through, inter alia, values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, institutions and ways of life. They are also considered as protecting access to cultural heritage and resources that allow such identification and development processes to take place. Cultural rights relate to a broad range of issues, such as: expression and creation, including in diverse material and non-material forms of art; information and communication; language; identity and belonging to multiple, diverse and changing communities of shared cultural values; development of specific world visions and the pursuit of specific ways of life; education and training; access, contribution and participation in cultural life and the conduct of cultural practices and access to and enjoyment of heritage in its tangible, intangible, natural and mixed manifestations (OHCHR).

**Cultural Services.** Services aimed at satisfying cultural interests or needs. They do not represent cultural material goods in themselves but facilitate their production and distribution. For example, cultural services include licensing activities and other copyright-related services, audio-visual distribution activities, promotion of performing arts and cultural events, as well as cultural information services and the preservation of books, recordings and artefacts (in libraries, documentation centres, museums) (UIS).

**Culture and Arts Education.** Culture and arts education include teaching and learning about, with and through the arts and culture, as well as all forms of cultural and artistic expressions. 'Culture and Arts Education' position culture including the arts as an educational tool, an approach, and a field of study, research and practice (UNESCO).

**Culture.** Set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group, [which] includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs (MONDIACULT Declarations, 1982 – 2022)

**Culture professionals.** Individuals who support, enable, manage, or promote cultural activities. They may not be artists themselves but play essential roles in sustaining the culture sector.

**Decent Work.** Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men (ILO).

**Endangered Language.** Languages meeting one of the five levels of endangerment according UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (UNESCO).

**Fair Remuneration.** Refers to the principle that artists and culture professionals should be adequately and fairly compensated for their work to ensure the independence and sustainability of creative work. Some of the main challenges to fair remuneration include inadequate copyright protection, piracy and illegal streaming (UNESCO).

**Formal education.** Education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognized private bodies and, in their totality, make up the formal education system of a country. Formal education programs are thus recognized as such by the relevant national educational authorities or equivalent, e.g. any other institution in co-operation with the national or sub-national educational authorities. Formal education consists mostly of initial education. Vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education are often recognized as being part of the formal education system (UIS).

**Formalization.** Formalization is the process of bringing informal workers and economic units under the coverage of formal arrangements, while ensuring opportunities for income security, livelihoods and entrepreneurship (ILO).

**Global Citizenship.** The concept that we are connected not just with one country but with a broader global community. So, by positively contributing to it, we can also influence change on regional, national and local levels. A global citizen understands how the world works, values differences in people, and works with others to find solutions to challenges too big for any one nation (UNESCO).

**Illicit trafficking of Cultural Property.** Trafficking of cultural property involves several acts, including theft and other forms of unlawful appropriation, unlawful excavation, removal, importation and exportation, illegal acquisition, transfer and placing on the market of cultural property and falsification of documents

**Indigenous Knowledge.** See 'Traditional knowledge'

**Informal Learning.** Forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate but are not institutionalized. It is consequently less organized and structured than either formal or non-formal education. Informal learning may include learning activities that occur in the family, workplace, local community and daily life, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially-directed basis (UNESCO IIEP).

**Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).** Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO).

**Intellectual property.** Refers to the protection of creations of the mind, such as inventions, literary and artistic works, and designs. IP is protected in law by patents, copyright, and trademarks, which grant owners the exclusive right to control how their creations are used and to financially benefit from them (UNESCO).

**Just transition.** A set of principles, processes and practices that aim to ensure that no people, workers, places, sectors, countries or regions are left behind in the transition from a high-carbon to a low-carbon economy. Targeted and proactive measures from governments, agencies and authorities are needed to ensure that any negative social, environmental or economic impacts of economy-wide transitions are minimized, whilst benefits are maximized for those who are disproportionately affected (IPCC).

**Language rights.** 'Language rights' and 'linguistic rights' are human rights that have an impact on the language preferences or use of state authorities, individuals and other entities. Language rights are usually considered broader than linguistic rights. Language is central to human nature and culture, and is one of the most important expressions of identity. Issues surrounding language are therefore particularly emotive and significant to linguistic minority communities seeking to maintain their distinct group and cultural identities, sometimes under conditions of marginalization, exclusion and discrimination (OHCHR).

**Lifelong learning.** Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and the elderly, girls and boys, women and men), in all life-wide contexts (family, school, the community, the workplace, and so on) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal), which, together, meet a wide range of learning needs and demands. There are five essential elements to the UNESCO definition of lifelong learning. It must encompass: all age groups; all levels of education; all learning modalities; all learning spheres and spaces; a variety of purposes (UNESCO – UIL).

**Multilinguism.** The use of more than one language for communication, by individuals or institutions.

**Natural Heritage.** Natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of Outstanding Universal Value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view; geological and physiographical formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of science or conservation; natural sites or precisely delineated natural areas of Outstanding Universal Value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty (UNESCO).

**Non-formal education.** Education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals. It is often provided to guarantee the right of access to education for all. It caters for people of all ages, but does not necessarily apply a continuous pathway-structure; it may be short in duration and/or low intensity, and it is typically provided in the form of short courses, workshops or seminars. Non-formal education mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognized as formal qualifications by the relevant national educational authorities or to no qualifications at all. Non-formal education can cover programs contributing to adult and youth literacy and education for out-of-school children, as well as programs on life skills, work skills and social or cultural development (UIS).

**Preferential Trade Arrangements (PTAs).** PTAs for trade preferences, such as lower or zero tariffs, which a member may offer to a trade partner unilaterally (WTO).

**Return and restitution of cultural property.** The term 'restitution' is mostly used for property pillage in terms of war or for properties stolen from the owner. The term 'return', however, is preferred for property displaced from and restored to its country of origin, and also for cases of unlawful export. With unlawful exports, the property is returned to the state of origin without the question of ownership arising. Return depends more on the notion of territory, while restitution in the technical sense presupposes that there is an identified recipient. The notion of 'repatriation', also commonly used, refers to a specific form of restitution whose destination can vary; it can be either the country where the cultural property belongs to or the ethnic group that owns it (UNESCO).

**Safeguarding.** Measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage (UNESCO).

**Socioeconomic Rights.** The right to employment, to social security, to a minimum wage, to the freedom of assembly and association, to free access to employment (UNESCO).

**Status of the Artist.** Refers to, on the one hand, the recognition of artists' role in society as important contributors to the development of society through art and culture and, on the other, the recognition of liberties and rights, including moral, economic and social rights, with particular reference to income and social security, which artists should enjoy (UNESCO).

**Sustainable Development.** Meeting the social, environmental and economic needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (e.g. climate change, inequality and human rights, biodiversity loss, deforestation, waste and pollution) (UNESCO – UNEVOC).

**Tangible Cultural Heritage.** Tangible Cultural heritage (movable, immobile and underwater), includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance (UIS).

**Tertiary Level – Education.** Tertiary education builds on secondary education, providing learning activities in specialized fields of education. It aims at learning at a high level of complexity and specialization. Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education. It comprises ISCED levels 5, 6, 7 and 8, which are labelled as short-cycle tertiary education, Bachelor's or equivalent level, Master's or equivalent level, and doctoral or equivalent level, respectively. The content of programs at the tertiary level is more complex and advanced than in lower ISCED levels (UNESCO – UNEVOC).

**Traditional Knowledge.** Knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, forestry and environmental management in general (UIS).

**TVET.** Technical and Vocational Education and Training: Those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic life (UNESCO).

**Urban Heritage.** All the elements of urban areas or urban built environment that bear significance for past, present or future generations.

**Value chain.** Process or activities by which a company adds value to an article, including production, marketing, and the provision of after-sales service, going from the raw materials, until the final product (ILO).

**Vocational education.** Education that is designed for learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a particular occupation or trade or class of occupations or trades. Vocational education may have work-based components (e.g. apprenticeships). Successful completion of such programs leads to labour-market relevant vocational qualifications acknowledged as occupationally-oriented by the relevant national authorities and/or the labour market (UIS)

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# UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies

## Culture: The missing SDG

In an era marked by urgent challenges, the UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies - Culture: The missing SDG offers the first comprehensive overview of cultural policies across the world, drawing on data from 196 countries and over 100 cities. Rooted in the vision of the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration, this inaugural UNESCO report examines how cultural policies are evolving to advance rights, expand education, drive climate action and digital transformation and enhance resilience in the face of crises. It highlights both the growing momentum and the persistent gaps in access, investment and cooperation.

More than a diagnostic tool, the Global Report is a collective roadmap for concrete action. By amplifying the voices of culture not as a peripheral issue, but as a cornerstone of peace and sustainable development.

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