



UNESCO GLOBAL REPORT ON CULTURAL POLICIES

Culture: The missing SDG

Executive Summary



2025





Culture: The missing SDG

Published in 2025 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France.

© UNESCO 2025

CLT/EO/2025/RP/5

<https://doi.org/10.58337/IWCF6031>



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<https://www.unesco.org/en/open-access/cc-sa>).

Images marked with an asterisk (*) do not fall under the CC-BY-SA license and may not be used or reproduced without the prior permission of the copyright holders.

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

The complete report is available online at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000395504>

Graphic design and layout: BOLD Design SL

Cover design: Francisca Campos Escobar

Printed by: BOLD Design SL

Printed in: Barcelona, Spain



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

UNESCO GLOBAL REPORT ON CULTURAL POLICIES

Culture: The missing SDG

Executive Summary



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

A handwritten signature of Audrey Azoulay in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a horizontal line.

Culture: The missing SDG



Rundu, Kavango, Namibia

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 insights 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 and Recommendations, 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 also 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.

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 4.7¹ and 11.4.² 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. Yet, 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?*



Follow this link to see
the Global Report's
Results Framework

¹ 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.

² Target 11.4: By 2030 strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

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 World Conference on Cultural Policies – 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 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 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.

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 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 first Global Report on Cultural Policies demonstrates, culture is increasingly being operationalised 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. In the face of growing gender disparities and digital divides, income inequality among digital creators remains considerable. Meanwhile, AI-driven content threatens creator livelihoods, with projections of multibillion-euro losses for music and audiovisual professionals by 2028.

Culture also continues to face a significant data challenge. While there has been considerable progress in recent years to improve the quality and consistency of cultural data, much of it presented in this Report, there is still an urgent need to enhance data collection approaches and strengthen the foundations for evidence-based policymaking. This challenge is particularly acute in Member States with limited resources and a weak statistical track record in data collection for culture. More robust and disaggregated data will enable more effective policy instruments and will be vital to unlocking greater public and private investment in culture.

The 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 is no longer theoretical. It is being operationalised 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 report 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 of culture 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. 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 globally recognizing culture as a key element in their development strategies³. 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 prioritised. 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 persistent 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.

Shared aspirations, contextual challenges and emerging priorities

In preparation for MONDIACULT 2025, UNESCO convened six regional consultations between November 2024 and February 2025, engaging Member States, civil society, artists, youth 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. 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. Yet, 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 cultural 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

³ 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.

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 cultural and creative industries are 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, culture is increasingly recognized as a driver of economic transformation, particularly for increasing employment for women and youth, as seen in Africa's dynamic music, fashion and film sectors. Yet, constraints such as limited public and private investment, informality and weak infrastructure continue to hinder inclusive growth, and there is a risk that a broader creative economy paradigm does not tackle systemic barriers to fair and equitable cultural development and 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 underscore 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 and West Asia and North Africa report particularly high engagement in this regard, with respectively 83% and 94% of reporting States having implemented such dedicated policies (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Women account for 38% of total workers in the cultural and creative industries, constituting a powerful voice and a driving force for change in the cultural and creative ecosystems. However, structural inequalities in the cultural and creative industries 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. These gaps underscore the urgent need to systematically integrate gender equality into cultural policies and their implementation. Promoting women's leadership and ensuring safe, inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life is critical to fostering vibrant cultural ecosystems, protecting livelihoods and ensuring that girls and women can contribute fully to the cultural and creative sectors.



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 global priorities.⁴

A multilateral approach to culture as a stand-alone goal

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, the chapters recognize 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 underrecognized 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.

⁴ 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.

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 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 UNESCO 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.⁵ Ratification and submission rates also vary significantly across normative instruments and programmes, resulting in different levels of representation of cultural sub-domains. 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.

⁵ The number of countries includes Member States, Associate Members and States Parties. For a complete list of the countries and cities whose reports were analyzed for the 2025 Global Report on Cultural Policies, please refer to Annexes – Countries and Cities included in the analysis.

A snapshot of the Global Report on Cultural Policies

This 2025 edition of the UNESCO 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 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.

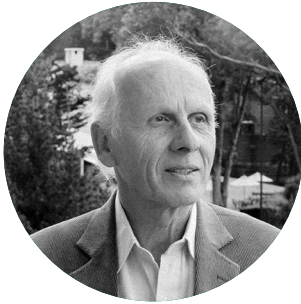
Data referencing acknowledgement

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.





César Augusto Guadalupe Mendizábal
Professor of Social Sciences
Universidad del Pacífico, Peru



Jamil Salmi
Global tertiary education expert

Chapter 1

Advancing inclusive and equitable participation in cultural life

► Creative Voices

Daiara Tukano



Visual artist, activist, and educator.

‘Just as the planet sows cultures, cultures cultivate the planet, nourishing systems of world and thought where exchanges and interactions are necessary to maintain or transform systems of life.’



Key figures

- 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).
- 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).
- Only 61% of reporting 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).
- 95% of reporting Member States indicate the implementation of heritage education programmes designed to improve young people's understanding of heritage, promote diversity and foster intercultural dialogue, either through formal programmes or on an ad-hoc basis (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- 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).

Key takeaways

- Despite formal recognition, there is still a serious lack in 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Women face distinct barriers to cultural participation, particularly in exercising their cultural and associated socioeconomic rights. Persistent gender inequalities limit their opportunities to create, lead and influence decision-making within the cultural and creative industries, despite their critical contributions to cultural life. In parallel, underrepresented groups – including Indigenous Peoples, cultural minorities and persons with disabilities – encounter systemic obstacles that restrict their ability to access, participate in and contribute to cultural life. For persons with disabilities, in particular, physical, communicational and attitudinal barriers often hinder both cultural expression and access to opportunities in the cultural and creative industries, as highlighted in UNESCO reports. Member States that integrate gender, as well as minority and disability impact assessments into their cultural policies and establish dedicated funding streams, provide valuable models for advancing equity, accessibility and inclusion in the cultural sector.
- 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.

Culture plays a fundamental role in fostering trust, tolerance and mutual respect within and across societies. Guaranteeing cultural rights is central to safeguarding and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions that enrich communities worldwide. At the heart of this discussion is the status of artists and cultural workers, who are essential drivers of creativity and cultural vitality. Yet many continue to face barriers to artistic freedom, coupled with interlinked socio-economic challenges that limit their ability to create, share their work and secure sustainable livelihoods. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that all individuals can fully participate in cultural life and contribute to building inclusive and resilient societies.

Summary

Culture as a human right

This first Global Report addresses the interconnected dimensions that cultural rights operate across. First, access and opportunity to experience cultural life and heritage, meaning the freedom of individuals to enjoy their own cultural heritage as well as that of other people and communities. Second, participation in cultural activities, referring to the ability to actively engage in cultural practices, criticise traditions and choose cultural affiliations freely. And third, 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’, and this intersection often results in women facing multiple forms of discrimination. The reality of individual identities being ‘multiple and complex’ makes women particularly vulnerable to overlapping forms of exclusion. In this regard, it becomes crucial to highlight that culture must not be used to legitimize gender violence, inequality and discrimination, especially when specific traditions, such as Female Genital Mutilation, contradict universal human rights.

Right to access and participation in cultural life

In the framework of monitoring mechanisms set around 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. Analysis in Chapter 1 reveals both progress in implementation frameworks and persistent disparities in cultural participation across regions and demographics. Recent data shows that these advances include notable progress in the inclusion of gender, sexual and identity diversities in cultural policies, as well as efforts to prevent the illegal trade of cultural properties. The Pact for the Future reinforces

ces this progress by making states ensure that cultural policies and strategies contribute to more effective, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development through their integration into economic, social and environmental frameworks. However, challenges remain in fully implementing and protecting cultural rights for all citizens, particularly in ensuring equitable access and participation across different socioeconomic contexts.

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. 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. 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.

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. However, the Special Rapporteur notes that implementation gaps persist between policy frameworks and practical outcomes, particularly affecting marginalized communities. National reports show that addressing these gaps requires improved coordination among stakeholders and enhanced institutional capacity.

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. 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.⁶ 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.⁷ The United Nations therefore has recognized this connection through various resolutions, establishing special obligations for countries that acquired valuable cultural objects through colonial occupation.

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 2025⁸ – 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.

⁶<https://opiniojuris.org/2023/05/12/restitution-of-cultural-property-and-human-rights/>

⁷<https://www.qil-qdi.org/legal-aspects-concerning-the-restitution-of-cultural-property-removed-during-colonial-occupation/>

Protecting and promoting the diversity of contemporary cultural expressions

The UNESCO Global Report calls for policies that promote diverse and inclusive cultural participation. While heritage protection and restitution address historical dimensions of cultural rights, the safeguarding and promotion of contemporary cultural expressions is connected to the dynamic, evolving nature of cultural participation. 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 recognizes this dynamism, emphasizing culture’s role as a catalyst for sustainable development and social transformation.

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. The Special Rapporteur has emphasized that substantive equality requires states to protect diverse linguistic frameworks, particularly for minority and Indigenous communities. This protection intersects significantly with broader cultural expression mechanisms, as linguistic rights are fundamental to cultural participation and identity formation. 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.



Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea

Status of the artist: “recognizing the pillars of cultural life”

The status of the artist is a critical aspect of unlocking the role of culture as a foundation for sustainable development. The 1980 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist defines artists 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’.⁸

Establishing an official legal status is essential to ensuring that the contributions of artists and other culture professionals are fully recognized and valued in a fair way. Such recognition enables them to create, produce, distribute and enjoy their work with the full respect and protection of their socioeconomic rights. Many countries have adopted statutory protections, while collective management organizations play an important role in helping artists enforce and license their rights. Many countries have adopted statutory protections, and collective management organizations (CMOs) play an important role in helping 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. In developing countries, where large informal sectors persist, establishing fair compensation systems remains a challenge. However, encouraging examples demonstrate that practical solutions can be developed to address these gaps and strengthen the status and working conditions of artists.

Different groups of artists face additional barriers. For example, artists with disabilities face multiple challenges and require targeted support to ensure their full participation in the cultural and creative industries. Artists and culture professionals

⁸ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/new-types-cooperation-and-agreements-field-return-and-restitution-cultural-property-africa>

⁹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382658>

belonging to ethnic minorities may be confronted by language, cultural and social obstacles to access opportunities and upholding their rights. Women and LGBTIQ+ artists face multiple structural and social barriers to full and equal participation.

Furthermore, in the digital and platform-based economy, artists are exposed to challenging practices resulting in low pay – for instance, musicians earn very little per stream from platforms playing their works.¹⁰ Access to financial support is vital for many artists, especially at the beginning of their careers. Furthermore, initiatives to support 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.

Intellectual property: turning creativity into opportunity

The effective management of intellectual property (IP) is instrumental to enable artists and cultural workers to develop their practice and sustain a living through their work. 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. Many countries have introduced legislation and policies to complement the global agreements. By safeguarding intellectual property rights (IPR), 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.

Empowering cultural flows across borders

Dedicated approaches are required to foster equitable cultural mobility and exchange. Professional development and mobility are crucial for artists because they enhance creativity, career opportunities and financial sustainability. 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.

UNESCO has led efforts to build up support for the mobility of artists in the Global South. Article 16 of the 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 developing countries.¹¹ In spite of these recommendations, however, professional mobility data reveals pronounced disparities between the Global North and South. 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.

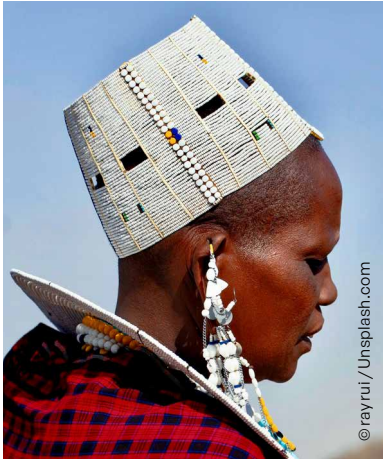
Participatory cultural policy-making and governance

The UNESCO Global Report reflects on emergent models of cultural governance that are more inclusive, inter-departmental, pan-institutional and participatory. Participatory governance in cultural policy making represents a fundamental dimension of cultural rights, embodying both the right to participate in and contribute to cultural life and reflecting international standards for inclusive decision-making in cultural matters. 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.

Gender-responsive institutional mechanisms demonstrate varying levels of development and effectiveness across regions. These include ensuring consistent

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/feb/19/spotify-discovery-mode-payola-playlist>

¹¹ https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392217_eng/PDF/392217eng.pdf.multi



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. 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.

Monitoring and evaluation

Cultural monitoring and evaluation are key to effective policy and action. Cultural rights monitoring 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.

The effective monitoring and evaluation of cultural rights implementation represents a significant challenge in the current global framework. 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.

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.

Chapter 1 Call for a stand-alone goal

A stand-alone sustainable development goal for culture would increase the visibility and management of cultural rights. It would provide a stronger basis for generating robust data, developing standardized indicators and implementing more effective evidence-based cultural policies. It would narrow the gap between improved policy and law-making in support of the status of the artist, and the actual delivery of actions which protect and promote cultural rights and deliver the nurturing environment for free and diverse cultural expressions.

Policy brief

Lucina Jiménez



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

‘The post 2030 agenda is an opportunity to reduce inequalities between the global North and South, and 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.’





Alejandra López Gabrielidis
Philosopher specialized in Arts
and Digital Technologies.

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

‘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.’

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



Key figures

- A clear disparity exists between the Global North and Global South, with respectively 70% and 54% of countries reporting digital literacy programmes for creation and experimentation (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).
- 86% of European and North American States, 76% of Latin American and Caribbean States, and 69% of Sub-Saharan African States who submitted reports have implemented measures to enhance the access to and discoverability of their domestic cultural content in the digital environment (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).
- 67% of responding Member States report having a standardized or unified inventory system (manual or digital) enforced by their government. But there's a notable difference between the Global North and Global South, with 73% of reporting Member States enforcing these systems in the Global North, compared to 60% in the Global South (2015 Recommendation Periodic Reports).
- 100% of responding 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, with 45% of responding Member States globally reporting challenges in implementing intellectual property rights recommendations (1980 Recommendation Periodic Reports).

Key takeaways

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, limiting 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 access and participate 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, requiring 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.

The impact of the digital transformation on all cultural domains brings new opportunities and challenges for culture professionals, artists and institutions. This chapter includes issues related to 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 on artificial intelligence. Special attention is given to the digital exclusion that continues to hinder women's full participation in the cultural and creative sectors, particularly in low- and lower-middle-income countries, where the digital divide remains pronounced.

Summary

The rapid evolution of digital technologies and AI is transforming the way culture is created, accessed and shared, opening new horizons for creativity while also raising profound questions for cultural policies. This technological shift brings opportunities for innovation, participation and economic growth, yet it also presents tensions and risks, from unequal access to digital tools to concerns over intellectual property and cultural diversity.

To navigate this transformation, coordinated action is essential. National and local governments, working in concert with international partners, public-private collaborations, informed policy frameworks and dedicated investment play a pivotal role in ensuring equitable access to digital education, cultural participation and the benefits of the creative economy. By harnessing the potential of the cultural and creative industries in the digital era, these efforts can drive inclusive and sustainable growth, contributing to the achievement of the SDGs and the post-2030 development agenda.

Digital technologies, online platforms and social media have radically transformed the way people produce, distribute, access and enjoy cultural goods and services. Furthermore, the rise of generative AI is reshaping cultural content creation and AI systems have proven to be very effective in facilitating access to cultural institutions' collections and 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 cultural professionals, impact on artists' income potential, biases in AI outcomes, cultural flattening and homogenization, the reconfiguration of the concept of creativity and the increase of techno-monopolies.

However, more and more artists and creators are 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. All this highlights critical issues such as digital and AI literacy, the capacity to adapt to rapid technological advances, access to essential digital infrastructure, the definition of labour, moral and cultural rights, and the need to ensure that artists maintain agency over their creative processes while fostering innovation.

Fostering access to digital infrastructure

Cultural rights, understood as the ability to access, participate in and contribute to cultural life, which has become intrinsically linked to digital technologies and the internet, are considered universal human rights, as Chapter 1 illustrates in more detail. However, issues of access to digital infrastructure remain a critical barrier to equitable participation in cultural life and constitute a key challenge in terms of leveraging the potential of digital technologies. For example, 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. Higher-income countries advance at a faster pace and gender disparities further exacerbate digital divides, with 70% of men worldwide using the Internet, compared with 65% of women. This means that globally, there are 189 million more men than women using the internet.

The 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), for example, advocates for universal connectivity and access to digital infrastructure by 2030 as fundamental for achieving the SDGs and reducing inequality, highlighting the urgency to bridge the digital divide, particularly in underserved regions. More recently, the Pact for the Future also emphasized digital cooperation as a key driver of sustainable development, stressing the need to close digital divides, particularly between developed and developing countries, to ensure that technological progress benefits all.

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. Digital literacy is also recognized as a cornerstone of national development, enabling individuals to engage with digital technologies in education, communication and employment. But the rapidly evolving nature of the digital landscape requires a comprehensive approach to equipping cultural professionals with the necessary skills to navigate emerging technologies while ensuring inclusiveness and sustainability. Therefore, the MONDIACULT Declaration also advocates for the integration of digital literacy into education to enhance knowledge, conservation and cultural diversity.

Data provided by UNESCO Member States shows that many of them reported digital literacy programmes for creation and experimentation. Nevertheless, there is significant variation in the implementation of digital literacy programmes and a clear disparity between the Global North and Global South with especially higher-income countries more likely to have digital literacy programmes. This skill gap also restricts access to emerging employment opportunities in the global digital economy, including those requiring technical proficiency in operating digital devices such as drones or remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), which are, for example, 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, but also to reduce job losses and facilitate a just transition. Solutions need to involve the integration of AI education into school curricula, educational partnerships and capacity-building initiatives leveraging digital online platforms to bring educational resources to countries that have lower resources for investment in digital literacy programmes as well as digital literacy programmes that target the most vulnerable groups and that are age, income and gender responsive.

However, the impacts of AI systems vary significantly across different fields and stages of the value chain, given the wide-ranging nature of cultural and creative industries. Effective and responsive policymaking will therefore require granular, sector-specific data as well as nuanced mechanisms to identify and anticipate the evolving digital skill needs of professionals and support upskilling strategies that reflect the specific dynamics of each sub-sector and ensure inclusive adaptation to technological change.



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

Digitizing and democratizing access to cultural heritage

The digitization of cultural heritage has become an essential strategy for recording, promoting and democratizing access to cultural expressions. More than a purely technical process, digitization serves as a fundamental mechanism for increasing access to both tangible and intangible heritage, ensuring its transmission across generations and expanding its role in contemporary cultural life. Digital technologies are powerful tools not only to document, restore and disseminate cultural assets, but also to enhance the understanding of heritage values, fostering new ways of engaging with the past while shaping the cultural landscapes of the future. Through digital archives, open-access platforms and virtual reality tools, historical monuments, archaeological sites and artistic artifacts are now available to global audiences, reducing geographical and economic barriers to cultural engagement. At the same time, intangible heritage – including oral traditions, rituals and Indigenous Knowledge systems – is recorded and shared through digital storytelling, multimedia documentation and AI-assisted language preservation, reinforcing cultural diversity in digital environments.

But the lack of comprehensive digitization policies and strategies can pose significant risks to the protection and transmission of cultural heritage and can foster unethical practices. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration therefore also 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. Additionally, it stresses the importance of digital tools in combating illicit trafficking of cultural property, emphasizing their potential to track, document and protect heritage from illegal trade.

Furthermore, technological advances must be accompanied by inclusive policies that ensure digitized collections remain accessible, adaptable for educational purposes and open to creative reuse. Policy frameworks also need to promote interoperability, sustainability and long-term digital preservation planning, not just access and usage, and they need to address challenges related to the appropriation and misrepresentation of cultural knowledge and digital extractivism, particularly in the context of cultural assets of Indigenous and historically marginalized communities.

Diversifying cultural expressions in the digital realm

When analysing the landscape of policies for cultural diversity in digital environments, data presented in Chapter 2 suggests that a significant proportion of countries are implementing measures to enhance the access to and discoverability of their cultural content in the digital environment (2005 Convention Periodic Reports). However, significant barriers persist to diversify cultural expressions in the digital realm, such as linguistic domination and asymmetry impacting the visibility and circulation of cultural expressions and reinforcing structural inequalities.

To address this, the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) highlights the need to ensure access to diverse cultural expressions in AI-driven content distribution and to mitigate the risks of algorithmic homogenization and the biases embedded in the training datasets of AI systems, which reinforce hegemonic cultural narratives. Hence, ethical considerations must be embedded throughout all stages of the AI system life cycle and legal instruments should not only address the auditability of algorithms but also extend to the transparency and accountability of AI training datasets. Furthermore, it is important that governments integrate systemic and structural responses into their digital strategies, implementing measures that not only promote but also ensure the long-term discoverability of local cultural content.

In order to ensure cultural diversity in AI systems, Chapter 2 thus emphasizes the need for robust data governance strategies to continuously evaluate the quality of training data, including the adequacy of collection and selection processes, and the need to promote and facilitate the use of high-quality, diverse and lawfully sourced datasets for AI training and development. This includes incorporating multilingual datasets, ensuring representation of diverse epistemologies and knowledge systems, integrating data from historically marginalized communities to prevent cultural homogenization and bias and addressing data gaps to broaden and diversify representation in AI systems. Finally, to ensure cultural diversity in the digital sphere beyond just cultural representation, it is also necessary to promote technodiversity, including the design of technologies, platforms and interfaces of interactions that are adequate to diverse cultural worldviews, lifestyles and value systems.



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

Creators of original work are generally protected by intellectual property laws, including copyright laws, to guarantee them fair compensation for their work. The limitations of current copyright laws in dealing with the challenges and complexities brought about by AI systems, such as the use of transitory copies and metadata or the protection of work that has no independent economic value in a technological process, need to be urgently addressed.

Many of the discussions related to the tensions surrounding copyrighted content used to train AI models focus on the type of consent that rightsholders should be required to provide. Trends towards a model of voluntary licensing have, for example, faced significant barriers and criticism, as many experts argue that such an approach cannot meet the scale, diversity, or data types required for AI training, would be prohibitively costly and accessible only to certain developers, and is hindered by the practical difficulty of identifying and contacting all copyright holders.

The problem in determining whether protected work has been used by an AI system is also that many developers do not make public the datasets with which they train their algorithms. To effectively protect artists and cultural creators, ensuring they receive fair compensation for the use of their work and that their moral rights to determine where and how their works may be used are preserved, many policy recommendations advocate for a regulatory framework that integrates transparency (including the disclosure of datasets used to train AI systems), accountability and openness as foundational principles for AI development and governance.

In summary, adapting intellectual property laws and fostering innovations (such as the inclusion of creators' consent in the metadata of digital files, shared partial ownership between creators and decentralized distribution or a tax on AI systems) are crucial to protect artists and cultural creators in the age of evolving digital technologies and AI. It is also necessary to think beyond current types of data ownership and individual forms of compensation, as the cognitive value of data in AI systems is a collective concern. The role society plays in the generation of AI training data is currently not recognized or compensated and digital policies and strategies

must be more specific in articulating how collective modes of data ownership and data as a public good can yield economic benefits for society as a whole. Thinking of some types of data as a common public good can, for example, foster new and innovative ways of collective rather than individual compensation. This means that cultural policies must 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 now also takes place in the digital realm) and set standards as to how the derived cognitive and economic value should be managed and distributed.

Chapter 2

Call for a stand-alone goal

A stand-alone goal on culture is crucial to facilitate, guide and monitor the digital transformation within the cultural and creative industries, including the promotion of equitable and inclusive access to digital platforms and content. It would help address the risk of cultural homogenization in the digital space, ensuring the preservation and promotion of diverse cultural expressions, including local and Indigenous knowledge. A stand-alone goal could also reinforce and redefine the treatment of cultural data as a public good, promoting 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

‘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...

...Collaboration with governments, cultural institutions and international organizations is key to shaping inclusive policies that put people and culture at the centre. By jointly prioritising 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.’





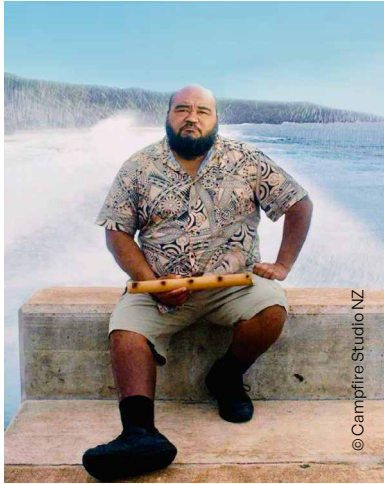
Vanessa Achilles
Independent researcher
and facilitator

Chapter 3

Fostering culture and arts education

► Creative Voices

Tau'ili'ili Alpha Maiava



Writer, director, and composer.

‘Sāmoa, akin to many Indigenous cultures within the Moana Pacific region, 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.’



Key figures

- Around 90% of UNESCO Creative Cities have developed policies to support youth integration into the cultural and creative industries (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports).
- As of 2024, 78% of reporting Member States in the Global South and 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).
- However, only 21% of countries estimate that their heritage education programmes are conducted systematically and effectively (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- The quality and depth of culture and arts education vary widely across regions. In lower secondary education, the proportion of instructional time allocated to these subjects ranges from 7% to 76%, with an average of 43% (UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators).
- 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).

Key takeaways

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 relevance of the 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 cultural 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.

Chapter 3 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 of ensuring 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.

Summary

Strengthening synergies between culture and education can serve as a pillar of inclusive and sustainable development rooted in cultural diversity and human rights. It also 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 cultural diversity and intercultural understanding. The chapter describes how policies and initiatives have been implemented to harness the benefits of strengthening the connections between culture and education, but it also examines the current challenges and gaps in this field and highlights solutions and recommendations to address these.

Both education and culture are global public goods and fundamental universal human rights, to which everyone is entitled. Together, education and culture form foundational pillars of human development, reinforcing each other to promote creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and intercultural understanding as well as resilient, just and sustainable futures. This 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.

In an interconnected world, rooting education in local contexts and inclusive values - while promoting respect for other cultures - fosters empathy, social cohesion and cross-cultural understanding 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 the safeguarding and continued relevance of diverse cultural expressions.



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

Numerous international normative instruments and frameworks, UNESCO Conventions and internationally adopted declarations and recommendations provide a solid framework to encourage and guide countries in integrating arts, culture and education. The 2022 MONDIACULT Declaration also stresses the importance of context-relevant education, incorporating cultural heritage, history and traditional knowledge to enhance learning outcomes and cultural diversity awareness. Furthermore, the adoption of the UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education in 2024 marked a significant milestone in advancing the global agenda for culture and arts education. This new 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. It recognizes that learning in, through and with diverse cultural expressions – especially local and Indigenous ones – is vital for overcoming divisions and fostering mutual understanding.

All these frameworks, along with commitments to integrating Indigenous and traditional knowledge with science and investing in inclusive lifelong education, acknowledge and reinforce the role of culture in shaping sustainable and equitable learning systems. But their implementation remains an ongoing process. To truly support cultural and arts education, a stronger cooperation between the education and culture sectors is essential. Moreover, stronger and more effective multi-sectoral coordination among all relevant sectors and stakeholders, including public and non-public stakeholders, is needed to improve policy development and monitoring, ensuring that cultural learning is a central pillar of education worldwide.

Cultivating cultural diversity and pluralism through education

Cultural diversity and pluralism can be cultivated through education by embedding culture and arts in formal and non-formal education, enriching primary and secondary education curricula with culture and arts education, offering arts education in technical and vocational secondary schools, learning through arts and culture (i.e. using arts and culture as a tool to explore subjects that are not obviously connected to them) and offering mother tongue education and multilingualism as a gateway to cultural awareness.

The integration of living heritage as well as other cultural expressions 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 connections between schools and their communities. This not only supports academic outcomes but also fosters interest in culture beyond the classroom, supporting its safeguarding and can also help bring cultural minorities into focus within educational settings by incorporating their specific practices into learning experiences.

However, challenges to achieve this persist, such as 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. For cultural education to be effective and widely adopted, several enabling conditions must be in place, as Chapter 3 shows. These include high-level commitment from both the cultural and education sectors, curricula that embrace cultural content and culture and arts-based pedagogies, appropriately trained teachers, relevant learning resources and a culture-sensitive approach. To ensure meaningful representation and sharing through the education systems, it is also essential to involve members of the local communities in the design and delivery of programmes, ensuring their voices are heard and their heritage is represented in ways that are respectful and empowering.

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

Many 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 to foster dialogue, mutual respect and intercultural understanding. 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.

Quality education relies on good teachers, whose primary function is to ignite a love for learning and nurture the creative potential of young minds. However, this potential can only be fully realized if teachers are adequately supported – through decent working conditions, relevant and accessible training (including on the intricate relationship between education, society and culture) and high-quality, contextualized resources, that are accessible in multiple languages and adapted to diverse cultural and educational contexts.

However, 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 offer 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 bearers of traditions. Furthermore, 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.

Strengthening culture and arts education through partnerships and lifelong learning

Collaboration between educational and cultural institutions and connected sectors (such as tourism, sport and health) as well as with local communities, civil society, artists, heritage practitioners and culture professionals is essential for enriching arts and cultural education and fostering appreciation of cultural diversity. Such partnerships can also complement existing structures to increase access and inclusion of otherwise disadvantaged learners and reaching marginalized groups, as Chapter 3 shows.

Beyond formal education, cultural institutions (such as museums and libraries), community spaces where living heritage is practiced and cultural associations play a vital role in informal and lifelong learning, which connects learning with everyday life, covering all ages, settings and learning formats to address diverse needs throughout a person's life.



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

Engaging people in culture and arts, youth in particular, is essential for fostering cultural appreciation and nurturing future generations of cultural practitioners, professionals and consumers of cultural goods, services and content. While a wide array of tertiary education programmes in arts and culture are available across the globe, more effort is needed to ensure that 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. Encouraging regular skills-gap assessments can help tailor curricula to the evolving needs of the sector and making higher education overall more responsive, inclusive and market-relevant is essential to unlocking the full potential of cultural and creative professionals and the sector overall.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to further professionalize cultural and artistic careers by strengthening technical expertise, essential business skills and digital literacy, enabling culture professionals to navigate the evolving market successfully and ensuring equal opportunities for all, particularly for women, who continue to face barriers in the sector. Lifelong learning opportunities not only support individual career development but also position the cultural and creative industries as a force for addressing broader social and economic challenges. 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 and cultural professionals seeking relevant, coherent educational pathways. Moreover, the short-term nature of most training programmes, often reaching only a small group of highly self-motivated participants, limits both scalability and lasting impact.

Thus, to meet the evolving demands of the sector and support sustainable careers, there is an urgent need to invest more systematically in the professional development of cultural and creative actors and to develop more coherent, inclusive and forward-looking training strategies that are tailored to local contexts and grounded in clearly identified needs.

Embracing the digital leap: educating for a safe future in the arts and culture sectors

Digital technologies and artificial intelligence are not only reshaping the cultural and creative industries, but also the education sector and the landscape of cultural and creative learning. They offer unprecedented opportunities for expanding access, fostering creativity and enhancing professional development. Digital technologies, for example, enable interactive learning experiences, enhance knowledge sharing and expand innovative educational and training opportunities. To maximize the potential of these new technologies, educators need to be supported and trained to enhance the content of their courses and to better understand the ethical and political dimensions of technology use, including AI-generated content, copyright, inclusivity and sustainability. But ongoing digital transformations also introduce significant challenges, such as disparities in access to digital resources and infrastructure, gaps in digital literacy and privacy and data protection. They also raise urgent questions about cultural integrity, multilingualism, equity and the human-centred values of education.

To build a sustainable digital future for the cultural sector and ensure equitable access to digital resources for all learners, in particular women and marginalized groups, policymakers and institutions need to design inclusive digital education strategies that go beyond short-term interventions and prioritise investment in digital infrastructure and literacy programmes. To bridge the gender gap in digital literacy and the use of emerging technologies and to move towards greater inclusion and opportunities for women in digital creative fields, digital cultural education for women thus remains crucial. Overall, culture professionals must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to understand and navigate these

challenges as well as emerging regulatory landscapes. These efforts need to be complemented by the availability of diverse and locally relevant digital content that respects cultural diversity and allows educators and learners to engage meaningfully with their heritage and that of others.

In summary, despite constant progress in terms of integrating culture and education, significant gaps persist. These include the non-systematic implementation of cultural education policies, the temporary and project-based nature of many initiatives, and 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.

Chapter 3

Call for a stand-alone goal

A stand-alone goal on culture would allow for a more robust and systematic integration of its transformative role in education, especially in promoting creativity, identity, inclusion and critical thinking. A standardized UNESCO Fields of Study definition linked to this to allow the creation of explicit targets and indicators for cultural education would also ensure that arts education, heritage-based learning and cultural participation are not only visible but also measurable and resourced. A stand-alone goal would reinforce cultural rights and inclusion, promoting education in learners' mother tongues, culturally relevant curricula and the safeguarding of Indigenous Knowledge systems, especially in marginalized communities.

Policy brief

Leonardo Garnier



Former Minister of Education of Costa Rica

‘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.’





Dorota Ilczuk
Professor, SWPS University of Social
Sciences and Humanities, Poland



Anna Karpińska
Researcher, SWPS University of Social
Sciences and Humanities, Poland

Chapter 4

Enabling an inclusive and sustainable cultural ecosystem and driving economic development

► Creative Voices

Mo Abudu



Founder and CEO of EbonyLife Group

‘The cultural and creative industries (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...

...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.’



Key figures

- 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.
- The CCIs are estimated to contribute 3.39% to global GDP,¹² highlighting their significant economic impact worldwide (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).
- Urban centers further highlight the transformative power of the CCIs, with Beijing, Chengdu and Ouagadougou contributing 11.0%, 10.9% and 10.0% to local GDP,¹³ respectively (UNESCO Creative Cities Reports, UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators).
- The median per capita expenditure for culture in high-income countries (\$349) is more than two thousand times higher than the median expenditure in low-income countries (\$0.15) – and more than 29 times higher than in upper-middle-income countries (\$11.79), which demonstrates the great disparities in the ability to invest in culture across the world (2005 Convention Periodic Reports).

Key takeaways

01. The CCIs are a major part of the global economy, providing millions of jobs,¹⁴ contributing to gross domestic product (GDP)¹⁵ 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 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 under-estimated, 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 driver of growth 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, nourished by informal and voluntary activities and supported by a mix of state, NGO and private contributions (in terms of 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. 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.
04. The CCIs generate spillovers or crossovers across the economy, as well as through their contribution to well-being, cohesion and pride in place. 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 and the potential participation of every community. However, in practice, the CCIs are profoundly unequal, 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 under-perform and their contribution to sustainable development will be weaker

¹² Estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.

¹³ Local GDP estimates can be difficult to estimate as production factors outside the urban limit may intervene.

¹⁴ CCIs represent a mean share of 3.55% of employment for the 61 countries for which there is available data.

¹⁵ CCIs contribute 3.39% to global GDP as estimated by using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.

The connection between public subsidy for arts and culture and economic growth generated across the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) is clear. Culture is a key driver of inclusive economic development and thus sustainable development. Monitoring of policies and measures across the world shows that 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 in Chapter 4 through a policy lens. In turn, this blend of state support, public-private partnership and commercial activities provides the conditions for innovation and inclusive growth in every global region. The CCIs are a major provider of jobs, generator of economic value and catalyst for innovation, however, many of these jobs are precarious, poorly paid and lack appropriate regulatory and financial support.

This chapter critically reflects on the simplistic notion that culture drives economic growth and instead points to challenges of equity and inclusion across the CCIs. It affirms the importance of state support for arts and culture – as a foundation for a resilient and inclusive sector – with even the most commercially successful CCIs dependent on talent and content which has been generated in part due to subsidy.

Summary

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. These have, to varying extents, emphasized culture's importance in addressing societal challenges like social inclusion, economic inequality, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

The concept of the creative economy has also significantly influenced cultural policies, emphasizing creativity, intellectual property and intangible assets as drivers of economic growth and cultural expression, with an emphasis on growth and job creation. However, it is a contested term, perceived by some as foregrounding economy and the market over the social and intrinsic impacts of culture. This is particularly important because the notion of a creative economy risks destabilizing the argument for state subsidies (such as grants or core funding for cultural organizations) and targeted interventions, which are vital to ensuring an inclusive and sustainable cultural sector, and in turn to generating those pipelines of talent and innovation which can in turn generate economic value.

The Global Report addresses this tension between an acceptance of the very significant economic contribution of culture on the one hand, and its dependence on subsidy and position as a public good on the other.

Ensuring the economic sustainability of cultural sectors goes beyond market strategies – e.g. to address the working conditions and rights of artists and culture professionals. While market-driven approaches have expanded revenue streams, they also risk commodifying culture and marginalizing non-commercial expressions. And while digitalization has enabled an acceleration of distributed 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 the monetizing of content – now produced and consumed in large quantities. 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.

Resilient and sustainable cultural sectors depend on aligning international frameworks with local policies to balance cultural diversity and economic resilience on both local and global scales. There remains a persistent imbalance of opportunity (based on geography, access to resources, regulatory and financial context etc.) in the circulation of cultural goods and services globally, as well as unequal access to cultural resources and opportunities within and between countries. These disparities are deeply tied to systemic inequalities and forms of discrimination, 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.



Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival in Vanuatu

The economic development role of culture

Culture operates as a multifaceted system where economic and cultural values are deeply intertwined, rather than existing as separate or opposing dimensions. Cultural value supports economic growth by fostering innovation, identity and community, while economic value sustains cultural production and accessibility. This interdependence makes the cultural economy distinct, playing a pivotal yet complex role in development by simultaneously driving financial growth and enriching societal well-being. Recognizing this duality is essential to understanding its unique contribution to sustainable progress.

Employment in CCIs is diverse, encompassing a range of occupations from artists and performers to technical and administrative roles. This diversity highlights the sector's capacity to offer varied employment opportunities, catering to different skill sets and professional interests.

The regional contribution to CCIs employment varies significantly, with some areas demonstrating higher engagement in the CCIs than others. For example, Europe and North America have a higher percentage of employment in CCIs, partly due to well-established cultural policies and a robust infrastructure supporting the arts and creative industries. In Asia, countries such as the Republic of Korea and Japan have made significant strides in integrating CCIs into their economic frameworks, leading to substantial employment in the CCIs. In contrast, regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are witnessing growth but still comparatively smaller contributions from CCIs to total (formal) employment. These regional disparities underscore the importance of tailored policies and investments to harness the full potential of CCIs across different geographies.

Strengthening the sector further requires integrated legal and policy frameworks that ensure fair remuneration, social rights and artistic freedom, as highlighted in UNESCO's Empowering Creativity and Reshaping Policies for Creativity reports. Such measures protect cultural creators, support diverse voices and expressions, and foster vibrant and sustainable cultural ecosystems.



Gender (in)equality in the CCIs

The CCIs continue to face significant gender inequalities, limiting inclusive pathways for participation and development. Women generally earn less than their male counterparts in various roles and sectors, emphasizing the ongoing structural inequalities in the industry. 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.

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.

Public investment in culture

Huge disparities can be observed between different countries and regions in terms of their budget for culture and their approach to nurturing and growing the CCIs. Europe and North America have an average per capita cultural budget of \$418.56, reflecting strong institutional frameworks, prioritisation 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 Reports). In contrast, the global mean is \$124.17, showcasing the stark divide between regions. 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 prioritising culture in public spending to foster innovation, social cohesion and economic growth in all regions.

Cultural trade as a catalyst for sustainable growth

Trade agreements that recognize the special status of cultural goods and services are vital for promoting cultural exchange and nurturing inclusive economic development. For example, several countries have signed or are negotiating agreements that provide preferential treatment for cultural goods, facilitating their movement across borders 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.

Yet global trade is inherently unequal and cultural trade reflects these 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 that favour established economies and first movers. Cultural trade is frequently overlooked in broader trade negotiations, exacerbating its marginalization. Furthermore, with much of cultural trade now existing in the realm of 'invisibles' – such as digital content and services – it remains underregulated and poorly documented.

The digital revolution 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. Another pressing concern is the way digital platforms facilitate the illicit trafficking of cultural property, as states struggle to respond to the rapid and often transient online circulation of stolen or unlawfully exported cultural objects. Strengthening monitoring, regulation and international cooperation is essential to combat these practices and protect cultural heritage. Further challenges include widespread copyright infringements, the disruption of traditional business models and exploitative practices such as buy-in contracts that erode creators' rights. The rise of artificial intelligence intensifies these issues, enabling the unauthorized use of creative works and posing new threats to intellectual property.

There is an urgent need to address the significant and deep-set disparities in global cultural trade and exchange, highlighting the need for capacity-building in trade negotiations and knowledge-sharing between regions. Tailored policies and equitable frameworks are essential to ensure cultural trade fosters balanced global development.

Heritage investment

Heritage investment is a core component of the wider cultural policy landscape, positioning heritage as a foundation for cultural expression and a driver of development, including cultural trade. 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.

The described 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.

Public / private partnership and co-investment in culture

A diverse range of public policies supports investment in culture, indirect support mechanisms, such as tax incentives, relevant legal / regulatory frameworks, and a range of specific financial instruments. The authors also highlight the growing trend of public-private financing for culture – a reality in the mixed economy of the CCIs. The chapter explores how public-private partnerships (PPPs) are an effective way to leverage private investment for cultural projects. These partnerships can bring additional resources and expertise to cultural initiatives, enhancing their impact and sustainability. PPPs can be particularly beneficial for large-scale projects such as museum expansions or heritage site restorations, where the costs might be prohibitive for public funding alone. To maximize the benefits of PPPs, agreements must be carefully structured to protect the interests of cultural institutions and ensure long-term sustainability. Transparent terms, clear delineation of responsibilities and alignment with cultural and community objectives are essential to avoid adverse impacts and deliver projects that are both economically viable and culturally enriching.



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 developing world, where youth represent the majority population and hold the key to the future of cultural and economic development. Prioritising their inclusion ensures that their creative energy and perspectives contribute to shaping more equitable and dynamic cultural sectors.

Addressing inequalities in the CCIs requires more than increasing representation; it demands tackling systemic issues such as unequal pay, limited access to leadership and discriminatory cultural narratives. Women, though more visible in CCIs, often face barriers to senior roles and work environments that perpetuate stereotypes. Additionally, increasing representation must go hand-in-hand with addressing how marginalized groups are portrayed in cultural outputs, ensuring these do not reinforce societal biases. Heritage preservation also highlights inequality, as women and marginalized communities are often excluded from decision-making processes, despite being key knowledge bearers. Truly inclusive CCIs require addressing these intertwined challenges to create equitable opportunities and narratives that reflect and empower all voices.

It is imperative for cultural policies to focus on inclusivity, sustainability and equity. 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 cultural sectors with broader environmental goals. Moreover, strengthening transnational collaboration can enhance knowledge-sharing and equitable development, ensuring culture's contribution to sustainable development and societal well-being.

Chapter 4 Call for a stand-alone goal

A stand-alone sustainable development goal for culture would facilitate policy commitment to the value and impact of the CCIs, leading to more robust and consistent data collection, dedicated evidence-driven regulation and legal reform, and targeted investment and support. It would enable a more holistic understanding of economic value which connects not-for-profit, subsidized and informal cultural expressions to the development of formalized organizations, institutions and enterprises which together generate jobs, contribute to economic growth and, most vitally, enhance quality of life. It would put the CCIs at the heart of a sustainable economic model which thrives through diversity, inclusion and the celebration of human creativity.

Policy brief

Simon Brault



Independent art consultant

‘The immediate issues and challenges facing the cultural and creative industries – 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.’





Thiago Jesus
Researcher and creative producer
advancing culture-based approaches
to climate action

Chapter 5

Tackling climate change and promoting environmental sustainability through culture

Creative Voices

Oto Hudec



Visual artist and teacher, Technical University of Košice, Slovakia

‘In a world facing geopolitical unpredictability and inequality, where 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. 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.’



Key figures

- Only 35% of 190 States Parties reported having adequate levels of coordination and integration of multilateral heritage agreements into national policies for the conservation, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage, with notably lower figures in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as West Asia and North Africa, both with 13% (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- 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 (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- Between 86% and 89% of States Parties reported that they believe their legal frameworks for cultural and natural heritage are adequate or partially adequate to safeguard cultural and natural heritage from environmental and climate impacts – such as environmental impact assessments (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- 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 (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- Cultural and creative industries' carbon emissions vary significantly by income group, with upper-middle income countries producing the highest average emissions at approximately 23.8 million tonnes of CO₂ per year, compared to a global average of 11.8 million tonnes of CO₂ per year (BOP Consulting (2024) analysis of 2005 Convention periodic reports, OECD, Ministries of Culture statistics and Our World in Data).

Key takeaways

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 practice 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 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.
05. Multilateral efforts are needed 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, governments, culture sector bodies 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.

Chapter 5 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 for climate adaptation and mitigation and for environmental sustainability, the issue of decarbonization and environmental sustainability in the cultural and creative industries and the need to protect cultural heritage and safeguard culture from climate change and environmental impacts.

Summary

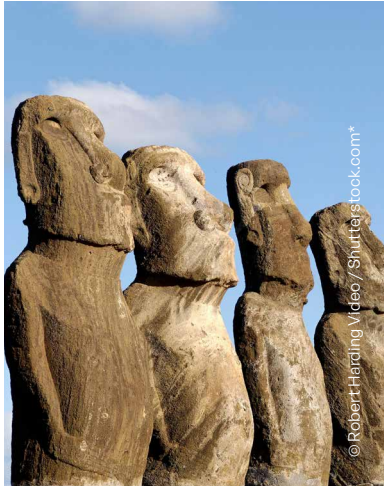
Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time, posing significant and escalating threats to the entire planet, disproportionately affecting people, communities and ecosystems and undermining the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development. The consequences of climate change threaten our natural, cultural and living heritage, the ability of individuals and communities to exercise their cultural rights (particularly the right to access, practice and preserve their cultural traditions and identities), endanger cultural and creative industries, and in the most extreme scenarios, devastate lives and livelihoods globally. 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.

Chapter 5 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 can reduce vulnerability and building resilience in the face of these escalating challenges.

Culture: a driver of progress toward sustainable development and climate action

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. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration also 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'.

Over the last few decades there has been a growing understanding of the inseparable links between culture and nature and how these linkages play a crucial role in sustainable development. Furthermore, significant progress has been made in integrating culture, heritage and creativity in the formulation of national, regional and international development policies and intergovernmental forums. 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, with cultural heritage included as one of the targets in the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience and the establishment of the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action.



Moai statues at risk due to climatic and water factors. Easter Island, Chile

Climate change, the greatest threat to culture and heritage

As Chapter 5 demonstrates, climate change is among the greatest threats to natural and cultural heritage today. It is estimated that one in three natural heritage sites and one in six cultural heritage sites are currently threatened by climate change. Changes in the sea levels on the continental margin are exposing thousands of prehistoric sites on the beaches and wave impact affects coastal fortresses. Climate change poses 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. 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.

Furthermore, climate change is increasingly disrupting the socio-cultural fabric of communities worldwide, whether in large sprawling cities or remote rural communities. 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 and its bearers, as well as the resources they require to practice and transmit their living heritage to current and future generations. The loss of territory, habitability and of cultural heritage has also 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.

The economic and non-economic losses caused by climate change are addressed Chapter 5. For example, the significant long-term risks posed 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. Non-economic losses include language loss or the disruption of intergenerational transmission of socio-cultural practices, which also 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, forcing entire communities to migrate, abandoning their built, living and natural heritage.

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 capacities.

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.

Protecting and promoting culture in the face of climate change

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 effectively for the conservation and protection of both their cultural and natural heritage. The disparity within this group is significant, with 56% of Global North countries reporting adequate capacity and resources for both cultural and natural heritage, compared to only 14% to 15% respectively in Global South countries.

To ensure the continued safeguarding of heritage, 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 also involves empowering communities to actively engage in protecting and safeguarding their natural and cultural heritage.



Saami Shepherd in the Arctic, Norway

Culture, a critical resource in combating 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.

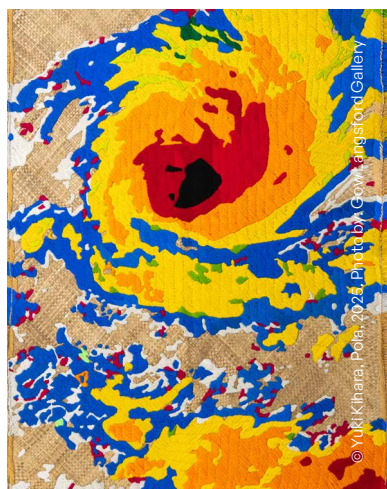
While much of the focus on local knowledge systems and climate change has been on monitoring and adaptation, it is equally important to recognize their contribution to mitigation, complementing scientific knowledge to improve conservation outcomes. A range of traditional practices relevant to contemporary mitigation strategies have been identified by the Climate Change and Cultural Heritage Working Group. 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 epitomise circular economy models that emphasize stewardship, reuse and resource efficiency.

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 children and youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, migrants and Indigenous Peoples.

Just 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 sector needs to 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.



Awareness raising driving climate action

Socio-cultural factors, behaviour and lifestyle changes that are supported by policy, infrastructure and technology, can accelerate the societal shift to low emissions-intensive consumption. Culture is more and more recognized as a powerful communicator about climate action and behaviour change. For example, a growing number of artistic and ecological movements are bringing the urgency of this challenge to the forefront through storytelling, activism, the exchange of ideas and collective experiences.

But despite its immense potential to raise awareness and drive climate action, culture remains largely overlooked in climate strategies and policies due to a lack of understanding, expertise and investment. There is increasing interest in exploring the role of arts and cultural activities in raising public awareness and shaping attitudes towards 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

Despite accounting for 3.39% of global GDP¹⁶ and a mean share of 3.55% of employment¹⁷ (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 and under-researched. From equipment usage in festivals and film productions to the energy demands of museums, theatres and live performances as well as the associated travel, every activity within the cultural and creative industries has an environmental footprint, including digital activities that are often overlooked.

But 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.

Charting the way forward

Recognizing culture's role in climate action has steadily grown in recent years and significant progress has been made by governments, international policymakers and global institutions in integrating culture into international climate discussions and intergovernmental forums. Key milestones towards strengthening the case for culture-based climate policies within the global climate framework include, for example, the Rome Declaration of the G20 Culture Ministers (which recognized that culture offers great potential to drive climate action and contribute meaningfully to climate solutions), the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience (which introduced seven specific targets for measuring progress, including one dedicated to cultural heritage) and the Pact for the Future adopted by the UN General Assembly (which calls for integrating culture into

¹⁶ Estimated contribution of the cultural and creative industries to global GDP using a weighted contribution analysis from a sample of 85 countries.

¹⁷ Mean share of employment for the 61 countries for which there is available data.

economic, social and environmental policies, supported by public investment). Furthermore, UNESCO is collaborating with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (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.

While significant progress in integrating culture into statutory climate processes and frameworks has been made, critical gaps remain in terms of further strengthening the culture and climate nexus towards 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.

To scale up multilateral efforts 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 – governments, cultural sector bodies 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.

Expanding the geographic scope of data gathering is critical, 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, 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 culture 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.

Chapter 5

Call for a stand-alone goal

A stand-alone goal on culture would allow for more robust and systematic data collection on the links between culture and climate action, particularly on culture's contributions to adaptation and mitigation, preventing loss and damage, building resilience and promoting behavioural change. Strengthening the evidence base and informing culture-based solutions will in turn unlock human, financial and technical resources to accelerate progress towards sustainable development.

Policy brief

Frances C. Koya Vaka'uta



Team Leader, Culture for Development,
Pacific Community (SPC)

‘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 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.’





Patty Gerstenblith
Distinguished Research Professor,
DePaul University College of Law,
United States of America

Chapter 6

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

Creative Voices

Aya Tarek



Painter and multidisciplinary artist

‘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...

... 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.’



Key figures

- A fifth (18%) of reporting countries globally intend to request enhanced protection for their World Heritage sites – actively used by states to secure an elevated level of legal safeguarding in armed conflict – within the next three years, with an expected 83 properties intended for protection (79 in the Global South and 4 in the Global North) (1972 Convention Periodic Reports).
- Only 58% of countries have introduced provisions in their military regulations to ensure respect for cultural property (1954 Convention Periodic Reports).
- 85% of respondent countries reported having introduced penal measures for conduct contrary to the obligations contained in the 1954 Convention (1954 Convention Periodic Reports), while 75% indicated they have established as criminal offences serious breaches of the Second Protocol (1954 Convention Periodic Reports).
- The lack of effective monitoring of trafficking is particularly concerning during conflicts and natural disasters. Although most reporting countries have legislation, policies or guidelines requiring cultural property inventories, only two-thirds enforce a standardized national system (2015 Recommendation Periodic Reports).¹⁸

Key takeaways

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 leads to heritage sites being destroyed, and 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 the prohibition of illicit trafficking. However, the 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 being particularly 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 cultural workers, 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 of 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, artificial intelligence (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.

¹⁸ 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.

Chapter 6 offers extensive insight on the policies and measures developed in the most pressing and fragile of circumstances. Using examples from recent and ongoing conflicts, reflections on good practices for supporting artists, especially women artists who are disproportionately more affected by crises and emergencies and for safeguarding culture in moments of acute risk and for peace, reconciliation and reconstruction are presented. 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 cultural professionals from minorities.

Summary

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.

Chapter 6 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. However, gaps in enforcement, systematic and coordinated responses, and targeted support to those most at risk, present deep-set challenges in the pursuit of heritage protection and management.

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 are also examined.

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 culture 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.



Palmyra, Syrian Arab Republic

In 2025, UNESCO completed a major six-year campaign in Mosul, Iraq, to support the recovery of the city following its liberation from Daesh in 2017. One of the world's oldest cities in the world, Mosul and its surrounding region are home to diverse communities, including Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, Kurds, Yazidis, Shabaks and Sabeen Mandaean. With significant 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 and its wider cultural landscape. Successful recovery and restoration, programmes such as that seen in Mosul, are closely linked with the UNESCO Culture Conventions which – not without limitations – provide a framework for preventing the destruction of tangible and intangible heritage, for encouraging states to commit to preventing destruction, and for coordinated responses when heritage is damaged, removed or lost. Complementary actions, such as the Unite4Heritage campaign, demonstrate that nonlegal avenues can provide an additional impetus to preserve heritage and to promote and guarantee its protection and safeguarding. 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.

Furthermore, artists and culture professionals, including cultural heritage defenders, 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 (that is, the right of all people to take part in cultural life), 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. 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 cultural professionals, including legal hurdles, attacks, murders, displacement, trauma and the disruption of their livelihoods, also often occur during times of crisis.

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 and ongoing conflicts have resulted in the destruction of cultural heritage – including archaeological sites, historical monuments and buildings, religious sites, museums, libraries, archives and historic urban landscapes. 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.

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.

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.

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.



P31 ship wreck in Malta

Harnessing technology: a game-changer for heritage at risk

New technologies are increasingly supporting heritage protection and recovery, while recognizing that they cannot replace tangible heritage which has been lost. 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 of cultural heritage at risk. Beyond remote sensing technologies, GIS – tools for analysing, storing and visualising spatial data – are being used regularly – such as to help authorities plan for the protection and rehabilitation of vulnerable heritage locations. Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) help create immersive experiences of historical sites, allowing experts and the public to visualise a site before and after destruction. New advances in AI technology also prove helpful in the monitoring and reconstruction of cultural heritage that has been destroyed or damaged.

Combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property

The illicit trafficking of cultural property remains a deep-set and ongoing global challenge. The theft of cultural property from cultural, religious and secular institutions and the looting of cultural artefacts 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. Underwater cultural heritage, including sunken historic shipwrecks, is particularly vulnerable to looting and natural disasters, with climate change further increasing risks by revealing or eroding sites, particularly near the shoreline. Thefts and looting may provide funds for armed conflict and terrorism and may be linked to other forms of criminal activity, such as money laundering. The trafficking of cultural property 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. 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.

The digital era has transformed the illegal trade landscape. Online marketplaces, including social media, e-commerce sites and dark web platforms, have enabled anonymous, rapid and cryptocurrency-based transactions, making regulation difficult. Monitoring remains challenging, especially during conflicts and natural disasters. While most countries have laws requiring cultural property inventories, only two-thirds enforce a standardized national system (1972 Convention Periodic Reports). Even where inventories exist, coverage of protected artefacts remains inconsistent. Training law enforcement, strengthening prosecution capacity and enhancing

international and intergovernmental cooperation remain essential to disrupting trafficking networks.

Raising public awareness is another critical strategy. UNESCO has established 14 November as the International Day against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property to promote global awareness and in 2025 it will launch the Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects, featuring 3D models and histories of stolen cultural objects, with the goal to ‘empty its collections’ as items are recovered and returned. Similarly, countries have increasingly developed education initiatives targeting communities, collectors, buyers and institutions to reduce demand for illegally-obtained objects.

Community engagement and economic alternatives have proven effective in mitigating looting. For example, Chapter 6 describes how 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.

Significant shift toward proactive restitution

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. Many museums and private institutions worldwide are responding to these developments by reassessing their collections and addressing colonial-era acquisitions.

Safeguarding creativity and diversity: strengthening support for cultural professionals at risk



The slow recognition of cultural rights makes protecting at-risk artists, creative producers and cultural heritage workers more difficult within the system of granting protections to human rights defenders. 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, such as language, music, crafts, dance, traditional and religious practices, folklore and traditional knowledge. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration made protecting at-risk artists and cultural heritage professionals a priority.

However, the world is currently experiencing several worsening crises which have exacerbated the risks 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. These crises are affecting the status of the artist and the viability of their professions as a means to earn a living.

As a consequence, the need to enhance the resilience of cultural professionals 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 specific risks, particularly the precarious economic situation, that many cultural workers face.



Cultural professionals as human rights defenders: a path to greater protection

A key to protecting artists and cultural heritage workers is the recognition of their status as cultural rights defenders and therefore also as human rights defenders. This recognition is crucial in order to offer 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 international human rights law.

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.

Chapter 6 Call for a stand-alone goal

A stand-alone sustainable development goal for culture would reinforce the importance of heritage protection and reconstruction in the face of conflict and climate crisis. It would encourage governments to work together and in dynamic partnerships with key agencies to more effectively monitor and map cultural heritage at risk and to provide rapid and sustainable solutions for heritage preservation and reconstruction. It would unlock investment and strengthen efforts to protect and manage cultural assets. It would boost approaches to tackle the illicit trade of cultural items. A stand-alone goal would also increase the urgency of developing more systematic responses to threats to intangible heritage. It would also bolster approaches to support the status of the artist, including proactive measures to support women, as well as minorities of all cultures. A stand-alone goal would recognize that the loss or denial of cultural heritage and any repression of cultural expression, is not just a threat to culture, but a threat to humanity.

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

‘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.’

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 for culture would address this gap by creating coherence where there is currently fragmentation, visibility where there is partial recognition and investment where there is underfunding.

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 harmonised 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 wellbeing. 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.



Flamenco dance, Seville, Spain

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.

As this report demonstrates, when culture is prioritised, 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.



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.



unesco