

## Culture and the SDGs

# How to implement sustainability through culture at an European level

Culture is what brings us together while other forces threaten to drive us apart. The gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic proved that culture is a pillar to building cohesive, equal, free and sustainable societies.

By the Culture2030Goal campaign

**T**he link between culture and sustainability is not a brand-new topic. Traditionally, it can be addressed from three distinct but interconnected perspectives: A comprehensive contribution of the cultural ecosystem to sustainable development, a shift of cultural practices towards more sustainable (and greener) models, and advocacy to ensure the sustainability of the cultural sector itself, starting with better working conditions. Culture can act as a vector of positive change, playing a key role in tackling contemporary challenges. Reaffirming that culture is a practice before being a resource, for the purpose of this collective contribution, we will address in particular the role of culture as a driver of sustainable development.

### Missed opportunities?

The “official” recognition of the explicit relationship between culture and development began formally in Mondiacult 1982, the major UNESCO world conference on cultural policy and sustainable development, which made two significant steps, introducing an “anthropological” definition of culture, and then linking it explicitly to development. This, however, was a conference with “culture” in the title. Events with a more general focus have been less consistent in giving culture prominent recognition. For example, a major missed opportunity arrived in 2015, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite strong advocacy from many cultural organisations and UNESCO itself, culture however failed to become a distinct Goal.

With no explicit focus on culture in the UN 2030 Agenda, opportunities to mobilise the cultural sector as a whole, and to draw on its reach, insights and energy to accelerate sustainable development have been overlooked. Against this backdrop, several major global cultural networks came together around the #Culture2030Goal campaign, emphasising that mobilisation is essential towards an explicit Culture goal, agreed upon at the highest level, and towards the ultimate recognition of culture

as the fourth pillar of sustainable development, alongside the economic, social and environmental ones.

While culture is effectively missing from the Sustainable Development Goals, no one would argue that culture is irrelevant to the 2030 Agenda. Indeed, the United Nations General Assembly Declaration enshrining the 2030 Agenda makes a small number of broad references primarily focusing on tourism, cultural heritage and the promotion of local cultures and products, there is no language specifying what Culture’s “contribution” is, detracting from the Agenda’s supposedly “integrated and indivisible” character embracing all relevant policy areas and the underlying factors shaping development outcomes.

### Crafting an explicit culture goal

With the halfway point in the 2030 Agenda imminent, it is timely to consider how culture could, in the future, take its proper place in the commitments, goals and targets to be adopted in due course through the mechanisms of the United Nations. Accomplishing this would help achieve the cultural shift that is an essential aspect of the fulfilment, in dignity and equality, of the potential of all human beings. It would, in the view of the Campaign, require explicit wording related to culture, as well as via education, (gender) equality, sustainable production and consumption, liveable cities, climate action, peace, justice, inclusion and beyond. It would also provide a means of avoiding artificial divisions between the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development, as well as anchoring the post-2030 Agenda in a culture of sustainability. In concrete terms, a dedicated Culture Goal would help to 1) ensure an adequate focus on culture; 2) ensure that the range of connections between culture and other policy areas are fully accounted for; 3) ensure that the culture sector itself feels a sense of engagement in and ownership of the SDGs; 4) ensure that all other goals are activated and that their achievement is strengthened through the mobilising power of culture; 5) ensure that the achievement of all goals is protected from systemic and behavioural barriers, which can be addressed through cultural lenses.

On 28–30 September 2022, 40 years after the first UNESCO global conference on cultural policies and sustainable development, a new Mondiacult in Mexico City gave a fresh new push to the objective of affirming culture as a powerful platform for sustainable development. It has provided the platform to correct the fact that culture has been under-valued and under-appreciated at the level of the global development agenda.

In order to inform and inspire discussions, the partners of the #Culture2030Goal Campaign presented and discussed a Zero-draft of a future Culture Goal. We have welcomed the commitment of the Final Declaration of the global conference to integrate a specific Culture Goal in the post-2030 development agenda. Based on expert inputs and a survey of actors across the field, the draft Goal allows for a new focus in efforts to ensure that culture takes its place at the heart of development planning, and that the only way to ensure that the role of culture and cultural actors in supporting sustainable development is properly recognised and realised is through an explicit goal. The document explores the structural absence of culture from the SDGs, and suggests the reasons for this, before turning to current issues, including the challenges that those leading the preparation of any post-2030 framework will need to address, including the framing of an agenda, the management of interconnections between goals, and a stronger implementation architecture, while also drawing on the successes that the current agenda has brought. Next, it looks at the current landscape of debates around what development itself is, and the place of culture within it, noting a welcome move towards better consideration of cultural factors as part of a pluralistic definition. It argues that culture may also contribute to overcoming the “pillarisation” of development, providing a new dimension that can help overcome tensions and unlock transformation. It also sets out the high-level results of a survey of stakeholders around the place of culture in development, and the contours of any future Culture Goal.

### Positive signs?

With responses from all world regions, this analysis offers insights into the impact of a lack of a Culture Goal in the current Agenda, and the value of having one in future, as well as suggestions for ways forward on advocacy.

The Zero-draft offers nine potential targets:

- Realising cultural rights for all;
- Promoting a culture of peace and non-violence;
- Protecting and safeguarding all forms of heritage;
- Protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions;
- Promoting culture and products, economic and social rights of artists and cultural professionals and artistic freedom;
- Improve legal conditions and practical opportunities for the mobility of cultural practitioners;
- Empowering indigenous peoples to strengthen their own institutions, cultures and languages;
- Developing a cultural approach to environmental protection and sustainable urbanisation;
- Strengthening cultural institutions, including through international cooperation;
- Ensure, through multi-stakeholder collaboration, that cultural considerations are taken into account in all international development goals.

There has already been some success from this work. In the Declaration coming out of Mondiacult 2022, Ministers of Culture endorse the idea of a specific culture goal, and invite UNESCO to launch a broad consultation on the multidimensional impact of culture on our societies as a global public good. This is a potentially valuable step, but it will need to be designed to focus on making the case to world leaders that culture is an accelerator of development today, and a pillar of any future inclusive development model.

The Declaration of course is broad-ranging, and so there will be an ongoing need to ensure focus on a Culture goal, as part of the wider work programme coming out of the conference, summarised by UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulay as: “[It] defines a set of cultural rights that need to be taken into account in public policies, ranging from the social and economic rights of artists, to artistic freedom, the right of indigenous communities to safeguard and transmit their ancestral knowledge, and the protection and promotion of cultural and natural heritage. It also calls for substantial regulation of the digital sector, notably of the major platforms, for the benefit of online cultural diversity, artists’ intellectual property rights and fair access to content for all”.

### Next steps

As set out above, the Mondiacult 2022 Declaration helps us move towards this by calling for a specific culture goal. The Zero-draft of a goal published by the Culture 2030 Goal Campaign, in turn, provides a focus for discussions around what this could look like, moving us from the more theoretical towards the concrete. The most forward-thinking governments will need to take the lead, and in particular the European Commission on behalf of the European Union should formally support the inclusion of a culture objective in the SDG agenda.

While 2030 may still seem a long way away, the time to start acting is now, rally support and identify key actors to bring the advocacy forward. The opportunity should not be missed again, as we did in the years leading up to 2015. Through this focus, we can also advance the place of culture in development today. It is time to recognise that without the cultural dimension, no goals, current or future, can be achieved. The critical mass for this is now reached and the cultural actors are ready for action.

#### AUTHORS + CONTACT

The publication is authored collectively by the *Culture2030Goal campaign*, composed by several major global cultural networks including Arterial Network, Culture Action Europe, International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity (IFCDD), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), International Music Council (IMC) and the Agenda 21 Culture Committee of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

For those who would like to be part of this important cause to place culture as a goal for sustainable development, please engage with us.

E-Mail: [info@culture2030goal.net](mailto:info@culture2030goal.net), Website: <https://culture2030goal.net/>