

Integrating and monitoring culture in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework

Sustainable development is a multifaceted paradigm that balances economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Central to this concept is culture, an intricate tapestry woven from historical knowledge, artistic expression, social norms, and values that define human societies. Culture and cultural heritage are indispensable to sustainable development, offering resources that permeate and influence the economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Nurse, 2006; Dubini, 2019). Every development goal in policies and programs results from culture-driven values and political choices (Cicerchia, 2016).

Several factors position culture at the heart of sustainable development. Economically, culture is a potent driver of growth and development. The cultural sectors foster job creation, entrepreneurial endeavours, and income generation, primarily through cultural tourism, creative industries, and the arts (Flew, 2011). These sectors provide livelihoods and stimulate associated economic activities, paving the way for vibrant local economies rooted in cultural expression and heritage preservation. They enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and the capacity to plan and manage participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlements (Dubini, 2019). Concepts like cultural capital and social capital help measure the contribution of culture to economic and social development (Throsby, 2001). Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) are among the most rapidly expanding sectors globally, evidencing the economic potential of culture (UNCTAD 2022; UNCTAD 2024). The Hangzhou Declaration (UNESCO 2013) emphasizes creativity as a pivotal force for employment and entrepreneurship, advocating for harnessing cultural diversity and creative industries, particularly by promoting small and medium-sized enterprises and sustainable trade and investment practices (UNESCO 2017, p.182). Moreover, revitalizing urban areas through culture-led initiatives enhances the social fabric, economic returns, and competitiveness by fostering intangible cultural heritage practices and contemporary creative expressions (UNESCO 2013, p.9).

Environmentally, culture plays a critical role in sustainable resource management. Traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices have long informed approaches to agriculture, conservation, and the stewardship of natural resources (Chams & García-Blandón, 2019). These practices embody sustainable living approaches that have evolved over generations, demonstrating an inherent understanding of local ecosystems (Martin et al., 2010). This wisdom encapsulates not only the sustainable use of resources but also the protection of biodiversity and the resilience of communities facing environmental challenges (Bohensky & Maru, 2011). Sustainable tourism is deeply entwined with culture, necessitating support for tourism models that are responsible, culturally

aware, inclusive, and contribute to the socio-economic development of host communities (UNESCO 2013, p.6).

Socially, culture is the cornerstone of community identity, social cohesion, and well-being. It shapes values, beliefs, and behaviours, fostering inclusive societies (Flint & Robinson, 2008). Cultural heritage offers a sense of continuity and connection to the past (Skrzypaszek, 2012). Cultural expressions provide platforms for dialogue and participation, strengthening social bonds and empowering diverse community voices. Moreover, culture can be a platform for a global dialogical community that transcends ethnocentric particularism (Benhabib, 1995). In post-conflict areas, culture plays a transformative role in social cohesion. The rehabilitation of cultural heritage and activities can restore communities' dignity and identity, while cultural infrastructure serves as a platform for dialogue, social inclusion, and violence reduction (UNESCO 2013, p.8, 9; ESPON Heriwell, 2022). The strong linkage between culture and well-being is evidenced by many researchers and scholars (Grossi et al., 2019). Quality education is intrinsically linked to cultural literacy, which promotes inclusive and equitable societies. Educational programs that support creativity and artistic expression and address societal challenges, such as gender issues and the traumas of violence, are pivotal for fostering a well-rounded education (UNESCO 2013, p.7). Furthermore, culture enriches education and learning by transmitting knowledge, skills, and values across generations, thereby supporting the educational dimension of sustainability (Lawton, 2012). It can also become a powerful tool for capacity building for individuals, communities, and organizations by restoring to the disadvantaged an open imagination free of emotional obstacles and a horizon of desires (Nussbaum 2000). Poverty extends beyond material conditions and income to include a lack of capabilities and opportunities, especially in cultural terms (UCLG 2013). Most human beings have the capacities but lack essential tools, skills, or capabilities to understand and transform the world sustainably. These capabilities include literacy, creativity, and critical knowledge, sense of place, empathy, trust, risk, respect, and recognition, which can be understood as the cultural component of sustainability (UCLG 2012). In this sense, culture is a transformative force that can reshape development approaches, making sustainable development more relevant to people's needs. Culture shapes visions of the future, influencing societal aspirations and the use of natural and cultural resources in land use and urban planning, directly impacting communities' quality of life (UCLG 2015). Lastly, it seems important to mention the concept of co-creation, an essential part of the life cycle of cultural sectors, and their value chain, which has increasing relevance within the economic system as a whole, and in sustainable development processes (OMC 2018, UNESCO 2024).

Despite the centrality of culture to sustainable development, its integration within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework is incomplete and fragmented. Established by the United

Nations in 2015, the framework comprises 17 global goals and 169 targets to guide nations towards a more sustainable future by 2030. However, within this ambitious and comprehensive agenda, culture is explicitly acknowledged in only four SDG targets, leaving its broader contribution to sustainability underrepresented.

This gap underscores a dichotomy between the theoretical acknowledgment of culture's importance and its practical consideration in global development strategies. While the existing literature robustly argues for culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development, there is a need for more exploration into local culture's role in achieving sustainability outcomes, particularly at the subnational level (Ordóñez-Ponce, 2023; Streimikiene et al., 2019). In addition, the territorial dimension of culture is particularly pertinent when considering local communities' unique cultural expressions and heritage. This local aspect is foundational to understanding the broader impact of culture on sustainable development, as it is at the sub-national level that the tangible interactions between cultural practices and sustainability outcomes are most readily observed and experienced. The concept of 'cultural localization' extends to operationalizing the SDGs at the sub-national level, where local governments, municipalities, and regions are tasked with adapting and implementing global goals within their specific territorial contexts. Recognizing the diversity of cultural expressions across different territories, it becomes clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to sustainability is insufficient. Instead, locally tailored strategies that leverage cultural heritage and practices can lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

In this context, this paper seeks to illuminate the current practices of monitoring culture within the context of the SDGs, with a particular focus on Europe's regional and urban landscapes. The ultimate goal is to enhance the SDGs framework by bringing together and proposing, where relevant, indicators that complement the existing ones, enabling a more comprehensive and culturally informed monitoring of the 169 targets.

To this end, 40 indicators are extracted from the most relevant sources, categorized into four key areas: economic contributions, access to cultural resources, wellbeing, and cultural education. Balancing traditional metrics with innovative approaches to capture both tangible and intangible benefits of culture, they illustrate how culture influences local development, from economic impact to social cohesion and environmental stewardship. In order to provide policymakers with a practical implementation tool to test the relationship between culture and development, a final framework of ten 'strong', effective and measurable indicators was then identified.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 1 examines the intersection of culture and sustainable development across various contexts. Section 2 reviews key reports that monitor

culture as an enabler of development. Section 3 proposes a new set of indicators to explore the links between culture and development and to potentially enhance the SDG framework.