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Culture and sustainable development goals:
an introduction to key issues and future prospects

Study conducted by Jordi Baltà Portolés, collaborator of the Marcel Hicter Association

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Jordi Baltà Portolés is a researcher, consultant, and trainer in cultural policy and international cultural relations. His areas of interest include local cultural policy, culture and sustainability, cultural rights, and cultural diversity. He is an advisor on culture and sustainable cities to the Culture Committee of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and a member of UNESCO's expert mechanism for the implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Jordi works regularly with Trànsit Projectes, a cultural management company based in Barcelona, and provides advice to a wide range of local, national, and international organizations and networks. He teaches in the international relations departments of Blanquerna - Universitat Ramon Llull (URL) and cultural management at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and the University of Girona (UdG). He holds a PhD from the Universities of Girona and Melbourne.

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1. Introduction

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a resolution entitled "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." The result of a long process of consultation and negotiation involving international and regional organizations, national, regional, and local governments, and civil society organizations, the 2030 Agenda is defined as "an action plan for people, the planet, and prosperity," which aims to strengthen universal peace and contribute to the eradication of poverty.

Although Agenda 2030 is not a legally binding document, it has been signed by all 193 UN member states and carries significant political weight. This is particularly true of the concrete commitments contained in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets that form the core of

the 2030 Agenda. These are intended to guide public policy and the actions of international and regional organizations, the private sector, and civil society in order to achieve progress in sustainable development over the 15-year period from 2015 to 2030.

The 17 SDGs represent a broad understanding of sustainable development, incorporating aspects such as combating climate change, transforming production and consumption patterns, health, education, gender equality, inclusive economic development, safe and resilient cities, and the promotion of peace and international cooperation. This is based on the understanding that, as suggested in the preamble to Agenda 2030, sustainable development consists of three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental. In practice, this means that cultural aspects are not specifically taken into account.

Indeed, despite the efforts of some regional and global cultural networks during the negotiation process of the 2030 Agenda, and despite the available evidence on the importance of cultural aspects for sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda does not include a specific goal on culture. However, it does contain some generic references to intercultural understanding, the value of cultural diversity, and the contribution of all cultures and civilizations to sustainable development in the preamble, as well as some more explicit references to culture and creativity in certain SDG targets, as this report will explore further.

This report aims to present the SDGs and their cultural dimension, and in particular to examine current and future prospects, taking stock of developments over the last decade. At the time of writing, in early 2025, nearly

two-thirds of the implementation period had elapsed. In a rapidly changing global context, where evidence of climate change is ubiquitous, inequalities within and between societies are more prevalent, and armed conflicts continue in many countries and regions, initial discussions are also underway to discuss the new agenda that will replace the SDGs after 2030. Given the efforts, numerous contributions, and growing debates on the place of culture over the past decade, what are the chances of culture playing a more visible role on this occasion? And why is this important? These are some of the questions that the report will attempt to answer. It should be particularly useful for cultural professionals working at the local and national levels who wish to examine how their work relates to human and sustainable development and international agendas.

To this end, after this brief introduction, Section 2 of the report presents the broader framework of the 2030 Agenda, its references to cultural aspects, and some of the considerations made since 2015 on the limited attention given to culture in this context, as well as how culture can contribute effectively to the SDGs. Section 3 then examines recent developments and debates, and what we might expect in the coming period. The report concludes with a brief set of conclusions.

2. The culture in the objectives of sustainable development

2.1. Background

The adoption of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs was preceded by what was considered the largest consultation ever undertaken by the United Nations. The SDGs were designed

to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a global framework adopted in 2000. The MDGs aimed to address development challenges particularly in "developing" or "Southern" countries, including reducing child mortality, achieving universal primary education, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, and therefore had relatively limited impact in "developed" or "Northern" countries - the main exception being international development agencies based in European countries, which incorporated the MDGs as a central framework between 2000 and 2015.

At the same time, the SDGs present a broader and more ambitious framework, which includes many themes not included in the MDGs and applies to all countries, on the understanding that sustainable development is a common challenge—both because all countries need to address needs in areas such as social inequality, education, health, and gender equality, each in their own way, and because some challenges, such as climate change, peace, and global inequalities, are truly global and require cooperation and solidarity from all countries. As a result, the SDGs have also become a framework for national, regional, and local governments, not only on the international stage but also in their domestic affairs, as evidenced by the numerous strategies and policies that refer to them, funding programs that are linked to the achievement of the SDGs, or the commitment of European national and local governments to the development of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), respectively, which present evidence of efforts to achieve the SDGs to the international community.

The SDGs comprise 17 goals (often

also known as "global goals") and 169 targets, which are supposed to be measurable. The targets have varying implications depending on the region and country, with some being particularly relevant to communities in the South (e.g., target 6.1, which aims to ensure universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all) or to countries in the North (e.g., target 17.2, which calls on developed countries to fulfill their international aid commitments in order to reach the goal of 0.7% of GDP devoted to developing countries), and others with implications everywhere (e.g., target 7.2, which aims to significantly increase the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix).

The latest report on the progress of the SDGs, published by the UN in June 2024, warns that "the world is seriously behind schedule in achieving the 2030 Agenda." According to available data, only 17% of the goals show sufficient progress to be achieved by 2030, with nearly half showing moderate (18%) or marginal (30%) progress. Furthermore, 18% show stagnation and 17% show regression from 2015 baseline levels. ³ The report also indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has wiped out previous progress in areas such as life expectancy and led to an increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty and hunger.

Overall, the SDGs for which more targets are on track or achieved are SDG 7 (energy), 12 (sustainable consumption and production), and 17 (partnerships for the goals, which involves strengthening alliances and cooperation within and between countries), while those showing more regression or stagnation are SDG 2

(zero hunger), 14 (life below water), 12 (sustainable consumption and production—where targets are either on track or regressing, which is why this SDG appears on both lists), and 8 (decent work and economic growth).

2.2. Culture in the SDGs

In May 2013, UNESCO, with the support of the Chinese government, organized an international congress entitled "Culture: Key to Sustainable Development" in the city of Hangzhou, China. Bringing together approximately

500 participants, including governments, UN bodies, development banks, academics, and members of civil society, the event was held in the context of preparations for what would become the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In addition to reaffirming the importance of culture as an instrument and driver of sustainable development and making specific commitments, the resulting Hangzhou Declaration also recommended that "a specific goal focused on culture be included in the United Nations post-2015 development agenda, based on heritage, diversity, creativity, and knowledge transmission, and including clear targets and indicators that link culture to all dimensions of sustainable development."⁵ The Hangzhou Conference was one of several actions launched by UNESCO during this period to reflect on how culture could be included in the subsequent SDGs. In addition, regional and national consultations and a number of publications were also undertaken.⁶

Behind the Hangzhou Declaration's call for a goal on

culture was, in addition to UNESCO, a group of international cultural networks concerned about the relatively limited role given to culture in major global debates. In the months that followed, they launched a global advocacy campaign under the slogan "The future we want includes culture," which later became #culture2015goal. They presented a manifesto and a declaration in 2013 and 2014 respectively, as well as a proposal for cultural goals and indicators to be included in the draft SDG framework, published in early 2015.⁷ The campaign asserted that "... most often, development policies and projects that do not take into account the cultural dimension have failed. Culture contributes effectively to policies, strategies, and programs aimed at inclusive social and economic development, environmental sustainability, harmony, peace, and security. Culture is both a driver and a catalyst for sustainable development."

Indeed, the arguments presented in the Hangzhou Declaration and subsequent initiatives such as the #culture2015goal campaign build on decades of contributions that have emphasized how essential cultural aspects are to understanding development in general, and sustainable development in particular. With regard to the latter, the assertion of culture as the "fourth pillar" of sustainable development is worth highlighting. In a small book published at the beginning of the century, Jon Hawkes argued that "[in] its simplest form, the concept of sustainability embodies the desire that future generations inherit a world at least as generous as the one we inhabit. However, how to achieve this... will always be the subject of ongoing debate. This debate is about values; it is a cultural debate."⁹

This is one of the many arguments put forward

by Hawkes to suggest that culture should be considered a pillar of sustainable development, alongside the three pillars or dimensions that have generally structured the dominant approaches to sustainability, namely economic, social, and environmental aspects. The understanding of culture as a "fourth pillar" has influenced some subsequent initiatives, notably Agenda 21 on Culture (2004), an international declaration linking local cultural policies and sustainable development, adopted by the global platform of local and regional governments, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), as a policy document in the field of culture.¹⁰ Similarly, as this report will explain later, some publications linking culture and the SDGs have referred to culture as a "missing" pillar in the SDGs.

In any case, there are other ways of understanding this relationship. An EU-funded research project involving a large consortium of universities and research groups argued, after extensive analysis, that the relationship between culture and sustainable development could be formulated in at least three different ways. Culture *in* sustainable development involves broadening the dominant discourse on sustainable development to include cultural aspects as an additional layer, in a similar way to that proposed by advocates of culture as a "fourth pillar." At the same time, culture *for* sustainable development involves giving culture a role of framing, contextualizing, and mediating, capable of balancing economic, social, and environmental aspects, adapting them to local contexts. Finally, culture *as* sustainable development considers culture as "the overall basis and structure necessary to achieve the goals of

sustainable development," understanding that culture is at the root of all human decisions and actions and therefore cannot be separated from any notion of sustainability.¹¹

Despite all these efforts, and as we have already noted, the SDGs adopted in September 2015 do not include a specific goal on culture. However, while the MDGs made virtually no reference to cultural aspects, the SDGs do include some references to cultural aspects, which are integrated into several goals. In particular, the following references are worth noting:

> In the context of SDG 2, which aims to end hunger and ensure food security, target 2.5 calls for preserving the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants, and livestock and domestic animals, as well as their wild relatives, and emphasizes that this requires sharing the benefits of associated traditional knowledge—in what can be seen as a reference to the cultural expertise that exists among indigenous peoples and many traditional and rural communities.

> In SDG 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning, target

4.7 suggests that all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including an appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development.

> SDG 8, which refers to promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work, includes target 8.3, which calls for promoting policies that support productive activities, the creation of decent jobs,

entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation, which can be interpreted as support for policies and programs in the creative economy. On the same goal, target 8.9 refers to the development and implementation of policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.

>In the context of SDG 11, dedicated to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, target 11.4 establishes a commitment to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

>SDG 12, which aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, includes target 12.b, which, with wording similar to that of target 8.9, commits to developing and implementing tools to monitor the impacts of sustainable development for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.

> Finally, under SDG 16, which is dedicated to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and building effective and accountable institutions, target 16.4 refers to the need to strengthen the recovery and restitution of stolen assets (which may include heritage items and collections from former colonies, for example), and target 16.10 calls for ensuring public access to information, which has generally been interpreted to include the availability of public libraries.

Although this remains a small set of isolated targets in the overall context of the SDGs, and the absence of a specific goal on culture reduces its visibility in the 2030 Agenda as a whole, it can be seen as a modest recognition of the value of culture. Furthermore, it could be argued that culture contributes to the achievement of the SDGs even in targets

where it is not explicitly recognized. Indeed, the local implementation of the SDGs, also known as the "localization" of the SDGs, requires adaptation to specific cultural contexts (e.g., in areas such as education in local languages, in the case of SDG 4, and the use of local languages and customs when disseminating information on health and well-being, to achieve SDG 3, and similarly for many other SDGs) and because local knowledge contributes to the sustainable management of the environment, materials, and local resources (as in SDGs 6, 13, 14, and 15, which deal with water, climate action, and marine and terrestrial ecosystems, among other goals).

In addition, cultural participation can contribute to the fight against inequality and the empowerment of communities (SDG 10), to raising awareness of gender inequality and changing gender roles (SDG 5), etc. In some goals and targets that include generic terms, such as references to "basic services" in SDGs 1 and 11 or "public spaces" in SDG 11, it could also be argued that cultural services can be considered basic services, and that public spaces are essential to cultural life, thus providing greater scope for explaining the contribution of culture to the SDGs.¹³ As shown in the evidence presented later in this report, subsequent analyses, including research reports, practical guides, and the NVRs and VLRs submitted by national, regional, and local governments to describe the measures adopted to implement the SDGs, have illustrated how culture has been integrated into practice, both in the objectives where the references

cultural objectives were more or less explicit and in others where, despite the absence of direct references, effective implementation required a cultural approach.

One consequence of the limited space given to culture in the SDGs is that, since the SDGs determine the allocation of public funds (and some private donations) in many countries, culture has remained a secondary concern in public budgets. This is very visible, for example, in the official development assistance (ODA) provided by Northern governments: successive UNESCO reports have shown that bilateral ODA for culture accounted for only 0.15% of total bilateral ODA in 2016 and 0.23% in 2018; despite the slight recovery, the figures are marginal and lower than those recorded between 2004 and 2012.

Furthermore, it could be argued that, in many cases, funds allocated to culture have been linked to the achievement of objectives that are not "strictly cultural," which some might perceive as a form of instrumentalization. At the same time, it is very likely that projects with a cultural component are classified in official data as belonging to other categories (e.g., contributing to entrepreneurship, social inclusion, education, or regional development) and, as a result, the actual funding devoted to culture is likely to be higher than the above figures show.

The absence of culture in the SDGs is significant for several reasons. On the one hand, it means that many strategies, policies, and programs related to sustainable development and the achievement of the SDGs will not take into account aspects such as people's values and aspirations, local knowledge,

creativity, diversity, or heritage—that is, those that can be considered part of the cultural domain. As a result, the expertise and potential of cultural professionals and organizations remain underutilized in sustainability strategies. On a more pragmatic level, cultural organizations have more limited opportunities to access funds geared toward achieving the SDGs, or must present their projects and results in a way that aligns with the achievement of non-cultural goals.

2.3. Why is culture's presence in the SDGs limited?

Since 2015, several analyses have examined why culture has not been the subject of a specific goal in the SDGs, and have identified a number of possible explanations, ranging from conceptual (e.g., difficulties in having a clear understanding of culture) to political (e.g., the reluctance of many countries to make commitments in the field of culture, which may require recognition of internal diversity), technical (e.g., the lack of sufficiently robust indicators available at the global level), and strategic (e.g., the fact that other policy areas were considered to deserve more attention). Although there are also arguments to refute some of these points, they are worth considering, particularly in the context of future negotiations.

In an article first written in 2015, in the wake of the adoption of Agenda 2030, and revised five years later, Professor Alfons Martinell, an academic and former director of cultural cooperation at the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (), identified a set of factors that may explain the absence of culture in the SDGs. They can be summarized as follows:

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- > The reluctance of national governments to establish international commitments related to culture and diversity at the international level, and to accept the implications of cultural diversity internally, for example in terms of recognizing the rights of ethnic or linguistic minorities. In this regard, it should be recalled that the 2030 Agenda was ultimately the result of intergovernmental negotiations involving mainly national governments.
- > The predominance of a traditional approach in large segments of the international community international development community, which may consider culture to be a secondary need or a "luxury" compared to other development factors.
- > The limited understanding and acceptance within the development community of the contribution of culture to economic and social development, as well as to the achievement of the MDGs, despite the substantial evidence that exists in this area.
- > The relatively limited influence of UNESCO within the United Nations system, compared to other UN agencies that have succeeded in integrating their priorities into the 2030 Agenda.
- > The reluctance to recognize the cultural dimension of many contemporary conflicts, due in part to the reluctance of governments and other parties to the conflict to engage in genuine dialogue and understanding.
- > The absence, within the cultural sector, of a truly systemic vision, with a clear understanding of what cultural sustainability entails and how it relates to broader societal issues, which other sectors (e.g., organizations active in the field of the environment and climate change) have successfully integrated into their mode of operation.

organizations active in the field of the environment and climate change) have successfully integrated into their mode of operation.

- > A narrow conception among negotiators of culture as being linked to the arts and heritage, rather than a broader and more dynamic conception of culture as being linked to cultural rights and the expansion of freedoms and capacities.

> Disregard for existing international commitments in the field of culture, including several UNESCO conventions, etc.

The #Culture2030Goal campaign, which in recent years has built on the work of the previous #Culture2015Goal initiative to inform the implementation of the SDGs and advocate for a dedicated culture goal in future global agendas, has also examined the factors that may explain the relative absence of culture in the SDGs. Its analysis, which can complement that of Martinell, suggests the following explanatory factors:

- > Given that there are already several well-structured intergovernmental mechanisms in the field of culture, notably the UNESCO conventions, negotiators may have felt that it was not necessary to establish new commitments within the framework of the SDGs. At the same time, the campaign also points out that in other areas, such as the fight against climate change, the SDGs refer to existing international commitments (e.g., the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). On this basis, cultural advocates have suggested that proposals for a future cultural goal should aim to integrate existing cultural mechanisms into the international development framework—that is, by linking existing conventions

UNESCO conventions to the post-2030 Agenda.

> UNESCO chose to emphasize the economic arguments relating to cultural industries as the dominant discourse to support the inclusion of culture in the SDGs. This may have led to the presentation of a highly sectoral approach (i.e., focused on the needs of cultural organizations and professionals), rather than an approach that could be more easily linked to a broader understanding of development.

> The likely lack of a sufficiently clear vision among civil society organizations at the time of the SDG negotiations on which aspects of culture should be included in the Agenda may also have hampered the success of the proposals made by these organizations.

> The lack of sufficient leadership and consensus among national governments, which would have been a prerequisite for the inclusion of culture as an important element in the negotiation of the SDGs.¹⁶ Other authors have also pointed to the lack of sufficient political will on the part of many national governments to lead intergovernmental efforts to include culture in the SDGs during the negotiation process.¹⁷

This diversity of arguments and factors must be taken into account when considering the feasibility of a specific cultural goal in future global agendas, which this report will address later. Yet despite the minor role given to culture in the SDGs, a significant number of initiatives and publications have highlighted the cultural dimension of the SDGs, as the following section will show.

2.4. Developments since 2015: initiatives and publications on culture and the SDGs

The limited attention given to culture in the SDGs has not prevented a significant number of initiatives from highlighting culture's contribution to achieving the SDGs. Indeed, a wide range of publications, demonstration projects, training activities, and advocacy efforts have emerged and serve several purposes. Some aim to guide cultural actors in designing and implementing projects that can integrate the SDG narrative, thereby expanding their fundraising potential and ensuring that they adopt the language of sustainability and can build bridges with other sectors. More technical efforts are also being made to measure the contribution of culture to the SDGs. Finally, some initiatives, operating at a more political level, aim to highlight that culture does indeed contribute to the achievement of the SDGs or to efforts to achieve them and, in doing so, to advocate for a stronger integration of culture into future sustainable development agendas.

Although the large number of initiatives in this area means that a comprehensive summary is not possible within the scope of this report, some significant efforts will be presented below. This will also allow interested readers to familiarize themselves with the main stakeholders in this area and to further explore the existing evidence. The examples presented in the following pages of the website have been classified into a series of thematic sections, although they often address more than one theme.

Introductory guides to culture and the SDGs

One of the objectives of existing initiatives in this area has been to provide guidance to cultural professionals and organizations so that they understand the SDGs and how they can be linked to their own work. With a broad or sector-specific scope, these tools highlight the frequent capacity of cultural projects to address a range of themes of public interest and societal value (e.g., social inclusion, job creation, gender equality, reconciliation, tourism appeal) and echo narratives found elsewhere—for example, how cultural and creative actors have often been able to raise EU funds in a wide range of policy areas. Some relevant examples are presented below:

> In 2018, UCLG, which is also one of the main networks of the #Culture2030Goal campaign, published a guide entitled *Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Local Action*, which provides evidence of how cultural aspects can be linked to each of the 17 SDGs and how SDG-related cultural policies and projects can be implemented in cities, municipalities, and neighborhoods.

> Another major promoter of the campaign, the international library network IFLA has published several guides and documents explaining how libraries can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. These include *Access and Opportunity for All: How Libraries Contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda*, and *Libraries and the Sustainable Development Goals: a storytelling manual*.

> The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), also involved in the #Culture2030Goal campaign, has examined how the SDGs can be linked to heritage actors and activities

Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Guidance for Heritage and Development Actors (2021), which provides advice on engaging development actors on the potential of cultural heritage and guiding heritage professionals in integrating a sustainable development perspective into their work.²¹

> A useful guide in the museum field is *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: A how-to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners* (2019), developed by Henry McGhie of the museum consulting firm Curating Tomorrow.

> In 2021, the Center for Music Ecosystems, a global NGO created by the consulting firm Sound Diplomacy, published *Your Guide to Music and the SDGs*, which presents examples and advice for linking music projects to each of the 17 Millennium Development Goals.

> The Canadian Commission for UNESCO has also published *Culture for SDGs Toolkit: A Practical Guide to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for Cultural and Heritage Organizations in Canada*, an accessible introduction to the 2030 Agenda, with advice on how cultural organizations can integrate the Goals into their work, and specific guidance for working on SDGs 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 16.²⁴

Research Initiatives

In addition to efforts to raise awareness of the links between culture and sustainable development, build the capacity of cultural actors to work on the SDGs, and advocate for a more explicit integration of culture into future agendas, a number of initiatives have focused on research and technical development related

culture and the SDGs. Relevant examples include the following:

> Building on previous efforts to measure the contribution of culture to development (including the Culture for Development Indicators Suite), UNESCO has developed an initiative called *Culture | 2030 Indicators*, a framework of thematic indicators with the aim of measuring and tracking progress in the contribution of culture to the national and local implementation of the SDGs and related targets. The initiative includes a framework publication, presented in 2019 following a research and consultation process, which identified 22 thematic indicators, grouped under four themes (Environment and Resilience; Prosperity and Livelihoods; Knowledge and Skills; Inclusion and Participation), each of which is linked to specific targets, covering 12 of the 17 SDGs overall.²⁵ Further methodological work, including collaboration with national statistical institutes and other research and data collection agencies, could serve as a basis for defining indicators that could be integrated into future development programs. An implementation process in 12 countries and cities was launched in 2021-2022. UNESCO has set up a group of experts to support this process.

> The #Culture2030Goal campaign has been following the

references to culture made by national and local governments in their respective NVRs and LVRs. An initial analysis of the NVRs presented in 2019 identified evidence of cultural policies and programs related to 9 of the 17 SDGs, some of which, such as SDG 9 (on infrastructure) or SDG 15 (life on land and territorial ecosystems), have limited explicit links to cultural aspects in their original wording. At the same time, the report states that

Culture is not very prominent in the NVRs and more general documents resulting from the UN review process. It also observed that "there is a gap between existing expertise and practices on the ground engaging culture for sustainable development and the reflection and prioritization of this in documents emerging from the implementation of Agenda 2030." Of course, the limited presence of culture in the formal framework of the SDGs does not facilitate such visualization. A subsequent analysis of the evidence found in the VLRs showed, however, that 74% of them included the cultural dimension in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda, with substantial narratives, and argued that, overall, the VLRs presented evidence of the contribution of culture to a wider range of SDGs than the VNRs. In this regard, the report argued that "there is great diversity in how local and regional governments... address culture in their sustainable development policies and reports." The campaign then published annual reports in 2022, 2023, and 2024, analyzing data from the VNRs. The most recent reports found that every NVR refers to culture, albeit to a highly variable degree and with a wide range of policy objectives—from culture as an element of national identity to culture as a pillar of development, culture and tourism, the culture of peace, and culture as a vehicle for awareness-raising initiatives.²⁹ These research initiatives are also linked to the campaign's advocacy work, including its proposal for a "dedicated" or "stand-alone" cultural goal, which will be described further below.

> Several initiatives academics have also addressed the links between culture and the SDGs. An interesting article published in 2021 by a group of researchers based in China, Israel, the Netherlands, and Norway analyzed the links between cultural values and the achievement of the SDGs, and

suggested that cultural traits are linked to the achievement of all 17 SDGs and 79% of the SDG targets. Empirical insights gained from panel data analysis revealed that cultural values explained up to 26% of the variation in SDG achievement. On this basis, the authors argue that there is a need to take greater account of cultural contexts and nuances in communication and policy design and to develop new interdisciplinary solutions to address sustainability challenges.³⁰

Advocacy and policy development

As described above, one of the objectives of initiatives linking culture to the SDGs is to provide evidence of how culture effectively contributes to the achievement of the SDGs, to advocate for stronger integration of cultural aspects into the post-2030 development agenda, and to advance the development of corresponding policies. Several networks, public bodies, and collaborative platforms have launched activities in this regard:

> In recent years, the British Council has published two major contributions demonstrating that culture remains "the missing pillar" in approaches to sustainable development and the SDGs. Combining data from projects launched or supported by the British Council, as well as data available elsewhere, *The Missing Pillar: Culture's Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals* (2020) and *The Missing Foundation: Culture's Place Within and Beyond the UN Sustainable Development Goals* (2023) have gained visibility. The latter report

warned, however, of the lack of sufficient consensus within the cultural sector on the precise role played by culture in the SDGs: "While some advocate making culture a fourth pillar or a stand-alone SDG, others see it as a powerful cross-cutting tool for advancing development goals. The report also emphasizes that the significance of culture goes beyond the narrower and more specific set of targets identified in the SDGs and suggests that "recognizing culture as a foundation for sustainable development, going beyond the SDGs, is essential. This broader perspective acknowledges the multifaceted and intrinsic role of culture in building a sustainable future for all."

> Several publications and initiatives

examining the EU's role in linking culture and the SDGs are also worth mentioning. These include a report by Gijs de Vries for Germany's Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) entitled *Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: The Role of the European Union*, which reviews the EU's progress in achieving the cultural goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda and provides guidance on how the EU and its Member States could maximize their impact, addressing in particular SDGs 4, 8, 11, 13, and 16.³³ The European Commission has also mapped and reported on its work in this area, notably in a *2022 report on the cultural dimension of sustainable development in EU actions*, presented to other EU bodies, which suggested that "to fully unlock the potential of cultural measures in, for, and as sustainable development and the role of cultural sectors, it is necessary to address the scattered distribution of cultural measures that target the sustainable development to

across many different policy areas." She goes on to say that it is "vital to translate the horizontal approach to sustainable development into a fully visible commitment to culture and creativity as drivers of development."³⁴ In the same year, another relevant contribution was published in the form of *Stormy Times. Nature and humans: Cultural courage for change. 11 messages for and from Europe*, a report drafted by a group of experts established in the context of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).³⁵ Other important contributions include the *reflection report on the challenges and opportunities of culture and the SDGs*, focusing on SDGs 4, 8, 11, and 13, published in 2021 as part of the Voices of Culture program, which enables structured dialogue with civil society actors:

> UCLG, which is heavily involved in the #Culture2030Goal campaign, has also launched a number of initiatives of its own, advocating for a stronger presence of culture in the SDGs. One example is a document published in 2023, ahead of that year's High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), which will review the implementation of the SDGs at the UN: *A Cultural Boost in the Achievement of the SDGs: How local and regional governments are promoting cultural heritage and sustainable cities and territories* focused, on the one hand, on the local implementation of target 11.4, related to the protection of cultural and natural heritage, and, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of cultural rights in achieving the SDGs, and presented a comprehensive analysis of how certain cultural factors could be either conducive or counterproductive to the achievement of the SDGs.³⁷ Recent work undertaken by the #Culture2030Goal campaign to advocate for a specific cultural goal in the post-2030 global agendas will be examined in the following section.

Overall, this section has examined the limited presence of culture in the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, but also the commitment of many authorities, organizations, and networks in the cultural sector to integrate the SDGs into their work, enhance the contribution of cultural activities to the achievement of the SDGs, and call for greater recognition of the importance of culture in current and future development agendas. The next section will analyze more recent developments and upcoming steps, including initial discussions for the design of the post-2030 development agenda that is expected to replace the SDGs.

3. Recent developments and future prospects

2025 marks the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the SDGs and places the international community just five years away from the 2030 deadline. Although no formal process has yet been launched to negotiate an international agenda for the post-2030 scenario, there are indications that the next two years will be used to discuss options for the future and that a high-level political forum to be held in September 2027 is expected to adopt an initial framework for advancing sustainable development beyond 2030.

In this context, the debate on the presence of culture in global agendas will continue to gather momentum in the coming years. It will draw not only on past developments, such as those described in the previous section, but also on more recent measures, which, particularly since 2022, have placed greater emphasis on the possibility of a dedicated or "stand-alone" cultural goal, i.e., a specific goal on culture in a future global agenda on sustainable development. The

main debates on this issue, as well as the remaining obstacles, will be discussed in the following pages.

3.1. MONDIACULT 2022 and subsequent debates on a specific cultural goal

In September 2022, UNESCO convened the World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development - MONDIACULT 2022, a high-level event held in Mexico City that brought together 135 ministers of culture and national delegations from 150 countries. This was the largest global conference on culture since Mexico hosted the first MONDIACULT conference in 1982. The presence of culture in the SDGs was one of the issues on the agenda of MONDIACULT 2022.

Several months before the event, the #Culture2030Goal campaign undertook research and an online survey to gather opinions on the desirability of having a specific cultural goal in a future global agenda, and drafted a proposal for a set of possible goals that could constitute such a goal. Taking into account some of the obstacles and challenges that have made it difficult to include culture in the SDGs, the proposal prioritizes themes that can be measured and that can build on existing international commitments. Here are some of the targets proposed for a future cultural goal

> Realize cultural rights for all, promoting access and participation for all in cultural life, creativity, and the diversity of cultural expressions, particularly for women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable populations.

> Promote a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity.

> Protect and safeguard all forms of heritage, exploiting them as a resource for sustainable development, through existing conventions and other policy frameworks, as well as any new appropriate mechanisms.

> Protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions in order to strengthen the creativity and development capacity of individuals and communities, through existing conventions and any new appropriate mechanisms.

> When developing and implementing policies relating to cultural and creative industries, sustainable tourism, and digital technologies, promote local culture and products, the economic and social rights of artists and cultural professionals, and artistic freedom, and develop and implement appropriate monitoring tools.

> Improve the legal conditions and practical possibilities for the mobility of cultural professionals and cross-border creativity in the creation of cultural goods, services, and practices through collaboration

> Empower indigenous peoples to strengthen their own institutions, cultures, and languages, and to pursue their development in accordance with their own needs and aspirations.

> Develop a cultural approach to environmental protection and sustainable urbanization, including land use planning, landscape management, biodiversity protection, agriculture, and natural area management, through heritage, local cultures and knowledge, creativity, and the arts.

Supporters of the cultural goal have indicated that they are eager to work with all relevant stakeholders, using the proposal as a basis, to advance efforts to realize the potential of culture as a driver of sustainable development.⁴⁰

The final declaration issued by the MONDIACULT 2022 intergovernmental conference was also unequivocal in its support for a specific goal for culture, a relatively rare step compared to previous developments. Indeed, the ministers of culture called on the UN Secretary-General to "firmly anchor culture as a global public good and integrate it as a specific goal in its own right into the development agenda beyond 2030." They also asked UNESCO to launch a broad consultation on the multidimensional impact of culture as a global public good and to strengthen advocacy for the inclusion of culture in the UN Future Summit, scheduled to take place in 2024.

The references to culture as a "global public good" included in the MONDIACULT declaration are a response to the UN Secretary-General's report entitled *Our Common Agenda*, published in 2021 in the midst of the global COVID-19 crisis, in which he called on societies to discuss the most essential and valued public goods and the best ways to ensure their provision. Public goods are defined here as "goods and services provided to society as a whole and benefiting everyone, which at the national level may include street lighting, fire services, traffic regulation, or drinking water." Some public goods have long been recognized as global in nature, in the sense that they cannot be adequately provided by a single state acting alone and that they concern the well-being

of humanity as a whole... Ultimately, what distinguishes these precious areas is that protecting them is an increasingly urgent task that we can only undertake together." The Secretary-General's report identified some of these global public goods, including global health, information, an economy that works for all, a healthy planet, and digital space, but it launched a debate to identify others.

MONDIACULT 2022's references to culture as a global public good should therefore be read in this light. Indeed, earlier in 2022, the understanding of culture as a global public good had already made the headlines in the third edition of UNESCO's Global Report on the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity*.⁴³ This report asserts that culture must be considered a global public good because "creativity is an inexhaustible resource, in which societies and individuals around the world participate, and today's creativity is tomorrow's heritage. Culture is not only a matter of institutions or economics, but also of individual and collective imagination."⁴⁴

MONDIACULT 2022's support for a "specific goal [on culture] in its own right" in the post-2030 Agenda was the first in a series of subsequent intergovernmental statements that reaffirmed this demand. For example, the New Delhi G20 Leaders' Declaration, adopted in September 2023 by the heads of government and state of the G20 countries, called for "the full recognition and protection of culture and its intrinsic value as a driver of transformation and a catalyst for the achievement of the SDGs" and advocated "the inclusion of culture as a stand-alone goal in the

future discussions on a possible post-2030 development agenda."⁴⁵ In very similar terms, the G7 Culture Ministers' meeting held in Naples in 2024 called for "the full recognition and integration of culture and the creative economy into development processes and policies" and agreed to "promote the inclusion of culture as a stand-alone goal in future discussions on how to advance sustainable development beyond 2030." In September 2023, an informal meeting of EU member state culture ministers held in Cáceres, Spain, issued a statement expressing the intention to "work towards the recognition of culture as a new sustainable development goal in its own right."

With a new edition of MONDIACULT to be held in Barcelona in September 2025, UNESCO launched a survey in 2024 of ministries of culture and civil society organizations to assess the outcomes and impacts of the commitments and issues raised by MONDIACULT 2022, including those related to the possible inclusion of culture as a stand-alone goal in future agendas. The survey revealed that ministries and other public bodies are "actively working to establish culture as a stand-alone goal in the post-2030 agenda," with actions in three main areas.

First, clarifying the rationale and objectives of culture in government frameworks, by identifying and agreeing on the principles and objectives of cultural policies within government structures, for example, culture as a driver of inclusion and social cohesion, economic development through culture, culture and

environmental sustainability, or cultural rights and equity.

Second, by putting in place strategies, mechanisms, and programs to integrate and align national cultural policies, for example, by including culture in national development strategies, adopting legislation and policies, increasing financial support for cultural projects, or engaging in advocacy at the international level.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, respondents also identified the need to address challenges in advancing cultural policies and promoting culture as a stand-alone objective, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it possible to adapt existing cultural strategies and better link them to societal crises in areas such as mental health and adaptation to the digital context; other economic, political, and social crises (and how to ensure continued support for culture when national priorities shift elsewhere), and enhanced regional and global coordination (i.e., the need to engage in complex bilateral and multilateral negotiations to maintain and strengthen public support for culture at the national and international levels, in a context of competing political priorities).

The report also sheds interesting light on regional differences in the reasons for and challenges of promoting culture as a stand-alone objective. Ministries in Latin America and the Caribbean emphasize the integration of cultural perspectives into sustainable development frameworks as part of a commitment to multiculturalism and social cohesion, viewing culture not only as

an auxiliary element, but also as an essential element in promoting community participation and preserving biodiversity. In Europe and North America, the role of culture in resilience is increasingly recognized, with some countries highlighting cultural contributions to societal well-being, while others are incorporating cultural adaptability into national programs. In the Arab States, greater attention is being paid to protecting cultural heritage and promoting intercultural dialogue, while Eastern European countries are emphasizing the priority given to culture in national recovery strategies, highlighting its importance in crisis management and strengthening social cohesion. Finally, respondents in regions facing significant political tensions highlight the need to integrate cultural activities into initiatives aimed at ensuring resilience and inclusiveness.

Responses from civil society organizations, on the other hand, revealed broad consensus on the importance of culture as a stand-alone objective, but varying degrees of civil society engagement in this area, partly due to the size of the organization—large international networks tend to be more actively involved in campaigns and actions than smaller local or national organizations. Civil society organizations also noted some common challenges, including "a lack of political will [to integrate culture into development frameworks] in some areas, limited financial resources for cultural initiatives, difficulties in measuring the impact of culture on development, and the need for better coordination between the culture and development sectors."

While the consensus demonstrated by ministerial statements and the MONDIACULT survey of governments and civil society organizations is encouraging and supports the progress made by global civil society initiatives such as the set of targets for a stand-alone goal proposed by the #Culture2030Goal campaign, it is important to remember that the actual negotiations for a post-2030 development agenda will be conducted primarily by other government bodies, including foreign ministries and finance ministries. In this regard, it will be important to ensure that some of the challenges observed during the negotiation of the SDGs, including the lack of leadership among national governments willing to support proposals for a cultural goal, can be overcome this time around. The drafting of the UN Future Pact in 2024, which, as the following section will show, had less positive results than might have been expected in light of the previous statements, is an example of the difficulties that could arise during the process.

3.2. Culture in the UN Pact for the Future

In September 2024, heads of government and state from around the world gathered at the UN General Assembly in New York to participate in the "Summit for the Future." Building on previous initiatives and debates, including the *Our Common Agenda* report presented by the UN Secretary-General in 2021, the Future Summit aimed to accelerate efforts to meet existing international commitments, such as the SDGs, and to take concrete action to address new challenges and seize new opportunities. To illustrate these commitments, the

summit led to the adoption of the Pact for the Future, an action-oriented final document, as well as two accompanying documents: the Declaration on Future Generations and the Global Digital Compact.

As is customary with this type of initiative, the Pact for the Future and accompanying documents were negotiated by national governments over several months before being formally adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. References to culture in the Pact for the Future illustrate this point. The "zero draft" of the Pact, i.e., the initial version released in January 2024, mentioned culture only in passing and in very modest terms. Following advocacy and political negotiations, a revised draft released four months later, in May, included a substantial action item entitled "We will protect and promote culture as an integral part of sustainable development," and suggested that governments could agree to "[integrate] culture into economic, social, and environmental development policies and strategies as a stand-alone objective and as a central consideration for strengthening the implementation of the ²⁰³⁰ Agenda."

However, this clear and ambitious commitment was dropped from the final, adopted version of the UN Pact for the Future, which retained references to culture but was less categorical about specific commitments, which were also grouped together with sport. Action 11 of the Pact for the Future is entitled "We will protect and promote culture and sport as integral components of sustainable development." It recognizes that culture and sport "offer individuals and communities a strong sense of identity and foster social cohesion" and "are important

catalysts for sustainable development." Consequently, the signatory countries commit to integrating "culture into economic, social, and environmental development policies and strategies" and to ensuring "adequate public investment in the protection and promotion of culture."⁵³

While these commitments are less ambitious than the commitment to a stand-alone goal that had been mentioned in a previous draft, it is also true that, with the path to the negotiation of the post-2030 development agenda still unclear, some governments may have considered such an explicit commitment premature. The #Culture2030Goal campaign suggested that, although a clearer commitment would have been welcome, "the Pact for the Future marks a valuable step forward... even if it falls slightly short of what it could have done to elevate culture to the same level as other policy areas." The campaign also called for the development of an implementation plan to achieve the Pact's goal of integrating culture into broader development policies and ensuring that culture is given its rightful place as a lever for change. The members of the campaign have committed to publishing a detailed proposal for the Culture Goal in July 2025, revising the initial proposal made in 2022, with a view to discussing it and contributing to the debates at the MONDIACULT 2025 conference to be held in Barcelona in September.

4. Conclusions

Culture is a component of sustainability in several ways. Our understanding of what makes life worth living and what we want to leave to future generations is informed by our values and aspirations. The diverse knowledge forms developed by communities around the world, over generations, embody ways of being and relating to the planet, and to other humans, that can be conducive to sustainability—however, some of the knowledge

developed by communities around the world, over generations, embody ways of being and relating to the planet, and to other humans, that can be conducive to sustainability—however, some of this knowledge is now lost, and the planet is changing at such a rapid pace that our ways of inhabiting it must adapt to a constantly evolving context. There is also potential for creativity to help us imagine future scenarios and values based on interdependence and collaboration that are essential in the transition to a changing world, both for current and future generations. Cultural aspects cut across the social, environmental, and economic components of sustainability, and cultural and other human rights form the basis for ensuring that all individuals and communities are engaged in this transition.

This approach has not yet been integrated into mainstream approaches to sustainable development, let alone global policies and strategies in this area, as this report has shown. However, there is substantial evidence of how many local and national policies, programs, and projects, civil society initiatives, and some regional and international programs have linked culture and sustainability. Furthermore, there now appears to be a slowly evolving momentum for cultural aspects to be taken more seriously into account in the development of global agendas on sustainable development.

The next five years will show whether these apparent changes are strong enough to give culture a more visible place in the post-2030 development agenda, in the form of a dedicated goal

or, failing that, a more prominent place than in the SDGs. Negotiations will take place in an international context currently defined by multiple crises and divisions, where reaching consensus on new issues requiring public resources may prove difficult.

In this regard, a more central role for culture in future development agendas will depend on a number of internal and external factors. Internal factors include raising awareness and building consensus within the cultural sector on the importance of sustainability and the need to take culture into account in global agendas; and ensuring coherence and coordination among the various stakeholders active in this field, including international organizations such as UNESCO, global and regional networks such as those involved in the #Culture2030Goal campaign, national and local governments, and other cultural organizations. As the analysis of the debates that led to the establishment of the SDGs has shown, it will also be necessary to involve certain national governments as leaders of the cause, willing to defend the place of culture in sustainable development and the need to fully integrate it into the agendas.

External factors include the willingness of the international community to reshape previous approaches to sustainable development, making them more comprehensive and holistic, and the ability to convince negotiators of the importance of culture. In this regard, as this report has indicated, there is a vast body of evidence and knowledge on the links between culture and sustainability. It will be necessary to present this in language and format that is accessible and relevant to

various stakeholders, establishing links with different policy areas and geographical contexts, while maintaining internal consistency.

This report aims to introduce the topic to cultural professionals and organizations that may not have been directly involved in the SDGs in the past. It has been written in the hope of helping them understand that this is an important cause, one in which they can engage in the future.

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1 United Nations General Assembly (2015), "Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", resolution A/RES/70/1, preamble, available at <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

2 Paragraph 79 of Agenda 2030 encourages UN Member States to conduct regular reviews of progress in implementing the SDGs at the national and subnational levels. Over the years, many national governments have published VNRs, which are available at <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>. Many cities and local and regional governments have also drafted VLRs (see <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/voluntary-local-reviews>), which illustrate what is known as the "localization" of the SDGs—that is, the understanding that achieving the SDGs requires substantial action at the local and regional levels, where many basic services are provided and where most human rights can be exercised.

3 These figures are based on the 135 targets for which global trend data since 2015 is available; the

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7 See <https://www.culture2030goal.net/resources> for more information. The initial members of the campaign were The International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity (IFCCD), and Culture Action Europe. Subsequent documents also involved The International Music Council (IMC), Arterial Network, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and The Latin-American Network for Art and Social Transformation. The campaign currently involves Arterial Network, Culture Action Europe, ICOMOS, IFCCD, IFLA, IMC, and UCLG, and other networks may join in the near future.

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