

# Culture(s) for Sustainability

a call to integrate the cultural sector and local cultures into sustainable development strategies and policies

## INTRODUCTION

### Looking for culture(s) in the sustainable development agenda: the global scope

The [Culture 2030 Goal campaign](#), composed of several global cultural networks, advocates for the pivotal role of culture in sustainable development. The campaign calls for radically new development approaches to ensure human and social progress. Culture is essential for achieving inclusive, people-centred, peaceful, and climate-resilient development, aligning with the core principles of sustainability. Supporters of the campaign argue that this shift requires recognising culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development, alongside economic, environmental, and social pillars, and establishing a standalone goal for culture in the next global sustainable development agenda.

In response to the Culture 2030 Goal coalition's calls, the integration of culture into sustainability has gained momentum. This was promoted in the [2022 EU Commission report on the cultural dimension of sustainable development](#) and at [COP28](#), where Brazil and the UAE created the "[Culture-Based Climate Action Group](#)," emphasising the importance of incorporating culture, such as creativity, heritage, and local wisdom, in addressing global climate challenges. Recently, the initial draft of the UN Pact for the Future [proposed the realistic prospect](#) of establishing a dedicated Culture Goal (SDG 18), acknowledging that for culture to effectively support the SDGs, it must first be empowered.

This article explores the emergencies and opportunities for the Creative and Cultural Sectors (CCSs), with a special emphasis on 'local cultures'—defined here as ways of living and thinking connected to a place and its surrounding nature, fostering a sense of community, unity, and stewardship (there are [approximately 160 local cultures in Europe in 2024](#))—within this promising global framework.

There is a unique opportunity to place local cultures and Creative and Cultural Sectors (CCSs) at the heart of addressing environmental challenges. Achieving climate neutrality by 2050 in the European Union (EU) depends not only on political and policy changes but also on a cultural shift in our lifestyles, consumption patterns, and relationships with natural resources and planetary boundaries. The CCSs play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable values in Europe by leveraging their creativity and influence. Through innovative projects, they raise awareness about environmental issues and encourage sustainable practices in ways that resonate deeply

with diverse audiences. By incorporating sustainability themes into their work and collaborating with local communities, artists foster a more balanced and culturally sensitive approach to sustainability.

## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### **On the (too often forgotten) culture-nature relationship(s)**

Local cultures around the world are fundamentally connected to their environments, expressing the relationship between people and their natural surroundings. Elements like food, architecture, lifestyles, and even languages are influenced by the local environment, adapting to what can be grown, how weather impacts building designs, and more. Changes in the natural environment can therefore lead to changes in local cultures, making it crucial to consider these relationships in the context of current environmental and climate crises.

### **On the different levels of interaction between climate change and culture(s)**

- ***Climate change, local culture(s) and cultural heritage.*** Climate change causes mass migration, disrupting the link between generations and eroding local cultures. In Holland, for example, rising sea levels start threatening coastal communities, leading to cultural disintegration as people relocate, while in Finland there is no point anymore to have skills on seine-fishing if your islander community needs to move to a big city. Climate change also impacts communities who can remain in their place but face disrupted relationships with nature. In the French and Spanish Pyrenees, a snow-based culture is declining as climate change alters seasonal patterns, making traditional knowledge irrelevant.

This disconnection leads to less environmental connection, and care, creating a vicious cycle: [in the global. New-Tech and climate change context in which one local language \(and culture\) disappears every 40 days](#), such 'cultural genocide' leads to the loss of unique sustainable ways of living and interacting with nature. In Europe, the decline of the Sami languages exemplifies this phenomenon. The Sami people, whose culture is intricately tied to their language, have traditionally relied on their deep ecological knowledge to manage reindeer herding and maintain the delicate balance of their Arctic environment. As their languages fade, so too does the transmission of this critical environmental wisdom, weakening the community's ability to protect and sustain their natural surroundings.

- ***The processes surrounding climate change are inherently cultural***, both influencing and being influenced by human behaviours. Production, consumption, and social organisation that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions are rooted in cultural practices. Addressing climate change necessitates shifting cultural values and behaviours, underscoring its nature as a deeply cultural issue.

The appreciation and response to climate change therefore are also cultural. Different societies—such as rural communities, indigenous tribes, and Western activists—perceive and react to climate change in distinct ways, reflecting the cultural diversity in addressing this issue. Sustainable development doesn't just include cultural aspects; it is inherently cultural itself.

Cultural and creative professionals are equipped with skills to craft new imaginaries, propose new narratives and alternative scenarios for futures that are just and sustainable. To harness this transformative power of culture and cultural workers, it is essential to recognise and integrate cultural factors and actors in the sustainable policies.

## THREE KEY SUSTAINABILITY FOCUSES FOR INCLUSION OF CULTURE(S)

### **On the importance of including culture(s) into European Green Deal initiatives**

The green transition in Europe brings about significant cultural shifts and socio-cultural risks, particularly for those in mountainous, coastal, and rural areas. Projects like renewable energy farms are already facing opposition from local communities who see these initiatives as disruptions to their traditional landscapes and ways of life. For instance, Greek shepherds in Kozani view wind turbines as threats to their cultural identity, which is closely tied to their knowledge of local paths and landscapes. Similarly, in rural Scotland, fishing communities resist offshore wind farms that alter their seascapes and disrupt traditional fishing practices. Integrating culture(s) into green transition initiatives is crucial for mitigating financial risks and ensuring sustainability by respecting local contexts and traditions.

**On the importance of including culture(s) into nature positive solutions** Integrating local cultures into biodiversity conservation is crucial due to the interconnectedness of human activities and nature in 90% of terrestrial ecosystems. Natural environments are rarely pristine or completely wild; they are almost always linked to people and, therefore, to local communities' cultures. Local cultures are essential for fostering economic resilience, social cohesion, and livelihood security by utilising the 'ecosystem services' provided by these environments. Local communities rely on nature for food, shelter, and materials. Additionally, traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations provides communities with valuable insights into local ecology and biodiversity, enhancing their ability to steward the land. The landscapes shaped by human activities also foster a deep sense of identity and belonging, instilling a strong commitment to conservation among local populations. Therefore, future successful European biodiversity conservation efforts must align solutions with the cultural practices of local communities, highlighting the importance of preserving local cultures to safeguard nature globally.

### **On the importance of including cultural and creative sectors in sustainable climate transition**

Cultural and creative sectors have significant influence over public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. They can effectively communicate complex environmental issues to diverse audiences through different forms of artistic and creative expression. This communication helps raise awareness about climate change and inspires action towards more sustainable climate transition. Art and culture have the power to motivate individuals and communities to adopt eco-friendly lifestyles, reduce consumption, and support environmentally responsible policies. CCS are also significant contributors to the economy. By integrating these sectors into sustainable climate transition efforts, new economic opportunities can be created. This includes green jobs in creative industries, tourism centred around sustainable cultural practices, and markets for eco-friendly cultural products. Simultaneously, incorporating the CCS into the sustainable development agenda can enhance the sector's sense of involvement and ownership of the sustainable development goals as well as can provide a fresh perspective on foresight and critical thinking.

## **GUIDELINES FOR EUROPEAN POLICY DISCUSSION & ACTION**

### **Time to use European ‘Traditional Ecological Knowledge’ to tackle climate change**

Traditional ways of life often manage natural environments sustainably by leveraging centuries of knowledge about their characteristics and limits. European local cultures, although representing precious knowledge as well, are forgotten. Emphasising the intrinsic link between cultural preservation and environmental conservation in Europe is crucial for fostering sustainable development. A policy action to address this issue could involve gathering and integrating European traditional ecological knowledge into environmental management plans and involving local communities in decision-making processes related to land use and conservation initiatives.

### **The limits of rational metrics for sustainability: culture much needed in the process !**

Today's sustainability policy makers, such as those behind the SDGs, the EU Green Deal, and corporate Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) strategies, often struggle to effectively include local cultures in their initiatives, as they have to prioritise quantifiable metrics over qualitative aspects, like culture. This focus on concrete numbers creates a barrier for integrating intangible cultural elements into sustainability efforts. To address this issue, policymakers could implement measures to bridge the gap between qualitative cultural research and quantitative sustainability metrics, such as establishing frameworks for assessing the cultural impacts of sustainability projects and developing more holistic approaches to sustainable development.

### **Culture(s) for a better localization of European sustainable development strategies**

Culture must become integral to the localization of SDGs and ESG strategies in today's post-global, decentralised world, where policies must increasingly adapt to diverse contexts and values. To achieve this, European policy-makers would need access to more ‘cultural impact assessment’ tools to evaluate the effects of their initiatives on local cultures and to address potential risks and costs for the stakeholders. Policy makers could also create frameworks for ‘cultural compensation initiatives’, to help mitigate socio-cultural challenges arising from the implementation of green EU policies in local contexts and balance potential negative impact of SDG and ESG projects on local culture(s)

### **Towards the very first « Cultural Ecosystem Services » in Europe ?**

To incorporate culture into sustainable development this article proposes the concept of ‘Cultural Ecosystem Services,’ akin to environmental ‘nature positive’ approaches. This entails quantifying the financial benefits of culturally rich and resilient environments to demonstrate the value that European cultural actors and local cultures contribute to the broader ecosystem. A policy action to address this issue could involve implementing guidelines for evaluating and promoting cultural ecosystem services that prioritise the preservation of cultural authenticity, integrity and diversity. Additionally, fostering community-led initiatives that celebrate and sustain local cultures without reducing them to mere economic assets can help strike a balance between cultural vitality and ecosystem health.

### **Towards unleashing the transformative power of culture**

To fully harness the transformative potential of culture and the arts, it is essential to support artists and creatives. This support should encompass ensuring high standards of working conditions, fair remuneration, mobility for cultural professionals, strengthening cultural institutions through cross-border collaboration and securing sufficient funding at both national and European levels.

## CONCLUSION

Most of the current global narratives surrounding sustainable development often still reflect a narrow anthropocentric perspective, emphasising human-centric solutions (“we humans, can do it!”), only huge global objectives (e.g. carbon positive initiatives), very tight timelines (“let’s save the world by 2030!”), distressing narratives (“we will all die if we do nothing”) and heroic interventions (the “Greta worship”), making people feel that we are all part of a US-based ‘Armageddon’ movie, green style.

This approach fails to acknowledge the interconnectedness between humans and nature at local level, perpetuating the same mindset that led to environmental degradation in the first place. To address this issue, European CCSs are the (last and only?) ones that should promote a more holistic understanding of sustainability by incorporating cultural perspectives that emphasise humanity's interconnectedness with nature and promote a sense of stewardship rather than dominance. Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability is not a trend: it is a reality, and a much needed process in the sustainability world of today.

**Credits:**

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent an official position of Culture Action Europe.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

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