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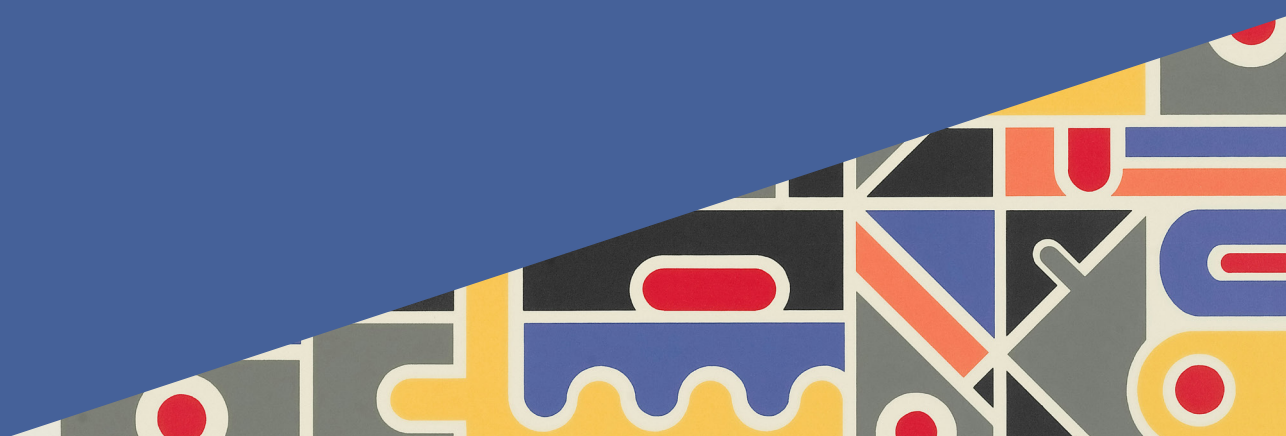
ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy

International Cultural Relations to Fulfil the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Challenges, Opportunities and Initiatives

Rosanna Lewis and Pedro Affonso Ivo Franco



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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
CDF	Cultural Development Fund (Saudi Arabia)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegations
FiCS	Finance in Common (network) Summit
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
G7	Group of 7 (informal intergovernmental political and economic forum of seven major industrial countries)
G20	Group of 20 (intergovernmental political and economic forum of twenty countries with developed and emerging economies)
GMA	Great Museum of Africa (AU initiative)
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative (China)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
ICR	international cultural relations
MCF	Mission Cultural Fund (operational fund administered by the Cultural Diplomacy Unit at Global Affairs Canada)
MONDIACULT	UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development

ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMC	Open Method Coordination (EU)
PBD(s)	Public Development Bank(s)
SAR	Saudi riyal (currency)
SDG(s)	(UN) Sustainable Development Goal(s)
UCCN	UNESCO Creative Cities Network
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UN HLPF	United Nations High-Level Political Forum
UN OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
USD	United States dollars (currency)
VLR(s)	Voluntary Local Review(s) (of the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030)
VNR(s)	Voluntary National Review(s) (of the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030)
WAI	Wales Arts International

Foreword

The 2030 Agenda in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is based on the idea that every human being should have the opportunity to live a life in dignity, on a safe and healthy planet. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the United Nations (UN) Charter. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated, "Eighty years ago, from the ashes of war, the world planted a seed of hope. One Charter, one vision, one promise: that peace is possible when humanity stands together."[1]

Today, this vision is being extensively challenged by increased aspirations for a rule by force and rule of the strongest. In Europe, new and intensified defence requirements impact priorities in public spending. However, in regard to International Relations, there is a trap to avoid. As the authors of the study mention, "culture is [often] treated as a tool for branding or international positioning rather than as transformative force for social development and rights-based progress" (p. 59), further emphasising the need for "a paradigm shift, where the attributes of 'culture' and 'cultural relations' are seen as paramount for the achievement of sustainable development" (p. 60), which includes peace and security.

This paradigm shift is important because "ICR [international cultural relations] is a key component to fulfil these objectives, particularly because it enables and fosters partnership, mutual trust and understanding, and cooperation" (p. 7). Based on shared responsibilities, ICR can contribute to achieving transformative milestones on the path towards a more sustainable world. Efforts towards fulfilling the SDGs need to accelerate. According to UN data, currently only 35% of targets are on track or moderate progress, while 18% demonstrate setbacks.[2]

This study forms part of ifa's Research Programme "Culture and Foreign Policy", in which experts address relevant issues relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim of involving academics, practitioners, policymakers, and civil society. I would like to thank Rosanna Lewis and Pedro Affonso Ivo Franco for their excellent work and commitment to this research. In addition, I would like to thank my ifa colleagues Sarah Widmaier and Ivana Putri for their work on the conception, coordination and editing of this project.

The next five years of the 2030 Agenda should be used to ensure that national objectives are aligned with international commitments. The international cultural relations sector can be measurably a very effective tool within such a strategy.

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Odila Triebel
ifa – Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen

[1] https://www.un.org/en/high-level-week-2025#UN80 [accessed on 12.09.2025].
[2] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sdg-moment/ [accessed on 12.09.2025].

Abstract

This research focuses on understanding why government-led initiatives that address the direct connection between international cultural relations (ICR) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are largely absent. It highlights the challenges to implement, monitor and report impact and progress of ICR in general, and in the context of sustainable development. It also identifies initiatives that have attempted to do so at local, regional, national and multilateral levels, including policies, measurement frameworks, and implementation methods. The report concludes by outlining the importance of developing actions in this direction, especially in the current global context, and presents potential pathways forward.

Executive Summary

The UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and planet through partnership, for now and the future. Adopted by all United Nations (UN) Member States in 2015, this global framework calls for action through setting ambitious targets and indicators at a national and international level. Cultural diversity and inter-cultural understanding are recognised in the preamble as crucial enablers of sustainable development, and some of the goals directly mention culture, including heritage (see SDG 4 and SDG 11). The cultural sector has been calling for culture to be recognised as the fourth pillar of development alongside economy, society and the environment, and together with some governments, are calling for a stand-alone goal on culture at the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2025 hosted in Barcelona.

However, the international dimension of culture—hereafter referred to as international cultural relations (ICR)—is less prominent. The debate around ICR to fulfil the SDGs is still fresh, as governments and public bodies wrestle with the tension between ICR, soft power, and development. Yet, if the world is ultimately seeking peace, prosperity, the protection of our planet and human rights and dignity for all people, ICR is a key component to fulfil these objectives, particularly because it enables and fosters partnership, mutual trust and understanding, and cooperation.

The report presents a selection of deep dives and country snapshots—not necessarily examples of success or failure, as the practical connection between ICRs and SDGs is scarce. Instead, initiatives are considered as ways that governments at different administrative levels officially approach the subject, and the extent to which these initiatives have been implemented and measured in order to advance this connection. The examples provided will enable readers to grasp the challenges and difficulties faced by public bodies and members of governmental institutions, as well as the opportunities and learnings when aligning the impact and value of ICR with the SDGs. Finally, the 'Tips' section proposes recommendations on how to close the gap between ICR and SDGs through systemic changes, values-based approaches, and cross-disciplinary ways of working. The 'Tricks' section shares practical ways forward, including platforms

and frameworks that could be used to better implement and measure the impact of international cultural relations to fulfil the SDGs.

One of the overarching main recommendations of this research is to reaffirm that the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals still need to be pursued. Not necessarily because the SDGs are measurable, nor because their targets provide a valid impact assessment for ICR, but because their existence is essential for the pursuit of sustainability, equity and justice in society, the economy, and environment by reducing global asymmetries. Furthermore, the research aims to reinforce that taking into account culture—regardless of whether it is understood as something practiced within borders or in the form of cultural relations practiced internationally—is a crucial and urgent part of the solution towards achieving the SDGs. It requires dedicated investment, whether monetary or in the form of policy support, human resources and effective systems, as well as people-to-people connections to create an enabling environment and the conditions for ICR to contribute to the SDGs.

Overall, this research offers support for governments at different administrative levels that wish to design and implement ICR initiatives—whether through programmatic activity, cooperation efforts, or cultural and city networks—by providing both the rationale for and the means of enabling this connection between ICR and SDGs.

1. Introduction

This report serves as a thought piece and provocation on government-led international cultural relations (ICR) within the context of sustainable development. It provides an overview of the relation between the two, explores ways in which governments at various administrative levels have explored this correlation, and considers how they could be better aligned and measured.

At first glance, this research may seem like just another study on the connection between culture and the SDGs. Recent studies in this area have largely focused on a) the role of cultural and creative industries for international cooperation and economic development, b) offering suggestions on how to embed the impact of culture on sustainable development at a local level (e.g. the #Culture2030Goal campaign and UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators), or c) discussing culture's place within and beyond the SDGs (e.g. "The Missing Pillar" and "The Missing Foundation" reports published by British Council).

However, this research specifically focuses on the international dimension of cultural relations in the context of sustainable development, and the roles that governments can play at different administrative levels. This triple angle—ICR, SDGs, and governments—makes this report unique, as is proven in the research by a lack of data and evidence on ICR initiatives specifically led by governments to fulfil the SDGs. Instead, this report primarily focuses on the context of this work, the challenges and barriers to measuring the impact of ICR on the SDGs, and examples where cities, countries and global regions have attempted to make a difference. Based on these findings, the report suggests a series of tips and tricks for governments at all administrative levels to consider, in order to respond to the need for better design, implementation and monitoring of ICR to fulfil the SDGs, and to uphold the values and impact of both ICR and sustainable development.

1.1. Situating Culture within the SDGs

When considering the role of international cultural relations to fulfil the SDGs, an appropriate starting point is the journey to date on the role of culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development. Since the UN Agenda 2030 was launched in 2015, there has been growing recognition of the role of culture to contribute to

achieving the SDGs. In the UN General Assembly Economic and Social Council's "SDG Progress Report" in 2023, the Secretary General demanded:

> *"greater consideration of culture's role in supporting the achievement of the Goals [that] would generate an important boost for implementation of the Goals between now and 2030", considering "culture [as] a global public good and a critical enabler and driver of progress towards the Goals" that "serves as a source of knowledge, values and communication, as a contributor to environmental sustainability and as a generator of economic activity and jobs". (UNGA, 2023, p. 28)*

The UN Pact for the Future, a document born out of the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024, marked a step change in the dedicated support for culture from UN bodies and Ministries of Culture with a dedicated "Action 11: We will protect and promote culture and sport as integral components of sustainable development" (United Nations, 2024, p. 8). There are also references to culture, heritage and education dotted across priority areas of international peace and security, technology innovation and digital cooperation, youth and future generations, as well as social, economic and environmental development.

At the multilateral level, UNESCO has been a significant leading player in connecting cultural policies to development. In addition to its international Conventions, UNESCO has published policy briefs and papers exploring the nexus between culture and sustainable development.[3] After a 24-year hiatus, UNESCO reconvened Ministers of Culture at its "Global Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development" in Mexico in 2022 (also known as MONDIACULT 2022), with a follow-up MONDIACULT conference taking place in Spain in September 2025 calling for a stand-alone goal on culture. UNESCO is also a Knowledge Partner to the G20 Working Group on Culture, established in 2021, which has significant political influence on the discourse on culture in the context of global affairs.

[3] See bibliography of this report for a list of publications published by UNESCO on culture and sustainable development.

In addition to UNESCO, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) has appointed a Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights since 2009, who works on improving visibility and implementation of cultural rights, reporting on thematic issues around cultural rights, including its pertinence to development. There are increasingly more UN declarations, documents, and research projects on the subject and attempts to strengthen implementation at a practical, policy and institutional level.

Despite key advancements, culture is yet to be formally recognised for its contribution to the SDGs. So far, the focus of the international community of cultural actors, institutions, cities, governments and networks working in the cultural sector has been to secure culture's place within the SDGs through advocacy efforts calling for a standalone goal on Culture within the SDGs (see also the #Culture2030Goal campaign[4]), and formally recognising it as a key pillar of development alongside the economic, social and environmental dimensions.

Whilst culture's role is being defined as a global public good and a driver and enabler of change, another focus has been on the localisation of the SDGs and culture's role in the local and national context, rather than the value of international exchange and cooperation towards development as part of ICR. At the UN High-Level Political Forum (UN HLPF) in 2023, UN Habitat noted that culture has "gained traction with enhanced recognition by decision makers, including through greater decentralization and transfer of competences to local authorities in the field of culture" (UN Habitat, 2023). The United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) have been tracking the presence of culture in Voluntary Local Reviews from cities and local governments worldwide, and have created an online database of good practices[5] (Culture 2030 Goal Campaign, 2021).

[4] https://www.culture2030goal.net/our-culture-goal-proposal [accessed on 24.06.2025].

[5] https://obs.agenda21culture.net/en/ [accessed on 08.08.2025].

In certain thematic areas, there has also been some policy progress, such as the inclusion of (cultural) heritage under Loss and Damage in climate policies and in the dedicated UNFCCC paper on non-economic losses[6]. Co-chaired by the Cultural Ministries of Brazil and the United Arab Emirates, the Group of Friends on Culture-based Climate Action was established at COP28 with the ambition of embedding culture within climate policy. There are also tools to measure the role and value of arts and culture for democracy, including the Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy[7] developed by the Council of Europe. Furthermore, a report published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Office for Europe has highlighted that participation in cultural activities has been linked to improved mental health and well-being, which can reduce public health expenditures (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). However, more effort needs to be made in securing the support of relevant stakeholders beyond the cultural sector. Compared to other sectors that substantially invest in lobbying for policies and actions in their (mostly economic) favour, the cultural sector is often guilty of largely speaking in an echo chamber with little progress made beyond the field of culture.

Within the cultural sector, there has been a growing consciousness of different global challenges, with cultural organisations on the ground stepping up their engagement on social and environmental issues, either in their externally-facing activities or in their internal policies and structures. There are increasing sectoral guidelines to tackle the climate emergency through more sustainable practices (e.g., Theatre Green Book[8] and International Council of Museums' Guides for the Sustainability of Museums). Artists are speaking up about social and climate injustices, both publicly and through their work, and exploring the role they can play within communities and as activists, whether directly at the local level or online. There are several schemes to protect artists at risk from conflict or

[6] The paper "Non-Economic Losses: Featuring loss of territory and habitability, ecosystem services and biodiversity, and cultural heritage" was published by the United Nations Climate Change Secretariat in 2024 and is available online:
https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/nels_paper_2024.pdf [accessed on 25.06.2025].

[7] https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/indicators-culture-and-democracy [accessed on 24.06.2025].

[8] https://theatregreenbook.com/ [accessed on 24.06.2025].

oppression, such as the Martin Roth-Initiative[9], Artists at Risk[10], and the Artist Protection Fund of the Institute for International Education[11]. However, there is still a lot of work to be done to socialise the SDGs, for artists and other cultural practitioners to see their work through this development lens and situate their work within the language and political discourse of the UN Agenda 2030.

The above initiatives indicate positive steps to further align cultural activity with sustainable development at a local and global level. This wider context is often overlooked when it comes to Member States' formal reporting on the SDGs to the UN. Such reports could benefit from integrating more examples from civil society and the cultural sector to reveal a comprehensive story of impact. Furthermore, the progress made in the field of culture for sustainable development can provide inspiration and lessons learnt for ICR.

1.2. Understanding International Cultural Relations (ICR) in the Context of Sustainable Development

Whilst there is no single definition of international cultural relations (ICR) and there are many differing terms for this type of work, the researchers of this report understand ICR as a form of collaboration between peoples and cultures to increase trust and understanding, for a more peaceful, equitable world. ICR can be used as an approach to conduct international relations which requires long-term commitment and engagement through relationship-building, creation of opportunities, and knowledge exchange.

When its implementation is funded or led by governments (as is the focus of this report), ICR can be closely related to foreign policy interests. In this case, it is difficult to separate ICR initiatives from political drivers and stances. There has been a significant focus by governments on the added value of ICR for soft power in the race to be the leading nation on the global stage, privileging its contribution

[9] https://www.martin-roth-initiative.de/en [accessed on 24.06.2025].

[10] https://artistsatrisk.org/?lang=en [accessed on 24.06.2025].

[11] https://www.iie.org/programs/artist-protection-fund/about [accessed on 24.06.2025].

to trade, attractiveness, familiarity and influence (see the Global Soft Power Index[12]). In this practice is an underlying desire to influence perceptions and behaviours in a way that can feel orchestrated due to the potential instrumentalisation of culture. These soft power goals—which often aim to serve inward-looking national interests—are in stark opposition to the values of the UN Agenda 2030, which emphasises the cross-cutting nature of development (people, planet, prosperity, and peace), leaving no one behind. For ICR to fulfil the SDGs, it therefore requires a 'whole of society' approach, as well as partnership with civil society and the private sector.

It is important to remember that International Cultural Relations is largely a concept that originates from the West and actors/institutions from developed countries are the major players in the ICR field. In the first monograph on International Cultural Relations, the late cultural relations practitioner and former Assistant Director-General of British Council J. M. Mitchell defines international cultural relations as "an intrinsic part of the way governments and nations relate to one another, and of the way institutions and peoples form an understanding of one another across frontiers" (Mitchell, 1986, p. XIV). The countries examined in JM Mitchell's monograph include "France, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany as long-established practitioners, the United States as an inescapable giant, and Japan as a country whose external cultural role is evolving to match her prosperity and riches" (ibid.). Through maintaining long-term relationships and connections globally, there is a focus on building trust and understanding for sustainable peace and prosperity.

However, cultural relations can be perceived as "an essential third dimension in relations between states: third, because they accompany politics and trade (for some American writers, they come fourth after politics, trade and defence)" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 1). The practice of 'cultural relations' by ex-colonial powers has traditionally been linked to global influence and economic standing, and this association still persists for some, affecting how ICR is defined, implemented and measured. The practice of ICR by certain countries can be seen as a legacy of colonialism, as a way of ultimately maintaining economic and trade ties as well as

[12] https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2024-a-world-in-flux [accessed on 09.08.2025].

a form of ensuring influence following the independence of many countries worldwide.

Whilst some might argue that ICR is a tool for soft power, there is a difference between the two that sometimes gets lost in translation. As stated by cultural practitioners MacDonald and Murray, "the distinctions that previously seemed clear between soft power (the pursuit of influence through attraction in the national interest) and cultural relations (creating the conditions for collaboration between like-minded people and countries in pursuit of the common good) are blurring" (British Council, 2022, p. 4). As such, there is no single definition for either 'ICR' or 'soft power', as governments take different approaches, either centred on 'public diplomacy', 'cultural diplomacy', 'cultural relations', 'strategic communications', or their unique approach to culture within international relations.

It is worth noting that the practice of ICR is often carried out by cultural institutions which implement projects internationally on behalf of governments or which receive public funding to do so. These are well-known as 'national cultural institutes' or 'non-departmental public bodies' that at times function as extensions of their respective governments, considering the public funding and the government steer they receive. ICR often also relies on partnerships with non-state actors, civil society and the private sector. There are a number of cultural institutions, universities, and local cultural actors that focus on international cultural exchange, such as museums, libraries, festivals, summits, and leading creative industries, which could be classified as contributors to international cultural relations. Their work is amplified through the many multilateral organisations and networks already in place. The type of stakeholders that implement ICR is therefore diverse and ever-growing, as 'cultural relations' is a broad area that involves and affects various groups of people. This research offers a light-touch mapping of the ICR ecosystem in relation to sustainable development, including key stakeholders, platforms and networks to reflect the complexity of government-led or public-funded initiatives and entities in the field of ICR (see Appendix).

The scope of ICR can also go beyond arts, heritage, and the cultural and creative industries, to include education systems, youth and civil society engagement, and knowledge exchange. In relation to sustainable development, additional

stakeholders include those working in the specific sectors related to the Goals, such as health and sanitation, climate and environment, economy, infrastructure, defence and security. The intersectional nature of the SDGs should not be underestimated, and any ICR actions that aim to fulfil the SDGs should define the areas of focus and work with a variety of stakeholders as encouraged by SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals.

1.3. The Global Context for ICR and SDGs

When looking into the role of international cultural relations in fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals, it is vital to situate this report in a wider context, where the dynamics of international politics not only affect the relations between countries, but also have real consequences on people. At the time this research was conducted, the world is experiencing polycrises. European elections show a rise in far-right sentiment; conflicts and wars are ravaging Eastern Europe, the Middle East, parts of Africa and Asia; human rights are being violated globally, contributing to the backsliding of progress made towards diversity, equality and inclusion. In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, the tangible effects of emergency spending are being felt in the global economy, as well as changing priorities in global trade and investment, shifting away from (international) development. Technological advances are seen as both an opportunity for humanity and a threat to fundamental rights and freedoms, changing the way people communicate and interact with each other and affecting the global job market. The climate crisis is worsening by the day, highlighting inequalities between countries and people, and exposing a globalised culture and system of extraction and overconsumption, with a general disregard for the environment and shared heritage.

On the one hand, with an ever-changing global landscape on many levels—be it geopolitical, financial, social, environmental, and cultural—it could be argued that there is a risk international cultural relations may not thrive let alone survive in the coming years. On the other hand, in this context, there is a real opportunity for ICR to be a driver and enabling factor for sustainable development through building trust, initiating international and cross-sectoral collaboration, and facilitating different measures that strive towards fulfilment of the Goals. In times

where public discourse is often polarised, more connection, understanding, and multilateralism is needed—ICR can help create the conditions for this. The SDGs can be a framework and moral compass not only for international relations globally, but also a guide to an ICR approach that is collaborative, holistic, and intersectional rooted in the 5 fundamental pillars of the development agenda: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. Considering the current global context, there is a real urgency to centre sustainable development within ICR and build on lessons learnt from the past, in order to effectively work towards sustainable development for future generations.

2. Methodology and Criteria

2.1. Methodology

The overall objective of this research is to better demonstrate the value and contribution of international cultural relations towards achieving the SDGs through the support of governments at various administrative levels. The methodology includes:

- mapping the ecosystem through desk research and interviews,
- analysing selected initiatives and practices from different parts of the world; and
- suggesting recommendations in the form of 'tips and tricks' to better measure the impact and value of ICR to the SDGs for governments at various administrative levels.

In phase one, the researchers collated and analysed data through desk research, consultation with experts, and an analysis of practices. Interviews were carried out with government officials, civil servants, and researchers directly connected to ICR and/or the SDGs in parallel to the desk research to root them in practical experience. This exercise not only helped in the formulation of the report but also served as a source and analytical foundation for deeper insights into the initiatives, reports, and governmental experiences presented in this research. A total of 15 interviews were conducted with academic experts, cultural leaders, civil servants, and staff of multilateral bodies, in total coming from 10 countries.

In phase two, a roundtable was held online with eight experts from academia, multilateral institutions, civil society, and staff of local administrations. Preliminary findings of the research were presented, followed by thought-provoking discussions addressing topics related to the research. Through a collaborative approach, the roundtable participants provided feedback, critical reflections and input to shape the findings and recommendations. Key questions included:

- In what ways can/does International Cultural Relations provide the enabling conditions to respond to the SDGs?
- How can governments work more effectively to design and implement proper action using ICRs towards achieving SDGs?

- What role does the government play at different administrative levels in ICR and sustainable development?
- What examples, including measuring tools, can we learn from to inform the development, implementation and monitoring of ICR towards fulfilling the SDGs?

The final phase of the report collated the insight from the desk research, interviews and roundtable to develop a series of tips and tricks for aligning and measuring international cultural relations and sustainable development. They are primarily aimed at government and public bodies. The report concludes with a summary of the findings. The research was conducted from January to July 2025, in the lead up to UNESCO Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development - MONDIACULT 2025, and presented at a pre-conference event online.

2.2. Research Criteria

A key part of the methodology involved setting clear criteria for the research under which to frame the findings. The following points highlight the main considerations of the researchers to distinguish this piece of research from others, and to clarify key concepts. The research looks to combine the following criteria in its findings in a cumulative way. They are not to be taken as separate criteria, but are complementary and reinforcing, much like the nature of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Whilst this research is part of an ongoing effort to determine the value and role of culture to contribute towards achieving the SDGs, the research focuses on international cultural relations that are initiated and implemented exclusively by governments, using their in-house resources and institutional capacity. Non-governmental/privately funded/independent cultural relations initiatives which happen to take place in a developing country (according to the OECD DAC list of ODA recipients) or that solely address local sustainable development without an international dimension are not considered as part of this study.

See Table 1 for further information on aspects considered to be part of and beyond the research scope.

Table 1: Scope of the Research

What is in scope?
• Exclusively government-led and funded ICR initiatives at different administrative levels (city, region, national, e.g. via ministries, secretaries of culture, international networks and embassies). • Formal measuring / reporting mechanisms towards the SDGs with clear targets and indicators for ICR initiatives. • An exploration of the value of ICR within sustainable development. • Tips and Tricks / recommendations on how governments at different administrative levels can embed ICR initiatives in their response to the SDGs.
What is not in scope?
• Co-financed initiatives implemented via national cultural institutes, foundations and the private sector. • ICR initiatives that align with the SDGs only in name or theme, with no formal monitoring and reporting in place (sometimes referred to as "SDG-washing"). • Cultural activities aimed at localising the SDGs, with no international scope. • Cultural activities in an official development assistance (ODA) setting, with no cultural relations element embedded in the model.

2.2.1. SDGs as a Measuring Tool vs Framework

One important question to consider is whether the SDGs provide an appropriate model for measuring the impact of international cultural relations. The UN itself recognises the challenge in measuring progress towards the SDGs, in particular gathering data at a national level and harmonising it for a broad international system of impact measurement, as highlighted in the UN SDG Special Edition Report in 2023. Key issues impeding better coordination from National Offices of Statistics include "inadequate institutional mechanisms, ineffective communication channels for information sharing, and lack of incentives" (United

Nations, 2023, p. 9). It is therefore not just a struggle for governments and cultural organisations to measure their contribution to sustainable development through cultural or ICR initiatives; it is a challenge across the board.

Instead, when looking at the SDGs through more of a moral and philosophical lens rather than as practical guidelines for monitoring progress, they take on a new meaning as a common framework. The way of measuring impact shifts from quantitative, output-focused changes to a more values-led approach. This vision is also evident in the preamble of the UN Agenda 2030, which states that all nations:

> *"pledge to foster inter-cultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility. We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognise that all cultures and civilisations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development." (United Nations, 2015, p. 10)*

With a strong focus on advocating for the significance of culture within sustainable development, various attempts have also been made to develop frameworks and indicators to measure the impact of culture on sustainable development. Despite advancements in the field of culture, this research shows that there remain limited tools and frameworks for measuring the impact of international cultural relations towards sustainable development, including evidence of efficiency and impact when it comes to implementation. Instead, the report highlights the challenges to monitoring and evaluation, the diverse approaches taken, and 'deep dive' examples from governments at different administrative levels that align international cultural relations to the SDGs.

2.2.2. Defining 'Government-Led' and 'Administrative Levels' within ICR and SDGs

As demonstrated above, the ICR ecosystem is complex and operates at different levels, from government-led initiatives to people-to-people exchange. It is supported by a variety of funding sources, primarily dominated by public funding. Analysing the role governments play is crucial to understanding the power dynamics, priorities, and values behind the decisions taken around ICR, and how it can contribute to sustainable development. The research considers the need for critical engagement with how national interests influence the global cultural ecosystem, and whose voices are amplified or marginalised through these institutional frameworks.

For the purposes of this research, the researchers focused exclusively on examples of ICR initiatives and/or activities developed, funded, and implemented directly by governments at different administrative levels, that include a long-term commitment to sustainable development through policies and measurement frameworks. This angle provides an innovative perspective to the existing body of research, which has primarily focused on situating culture within sustainable development and has predominantly been led by UNESCO and the cultural sector. It includes newer and up-to-date insights, taking inspiration from previous research without covering the same ground.

The research therefore aims to better understand the role that governments play. It looks into the ways in which they themselves have the capacity to advance the connection between ICR and SDGs directly, as well as the support they can provide to non-governmental actors, civil society and the cultural sector through their actions. By focusing on governments at different administrative levels, the research provides key concerns and direct recommendations to these stakeholders. The research has the potential to provide a turning point for governments at different administrative levels in their approach to ICR, and relieve the burden of measuring against the SDGs that the cultural sector and cultural institutes face when it comes to implementing ICR in development contexts.

3. Challenges in Connecting ICR with the SDGs

For international cultural relations (ICR) to be recognised as a vital part of fulfilling the SDGs, there is a need to better understand the connection between the two, and the role of governments at all administrative levels. Without a clear sense of the value of ICR to effect change and contribute to sustainable development, there is a lack of imperative to integrate ICR approaches into sustainable development plans. This report highlights the urgency to recognise ICR as a valuable approach to sustainable development at all administrative levels, particularly in the upcoming negotiations around the post-2030 Agenda. Several factors prevent ICR from being more widely used as an approach to fulfil the SDGs, as outlined below.

3.1. Lack of Investment and Financing for Culture and ICR

One of the key challenges for the implementation of ICR is a general lack of investment and financing mechanisms. Governments play a pivotal role in financing culture and international cultural relations, where public funding is often the sole or primary source of support for the cultural sector and civil society, even more so through development aid outside the Global North. In these contexts, state institutions not only shape the domestic cultural landscape but also determine the extent and nature of cultural activities beyond national borders. The limited availability of private and/or philanthropic funding means that governments often act as gatekeepers and facilitators of international cultural engagement, selecting, for instance, which artists, narratives, and traditions are promoted abroad or reflected back to society at home.

With competing prioritisation of global challenges, culture is often deprioritised in government budgets, especially when compared to the amount of funding earmarked for sectors like infrastructure, defence, or health. This disconnect highlights a persistent undervaluation of culture within political decision-making, underlining the need for stronger advocacy and policy integration that reflect the full spectrum of culture's contributions to national and international development. At a national level, there is a global trend towards de-investment in

the arts and culture, due to concurrent national priorities, austerity measures, and general lack of prioritisation. This context directly affects the implementation of ICR, whether through its cultural institutions or the work of artists, creatives, and cultural practitioners.

> *"In Bulgaria, Canada, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, Korea, Sweden, and in other countries, cultural budgets are beginning to erode, also affecting institutions that support international cultural relations. [...] The combination of reduced funding and rising costs is creating an increasingly dire situation for cultural organisations and art workers." (Polivtseva, 2025, p. 6)*

In addition, there have been increasing cuts to international development cooperation in favour of defence and security spending in recent years, which further exacerbate the issue around the implementation of ICR activities that strive towards fulfilling the SDGs. Governments of countries in the Global North—many of which are major players in development cooperation and in ICR—are increasingly scrutinising how their overseas efforts bring value back to their home countries and people instead of focusing on the primary benefit to beneficiaries overseas, which can compromise relations of trust and mutuality on both sides. In 2025, Germany markedly shifted budgetary priorities, significantly increasing defence spending whilst reducing international cooperation. Germany's defence budget is set to rise to over 60 billion euros, up from 52 billion euros in 2024, with plans to maintain this elevated level for at least four years (Brady and Francis, 2025). However, the federal budget for culture increases for 2025, with 2.33 billion euros allocated for the Federal Government's cultural and media policy. Compared to the previous year, this represents an increase of just under 2 percent[13].

Furthermore, development cooperation is shifting away from the OECD's definition of "primary benefit to developing countries" towards national interests. For instance, at the start of 2025, the Netherlands issued a policy letter outlining their approach to international development, describing the policy as "serving Dutch interests (doing what's good for the Netherlands), working on core themes

[13] https://www.bundestag.de/presse/hib/kurzmeldungen-1105610 [accessed on 11.09.2025].

(doing what the Netherlands does best), the Netherlands' ongoing humanitarian aid work (doing what is needed)" (Government of the Netherlands, 2025, p. 2). The approach places more emphasis on sectors that the Dutch government perceives as competitively advantageous in development cooperation, including trade and the economy, security and stability, and migration. In parallel, they plan to phase out projects aimed at gender equality, vocational and higher education, sports and culture, as well as scale down efforts on climate, civil society and multilateral cooperation.[14] The lack of funding for the cultural sector—including ICR—and development, exacerbated by a renewed national introspection, represents a significant step backwards and a loss of resources for sustainable development and ICR.

On a more positive note, members of the Finance in Common network, a global network uniting several Public Development Banks (PBDs) around the world, have come together to form a working group on Culture. At the 4th biannual Finance in Common Summit (FiCS) in Cartagena in 2023, seven Public Development Banks (PDB) launched the "Coalition for Sustainable Development through Culture and Arts". As a working group, the newly formed Coalition intends to improve and promote a common knowledge of the potential of culture and the arts in relation to development issues. It also aims at leveraging the power of arts and culture to achieve the SDGs through concrete activities implemented as part of development cooperation. Research is being conducted into how development banks are integrating culture in their strategies and initiatives, and the first session on culture took place at the 5th FiCS in Cape Town in February 2025. UNESCO and the British Council are knowledge partners of the FiCS working group.

3.2. Lack of Government Staff Capacity

In accordance with responses shared by interviewees of this research project, the delivery of ICR programmes aligned with the SDGs has been increasingly hindered by a persistent and worsening lack of government staff capacity, an issue

[14] https://www.government.nl/documents/parliamentary-documents/2025/02/21/policy-letter-on-international-development [accessed on 18.08.2025].

that predates recent funding cuts but has been exacerbated by them. In many policy institutions, especially at municipal and national levels, the number of civil servants dedicated specifically to culture—and even fewer to ICR roles and bodies—has remained critically low. As governments restructure budgets and reduce cultural investment, administrative departments are being downsized or merged, leading to significant understaffing in areas related to culture and international cooperation.

At the European level, in most cases, cultural counsellors or cultural attachés of the diplomatic or consular missions are assigned at national level, while the Council Conclusions of 8 April 2019 called for EU Delegations (EUD) to designate cultural focal points. At EUD level, Culture often sits under the communications and visibility area instead of being part of the Political Section or the Cooperation Section, where the priorities would be more aligned with sustainable development (such as environment and sustainable urban development, human rights, strengthening of civil society, peacebuilding and migration tackling, and digital innovation and literacy). Internationally, ICR can be perceived more as a strategic communications tool for cultural diplomacy and soft power, rather than for sustainable development purposes.

In its report on UNESCO Sites for Sustainable Development, the Canadian National Commission and United Kingdom (UK) National Commission to UNESCO found that "site managers often lack the financial and human resources they need to work effectively with their stakeholders and communities to address these threats and ensure they fulfil their role in sustainable development" (Canadian and UK National Commissions to UNESCO, 2022, p. 9). In order for culture and ICR to be better embedded into sustainable development initiatives, adequate human and financial resources need to be assigned, and training provision and skills development should be provided to enable access to bridge the gap between community engagement and decision-making.

To address the knowledge and capacity gap on cultural relations of EU staff in the institutions and delegations, in 2021, the EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) issued Joint Guidelines for EU Institutions and EUNIC members on

"effective working relationships in order to further enhance their cooperation and ensure synergies and complementarity in the delivery of cultural relations strategies and projects" (EUNIC, 2021, p. 5).

The key principles it advocates for in its strategy are helpful to develop a common strategy and approach to ICR, namely:
- mutual listening and learning;
- co-creation and inclusive collaboration;
- joint capacity building; and
- local ownership.

3.3. A People-Centred Approach to ICR

ICR initiatives often depend on engagement and collaboration with civil society and non-state actors, in particular for implementation, monitoring and reporting. With activities delivered at least one step removed from government, it can be challenging for public bodies to be aware of the impact and value of the work they are funding on the ground. On the flipside, many civil society organisations and NGOs can feel removed from decision-making at a policy and funding level. Their work can be misrepresented and instrumentalised for soft power and cultural diplomacy purposes, and the quality of the stories and relationships, including the trust built, can be lost.

Furthermore, there is a growing risk to artists and civil society actors around the world due to the rise of authoritarianism, a crackdown on freedom of expression, and the threat to human rights and democratic processes. In its latest annual report on "The State of Artistic Freedom", Freemuse notes that "artists and arts institutions, even those in democratic countries, speak even more of needing to self-censor in order to avoid negative repercussions. In spite of these circumstances, the spirit of resistance among artists is remarkable. Even under the harshest of regimes, in 2024 they continued to create, sometimes in secret, sometimes in public" (Freemuse, 2025, p. 5). This has resulted in a marked increase in the connection between arts and activism, which in turn creates tension between civil society and governing bodies, especially when it comes to ICR initiatives funded

by governments that seek to remain apolitical. It is all the more challenging to build trust and understanding when the international context is a source of political contention and certain morals, beliefs and values are at play.

Several initiatives have aimed to address the need to include the voices of civil society in policymaking through platforms, networks and consultations. At the UN level, 20 civil society-supported ImPACT Coalitions[15] were launched at the 2024 UN Civil Society Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, including one on Arts, Culture, and Faith-based Solutions. As an arts and culture network, they organised the artist-led "Arts for the Future Festival" at the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024. This specific ImPACT Coalition is described as:

> *"an intergenerational alliance advocating for the integration of art and cultural expression into UN processes while promoting their representation and encouragement. Committed to amplifying diverse voices, including faith-based, indigenous, ethnic, linguistic, and artistic communities, enriching global dialogue with their unique cultural perspectives and traditions."*[16]

In parallel to the European Union's Open Method of Coordination with Member States[17], the Voices of Culture initiative provides a space for civil society dialogue. In 2022, it held a brainstorming session on International Cultural Relations which recognised a disconnect from global policies and priorities. It recommends to:

> *"embrace the UN's SDGs to create a sustainable and inclusive approach to future ICR activities [and] co-create a data-driven*

[15] According to the UN, "The Impact Coalitions (ICs) bring together stakeholders working on various issues, aligned with human rights-based approaches and related to the Summit of the Future to create networks that support Member States who wish to champion specific reforms and proposals toward the Summit of the Future and crucially, begin the implementation process beyond." Directly quoted from: https://www.un.org/en/2024uncsc/impact-coalitions-faq [accessed on 18.08.2025].
[16] https://www.un.org/en/2024uncsc/2024-uncsc-impact-coalitions-programme [accessed on 18.08.2025].
[17] More information about the EU Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is available at: https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/cultural-policy-cooperation-at-the-eu-level/cooperation-with-the-eu-countries [accessed on 18.08.2025].

roadmap to innovation in ICR where ICR interventions are not seen as the end of the process but as a means and catalyst to address the SDGs, global human rights and injustices, intersectional decoloniality, etc." (Goethe-Institut, 2022, pp. 5 & 16).

It further calls for a "results-based approach (including climate related SDG indicators for ICR) [that] could solve the challenges of project-oriented planning in favour of more sustainable action and outcomes", and also recommends to "develop regional or local green solutions with progress measured using indicators linked to the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa's 2063 Agenda, and the EU's five development priorities" (Goethe-Institut, 2022, p. 16).

3.4. Lack of Frameworks to Measure the Impact of ICR on the SDGs

In addition to the overall barriers to measuring progress towards the SDGs, there is an ongoing challenge of assessing the impact and value of culture and international cultural relations towards the SDGs. This requires a narrative shift in international cultural relations, going beyond its value to build trust and understanding between people and cultures, towards its positive contribution to the five fundamental pillars of sustainable development (people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships). Providing evidence of the impact of ICR can amplify stories of cultural diversity, highlight the approaches that create the conditions for sustainable development, and enable lessons learnt from practices and experiences to provide inspiration and insight. It would not only serve to secure funding or make a stronger case to policymakers of the value of ICR, but it would be valuable to the cultural sector, to those who benefit from ICR initiatives, and to wider stakeholders to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration.

3.4.1. Measuring the Value of Culture for/in/as Development and Challenges in Defining Indicators for ICR

There is a growing demand from policymakers for evidence that demonstrates the value and impact of culture towards sustainable development in order to justify public spending and budget allocations. However, there is a lack of consensus on the appropriate tools and measurement frameworks to use, including indicators. It remains a challenge to consolidate findings with fragmented ways of defining and measuring ICR, let alone its contribution to sustainable development.

Within ICR, many cultural institutions are asked to report on quantitative figures, such as reach, number of initiatives, economic value for money/return on investment, mobility, tourism, education and training opportunities. With its heavy focus on economic value, these types of indicators omit the societal and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

The cultural sector has looked into various ways of measuring its value to society, the economy, and to tackle the climate emergency. The Practitioners' Network working group on culture and development—at the time co-led by Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and the British Council—commissioned research into various internationally-recognised and national frameworks referred to or used by European development agencies. The report "Measuring Culture's Impact on Sustainable Development" analysed measurement tools and frameworks, opting to define cross-cutting advocacy and learning indicators rather than impact and results-focused measurements (see Joffe et al., 2024).

Global Affairs Canada (the Canadian governmental department for diplomatic relations) has developed performance measurement indicators for the Mission Cultural Fund (MCF), intended for its diplomatic missions. These indicators have been used to track and measure success for all MCF initiatives, including those involving other federal organisations as partners and participants in the initiatives.

These indicators include the number of target audiences reached, number of audiences supporting Canada's position, number of follow-ups (meaning further engagement, partnerships and/or contracts made as a result of the initiative), as well as in measuring the percentage of initiatives that met intended targets.

As ICR is perceived as an intangible sector, it is arguably more challenging—if not impossible—to define quantitative indicators to measure its value and impact. Instead, qualitative indicators are better suited, focusing on creating the conditions for sustainable development through ICR, in line with global rights-based values such as ensuring freedom of expression and appreciation for cultural diversity; encouraging co-creation and local ownership; raising awareness and developing transferable skills; and supporting people-to-people engagement and action. This qualitative method requires a long-term, locally-led approach, as it requires deep understanding of local contexts.

National cultural institutes, such as the British Council, have also recently completed research into the value of a 'cultural relations approach' to development. It proposes approach-based indicators based on the concepts of Cultural Relations 'Capital' (long term understanding, trust, credibility, and relationships) and Cultural Relations 'Practice' (the activities, engagement models, behaviours, and values applied in delivering projects and programmes).

Box 1: British Council's Assets and Elements of Cultural Relations

Source: British Council & Culligan, 2024, p. 7.

Cultural Relations Capital for Development [Assets]

- Longevity [length of time] in country
- Track-record
- Brand trusted by key audiences
- Subject matter expertise
- Understanding of local context
- Extensive local networks
- Access to key policymakers
- Multinational experience
- Access to UK/international expertise

Cultural Relations Practice for Development [Elements]

- Co-creation of solutions (Mutuality)
- Community ownership
- Brokering of relevant partnerships (Local and international)
- Sharing and exchange
- Convening
- Embracing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)
- Embracing marginalised communities and groups
- Adhering to rigorous protocols (e.g. safeguarding)
- Being evidence-driven
- Being values-driven

3.4.2. Culture within Formal Reporting Frameworks for SDGs

Beyond the preamble of the UN Agenda 2030, the only explicit mention of 'culture' in the SDGs is under SDG 4 (Quality Education) for awareness-raising purposes on sustainable development and cultural diversity, and under SDG 11 (on Sustainable Cities and Communities) to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. The SDG indicators developed later by the UN Statistics Division, are primarily quantitative and economic in nature rather than qualitative and impact-based, measuring for example the "total per capita expenditure on the preservation, protection and conservation of all cultural and natural heritage, by source of funding (public, private), type of heritage (cultural, natural) and level of government (national, regional, and local/municipal)" (United Nations Statistics Division, 2017, p. 12). Culture, including cultural heritage, is thus reduced to its educational and economic value, and its impact for people and the planet is not as visible or recognised.

The "Missing Foundation: Culture within and beyond the UN SDGs" report by the British Council (2023) highlights a significant gap in the integration of culture within the SDGs framework, primarily due to the absence of robust measurement

tools. This lack of standardised metrics hampers the ability to assess and communicate culture's contribution to sustainable development effectively. The report also questions whether the SDGs are the right framework to measure the value and impact of culture within development, and explores alternative ways of viewing this work for a more values-based and long-term vision of positive change.

Without a specific goal on Culture, with appropriate targets and indicators, the cultural sector's contribution and efforts towards sustainable development are not being directly captured. Through public consultation, the #Culture2030Goal campaign is defining what a Culture goal could look like within the SDGs, to be presented at MONDIACULT 2025 with a view to reaching a shared understanding and consensus at ministerial level. However, the proposed Culture goal currently lacks an international cultural relations dimension, focusing on local and national efforts towards sustainable development.

In addition to the lack of measurement frameworks, there remains a challenge for countries to incorporate impact learning and results into formal monitoring and reporting processes for the SDGs. Through the UN Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)—which monitors the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—Member States consolidate information across Ministries on their contribution to the targets and indicators of the SDGs and formally report to the UN at the High-Level Political Forum. The inclusion of culture's contribution to the SDGs in VNRs is limited, with some cities including a cultural dimension in their Voluntary Local Reviews (informal contributions by cities) as mapped by the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). Thus far, ICR does not feature prominently as an element that contributes to local or national sustainable development.

Since developing its Culture|2030 indicators[18] to map progress towards the SDGs, UNESCO has been piloting their application in several countries and cities (see image below), in partnership with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and AECID. It includes 22 indicators across four thematic dimensions to link culture with the SDGs, with the aim to strengthen

[18] https://whc.unesco.org/en/culture2030indicators/implementation/ [accessed on 18.08.2025].

data collection, inform national and local policies and actions, understand trends and build knowledge to contribute to advocacy in the participating countries and beyond.

Figure 1. Pilot Cities and Countries for UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators.

Source: UNESCO Culture2030 Indicators Data Bank[19] | Highcharts.com © UNESCO.

At the time of writing this report, UNESCO is due to release its new 2025 UNESCO Framework for Culture Statistics (FCS), recognising the growing importance of data and indicators, and the urgent need to rethink cultural data in response to the evolving demands of measurement and the rapidly changing statistical landscape. It was presented at the Abu Dhabi Culture Summit in a dedicated session on "Rethinking Cultural Measurement" in April 2025.[20]

3.5. The Influence of AI and Technology

An additional challenge is that technology is already reshaping the landscape of international cultural relations (ICR) in the ways that we communicate, interact with one another, and understand each other. This transformation demands

[19] https://whc.unesco.org/en/indicators2030/ [accessed on 07.09.2025].
[20] https://www.culturesummitabudhabi.com/en/programme/rethinking-cultural-measurement-workshop [accessed on 18.08.2025].

deeper reflection, particularly on the role of governments in supporting this evolving cultural ecosystem whilst safeguarding ethical standards, intellectual property and artists' rights, and cultural plurality, as well as duty of care for all. Yet, regulatory frameworks often lag behind technological innovation, leaving policymaking fragmented or reactive. UNESCO has chosen digital technologies in the cultural sector as a thematic focus for its MONDIACULT 2025 Conference, as well as researched the subject of "AI, Ethics and Cultural Diversity" (UNESCO, 2022).

Digital platforms and AI tools have undeniably made cultural production more accessible and inclusive, lowering entry barriers and enabling diverse voices to contribute to global cultural exchange (Yong Jin, 2021). They can also serve to preserve cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, through digital mapping and archiving, and to reimagine creative technical solutions to safeguard rich histories. However, this apparent democratisation and creative innovation come with contradictions. Whilst more people can now create and share cultural content facilitating international cultural relations, the algorithms that govern visibility often reinforce dominant cultural norms, stereotypes, and commercial preferences, rather than fostering genuine diversity and understanding (McKenna et al., 2025). As AI's role in cultural production grows, states will need to take a more proactive stance, not just in regulating technology, but in ensuring it serves inclusive, pluralistic, and ethically responsible international cultural relations.

4. Deep Dives

To provide an in-depth exploration of different approaches taken to address the nexus between culture, international cultural relations and sustainable development, this section presents in-depth cases at a local, regional, national and multilateral level. These deep dives aim to present ways in which governments at different administrative levels can implement and adapt international cultural relations with the aim of contributing to sustainable development.

Each deep dive looks into the approaches taken in the particular context, and how they align with international cultural relations, fulfilment of the SDGs, as well as the measurement tools and frameworks utilised to assess this. They have been selected based on the alignment of local and national policies and measurement tools with cultural and ICR practice. These deep dives have informed the research as well as the 'tips and tricks' for governments (see Chapter 5 of this report), providing concrete examples from different geographies and contexts globally.

4.1. National Level: Australia – TAKSO[21]

What is it?

Developed by the Cultural Development Network, TAKSO is a public sector funded initiative that provides an accessible digital platform for planning and reporting frameworks, used by cities, local and national authorities, and designed to bridge the gap between policy and practice. It is the first to name cultural outcomes alongside public policy domains of economy, society, environment and governance. Inspired by the research piece "Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainability" (Hawkes, 2001), the Cultural Development Network was established in 2003 to research and develop frameworks to answer the question, "what is culture in a policy setting?". Published research and conferences led to a prototype digital platform in 2015, that is today the "TAKSO Outcomes Planning Platform". TAKSO has been developed over many years in collaboration with artists, cultural producers, regional and urban councils, as well as national and regional arts and cultural agencies.

[21] See: https://www.takso-outcomes.com/.

Initially funded by the Australia Council for the Arts (now Creative Australia) and developed in partnership with RMIT University, it has received further funding from the Office for the Arts, Commonwealth Government, Australia Council, and the Local Governments across Australia. It works in partnership with several universities to develop the digital platform and to consolidate and analyse the data. Cultural Development Network believes that the value of culture comes from engaging with culture through cultural activities as a means. The experience is personal and therefore is captured through individual self-assessment. When aggregated, it can tell a wider story of change from a community, society or population level.

> *"Culture is a manifestation of our values—if you want policy traction you need to interact with culture." (John Smithies, TAKSO Founder and Director)*

How does it work?

TAKSO is the first platform to include cultural outcomes for reporting and aggregating data in one place according to a shared set of outcomes. It provides an open and consistent framework for users in the planning phase and to measure impact throughout their activities. Whilst funders and public authorities set the targets and end points, the digital platform offers measures according to what is achievable and measurable to evidence the outcomes. It is then up to the organisation or initiative to establish what and how to achieve these outcomes, using TAKSO as a planning and reporting tool that can be used to inform development and engagement with communities.

There are several ways to report on the impact of activities based on the social, economic, environmental, cultural or governance indicators. These are geared towards individual responses from participants, either in the form of self-reporting or through interviews, focus groups or surveys. Participating organisations mainly use the information available on the system in real time for funders and public authorities to monitor the progress made and impact achieved over time. This information can be used in reporting at an individual project level or aggregated by location, type of activity, funding body, or outcome. All of this information is

stored in TAKSO and informs the development of the outcomes for planning and monitoring purposes.

TAKSO currently houses data from over 50 organisations and 80 producers, including around 1,500 activities (750 completed) and 800 evaluation plans. The framework has been used primarily in Australia by local governments and cultural organisations including national galleries, as well as 8 capital cities, to plan and assess the impact of their policies and initiatives. TAKSO has also been piloted with Aboriginal Languages through the "Closing the Gap" initiative of the Commonwealth with Indigenous communities.

Originally designed for the arts and cultural sector globally, TAKSO has the ambition to provide the same service in other domains of public policy. It is constantly evolving and being refined based on new inputs, new clients, and more theory and research and consultation with governance policy experts.

Challenges related to International Cultural Relations to fulfil the SDGs

Although the outcomes cover the main pillars of development, TAKSO is not directly responding to the SDGs goals, targets and indicators. However, according to the Cultural Development Network, TAKSO would be able to map the framework against the SDGs and their targets, and there is a desire by cities and councils in Australia to align TAKSO with the SDGs.

TAKSO is currently managed by an independent organisation based in Australia that depends on agreements with public bodies and cultural organisations or initiatives to survive. The platform is constantly learning and evolving, the framework provides a fixed model that can be scaled and replicated, but it would need to be tailored to the contexts and institutions it serves. Up until now, TAKSO has primarily focused on locally rooted initiatives and actors, rather than on international engagement. Following international outreach, the team are increasingly working with other organisations outside of Australia and currently investigating the implementation of a multilingual TAKSO with European partners.

The framework relies heavily on self-reporting of activity producers and their engagement with participants, with varying degrees of data validity, depending on the way data is captured and recorded. Whilst the platform provides flexibility for planning and reporting, the timeliness, consistency and completeness of information may vary and is in the hands of those who use it. The fixed underlying framework ensures that there is a minimum level of consistent narrative data recorded and aggregated as activities are completed regardless of type or scale.

Opportunities for International Cultural Relations (ICR)

TAKSO's measurable outcomes are relevant to this research, as they assess a variety of public policy areas aligned with the SDGs. The 'cultural outcomes' can help demonstrate the value of culture to sustainable development such as economic growth (SDG 8), quality education (SDG 4), and sustainable cities and communities in relation to heritage (SDG 11). In 2020, a peer-reviewed academic article makes the case for the cultural engagement value of these outcome measures (see Dunphy et al., 2020). Under 'governance outcomes', there are measures related to trust, civic pride, increased networks and resources, which are aligned with ICR values and ways of working.

Box 2: Cultural Outcomes and Governance Outcomes of the TAKSO Digital Platform
Source: Cultural Development Network

TAKSO Cultural Outcomes:
- Creativity stimulated
- Aesthetic enrichment experienced
- Knowledge, ideas and insight gained
- appreciation for the diversity of cultural expression appreciated
- Sense of belonging to a shared cultural heritage deepened

TAKSO Governance Outcomes:
- Access to beneficial networks and other resources increased
- Agency and voice enabled
- Sense of civic pride enhanced
- Civic trust inspired

As an online platform, TAKSO is accessible, digital, and consistent. It can be used by many public bodies and the cultural sector, bringing them on the same page with the intended outcomes they look to achieve. The system is transparent with a shared set of outcomes that are agreed to by public authorities and funders, and there is flexibility in the means to achieve these measures. It also provides a model that is qualitative and long term, with progress measured and monitored in real time rather than retrospective collection of data, building confidence in its accuracy and efficiency. Its accessibility makes it transparent and builds agency with its users, who can analyse the data recorded for their own development and impact.

TAKSO could be a model to measure international cultural relations from one country internationally, and/or across multiple cultural relations institutes. British Council—the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and education—has worked with the Cultural Development Network to develop cultural relations outcomes and indicators for their work across 'Arts and Culture', spanning support to creative professionals, internationalisation, festivals and seasons of culture, creative economy and culture as a response to global challenges. Whilst TAKSO itself will not be used as a platform at this stage, there have been efforts to apply this outcomes-led way of thinking to measure the value and impact of international cultural relations.

With the rise in Artificial Intelligence and the evolution of technologies, TAKSO is working with universities to develop AI tools and large language models for future machine reading of data. This will speed up the process of analysing the information and will provide more causal links between activities and outcomes.

4.2. Wales – Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the 10-Year-Strategy of the Arts Council of Wales and Wales Arts International

What is it?

The Well-being of Future Generations Act[22] (also known as the Future Generations Act) is the first Act of its kind, making Wales the first country in the world to legislate for the interests of future generations. 2025 marks the 10-year anniversary since it was approved by royal assent in April 2015, just before the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals were in place. The Act formed part of the domestic approach to embed national commitments aligned to the UN Agenda 2030 and to ensure all Welsh Ministries and public bodies take account of global goals in law, including cultural bodies such as the Arts Council of Wales, Sports Council of Wales, National Museum of Wales, and National Library of Wales.

The Future Generations Act works towards seven goals across several public sectors aligned with the UN SDGs, with "A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language" as one of them on equal footing with the others (see Figure 2).

> *"The Well-being of Future Generations Act was inspired by Indigenous systems which value passing on knowledge, language, culture and tradition and their connection to land to future generations." (Wales Arts International, 2025, p. 7)*

In line with the Future Generations Act, Arts Council Wales and Wales Arts International (WAI) have recently published their joint "International Strategy Framework 2024-2034: The Arts and Well-being in Wales and the World" (Wales Arts International, 2025). It aims to:

[22] https://www.gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-act-essentials-html [accessed on 26.6.2025)

1. Create international opportunities for artists living in Wales to sustain and enrich their practice in a way that is fair to people and to the planet.
2. Support arts and culture within Wales' international and cultural relations in a way that is fair to people and to the planet.
3. Welcome and respect international cultures, languages and influences into Wales (including diaspora communities and Indigenous cultures) and decolonising artistic practice.

Figure 2. Well-being Goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Source: "Wales and the Sustainable Development Goals – Supplementary Report to the UK Voluntary National Review of Progress towards the SDGs, 2019", Welsh Government and the Office of the Commissioner for Future Generations[23]

[23] https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/supplementary-report-to-the-uk-review-of-progress-towards-the-sustainable-development-goals-2030_0.pdf [accessed on 08.09.2025)

How does it work?

The Future Generations Act provides a legally binding common purpose for national government, local government, local health boards and other specified public bodies. Public bodies must operate in a cross-cutting way across the seven goals, and must collaborate with each other to improve the well-being of Wales. Fifty national wellbeing indicators[24] have been defined, including cultural ones aligned to 14 SDGs. The commitment and progress of public bodies is tracked via an online reporting tool (Power BI[25]) that can be accessed to measure progress.

The Office of the Commissioner is an independent organisation, financed by the Welsh government with around 20 staff members. The Commissioner is appointed by cross political party representation, following an open recruitment process and public hearings. Wales is also part of an international network on future generations[26] and a coordinating member of the UN ImPACT Commission on Future Generations[27] set up in 2024, that connects civil society, UN Member States and the UN bodies.

The Welsh Government has appointed a Minister for International Relations and the Welsh Language, a combined role that links local and global engagement. As part of its 10-year International Strategy, WAI has developed an impact framework and theory of change to meet the seven Wellbeing Goals. It has created a set of outcomes and indicators, that are iterative and will be trialled and tested throughout the Strategy.

[24] https://www.gov.wales/national-indicators-mapping-well-being-and-un-sustainable-development-goals-interactive-tool [accessed on 26.06.2025].

[25] The specific Power BI tool to measure progress of the Well-being Act is available at: https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiZTczOGNjNTAtNGFjYS00ZDgyLTlkNTItMzdkZjI4ZTUxOWY3IiwidCI6ImEyY2MzNmM1LTkyODAtNGFlNy04ODg3LWQwNmRhYjg5MjE2YiJ9 [accessed on 26.06.2025].

[26] https://ourfuturegenerations.com/ [accessed on 26.06.2025].

[27] https://c4unwn.org/impact-coalitions/impact-coalition-for-future-generations/ [accessed on 26.06.2025].

Challenges related to International Cultural Relations to fulfil the SDGs

The Future Generations Act is designed to provide legislation for local development, rather than a tool for international cultural relations. Although in line with the SDGs, the goals have been adapted to the local context, and the correlation is more implicit than explicit. The Power BI tracker focuses on national indicators, which makes it more challenging to report directly against the SDGs. In terms of relevance to international cultural relations, there are limited indicators connected to international engagement, as the primary focus is on aligning local public policies in a holistic way.

Since the Office for the Commissioner is an independent entity, it can only play an advisory and monitoring function rather than enforce or veto any policies. Furthermore, since Wales is a devolved nation of the United Kingdom, the reporting mechanisms on the SDGs are led by the UK Government as the UN Member State. Wales is therefore consulted as part of the process and featured as an example in the 2019 UK Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) but remains removed from the formal reporting. It provided its own Wales supplementary report[28] to the UK VNR in 2019.

Despite culture being a core goal of the Future Generations Act, there is still a lack of investment in the cultural sector after suffering a decade of spending cuts to the nation's arts, culture, heritage and sports sectors. According to a recent study by the Senedd's Culture and Sport Committee, Wales has the second-lowest spending per head on culture out of all European nations (Welsh Parliament, 2025). This has led to a cultural crisis locally, with planned closures of leading institutions such as Cardiff University's prestigious School of Music, the disbanding of the National Theatre Wales, and Welsh National Opera reducing its programme and reach for 2024–2025. This poses a threat to the cultural sector as a whole, and a challenge to its cultural expression at home and abroad.

[28] The "Wales and the Sustainable Development Goals 2019 Supplementary Report to the UK and Northern Island Voluntary National Review of Progress towards the SDGs 2030" is available at: https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Wales-_-SDGs-_-VNR-_-Supplementary-Report-for-Wales-_-Version-10.1-Final-w-cover-ENG.pdf [accessed on 26.06.2025].

Furthermore, the cultural sector is often called on to demonstrate its alignment with government initiatives and its impact on multiple goals. This creates a burden on the cultural sector to justify the multiplying effect of its work in ways that other sectors do not need to prove as much.

Opportunities for International Cultural Relations

> *"Culture is not just a 'nice to have'. The legislation establishes national commitments on culture and [Wales] encourages every country in the world to place culture at its heart." (Jacob Dafydd Ellis, Office of the Future Generations Commissioner)*

According to the commonly used UN definition from the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future", sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987, p. 41), recognising the strong connection between sustainable development and the well-being today and for generations to come. This is also in line with the UN's 1997 Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations towards Future Generations, which has been further acknowledged in the UN Pact for the Future[29] (2024), The UN Declaration on Future Generations[30] (2024) for Member States, and the Common Principles on Future Generations[31] (2023) for UN agencies and bodies.

The Future Generations Act serves as a model for other countries to embed culture into public policies and assess its impact against the SDGs. With its broad policy scope that gives the same weight to culture as economic, social and environmental commitments, it provides legal grounds for other Acts. As a legislative framework, the text is protected from any shifts in policy and serves as a form of accountability to governments to value culture-based approaches in other public policy areas.

[29] https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf [accessed on 19.08.2025].
[30] https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/declaration-on-future-generations [accessed on 19.08.2025].
[31] https://unsceb.org/united-nations-system-common-principles-future-generations [accessed on 19.08.2025].

This has led to a partnership between the Welsh National Health Service (NHS) Confederation and the Arts Council of Wales that aims to improve lives and reduce pressure on health and care services through arts and health initiatives. This collaboration has received international recognition as "one of the most concrete commitments we found, both in terms of the intersectoral approach and the specific investment and action" (Arts Council of Wales, 2023), and was instrumental during COVID-19 pandemic to support mental health and wellbeing of staff and patients.

> *"We will make it our mission to reinforce the positive impact of cultural well-being. As a result, public bodies are making the urgent changes needed to promote culture and creativity, enhance the fabric of communities and promote multi-culturalism and the Welsh language." (Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015)*

In the same vein, the cultural sector has had to consider its role in responding to societal, economic and environmental challenges. Several initiatives have been implemented including a recent "Plan for Climate Justice and the Arts"[32]. Wales has committed to human rights and promoting peace through its Nation of Sanctuary scheme to recognise the contributions of diverse diaspora communities as well as to celebrate the links between Wales and the world and their contribution to Wales' vibrant tapestry of languages and cultures.[33]

The focus of the Culture goal on the Welsh language and other minority languages has also connected Wales with other countries and Indigenous communities with minority or Indigenous languages, facilitating exchange between artists and creatives from Wales, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia. The UNESCO International Year of Indigenous Languages offered exactly this opportunity to place the Welsh language within a global conversation and context

[32] https://arts.wales/about-us/strategy/plan-for-climate-justice-and-arts [accessed on 26.06.2025].

[33] See the report "Smooth Seas don't make Skillful Sailors" (2021) by Watch Africa Cymru. Available at: https://arts.wales/sites/default/files/2021-02/Watch%20Africa%20Cymru%20Response.pdf?_ga=2.96202719.234104325.1742466564-2010323968.1742466564 [accessed on 26.06.2025].

and to support international connections through a significant international network. The UN Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032 continues to provide the opportunity to further these international cultural relations between peoples and cultures.

The latest progress report on the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which is published every five years (due to be published in 2025), calls for the Welsh Government to embed cultural rights in its approach and for Wales to be represented at the 2025 UNESCO MONDIACULT conference. The Office of the Commissioner is closely following and supportive of the push for a standalone goal on Culture. Its own specific goal and indicators on culture, heritage and language could inform the shaping of a future Culture goal within sustainable development frameworks.

Figure 3. Culture-related Indicators of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act

IndicatorID	Indicator
3	The percentage of adults with two or more healthy lifestyle behaviours
6	Measurement of development of young children
7	Average capped 9 points score of pupils, including the gap between those who are eligible or are not eligible for free school meals
18	Percentage of people living in households in income poverty relative to the UK median: measured for children, working age and those of pension age
19	Percentage of people living in households in material deprivation
26	Percentage of people satisfied with local area as a place to live
27	Percentage of people agreeing that they belong to the area; that people from different backgrounds get on well together; and that people treat each other with respect
28	Percentage of people who volunteer
35	Percentage of people attending or participating in arts, culture or heritage activities at least three times a year
36	Percentage of people who speak Welsh daily and can speak more than just a few words of Welsh
37	Number of people who can speak Welsh
38	Percentage of people participating in sporting activities three or more times a week
39	Percentage of museums and archives holding archival/heritage collections meeting UK accreditation standards
40	Percentage of designated historic environment assets that are in stable or improved conditions
43	Areas of healthy ecosystems in Wales
44	Status of Biological diversity in Wales
45	Percentage of surface water bodies, and groundwater bodies, achieving good or high overall status
46	Active global citizenship in Wales
49	Percentage of households spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs Percentage of households spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs

Source: Power BI Tool

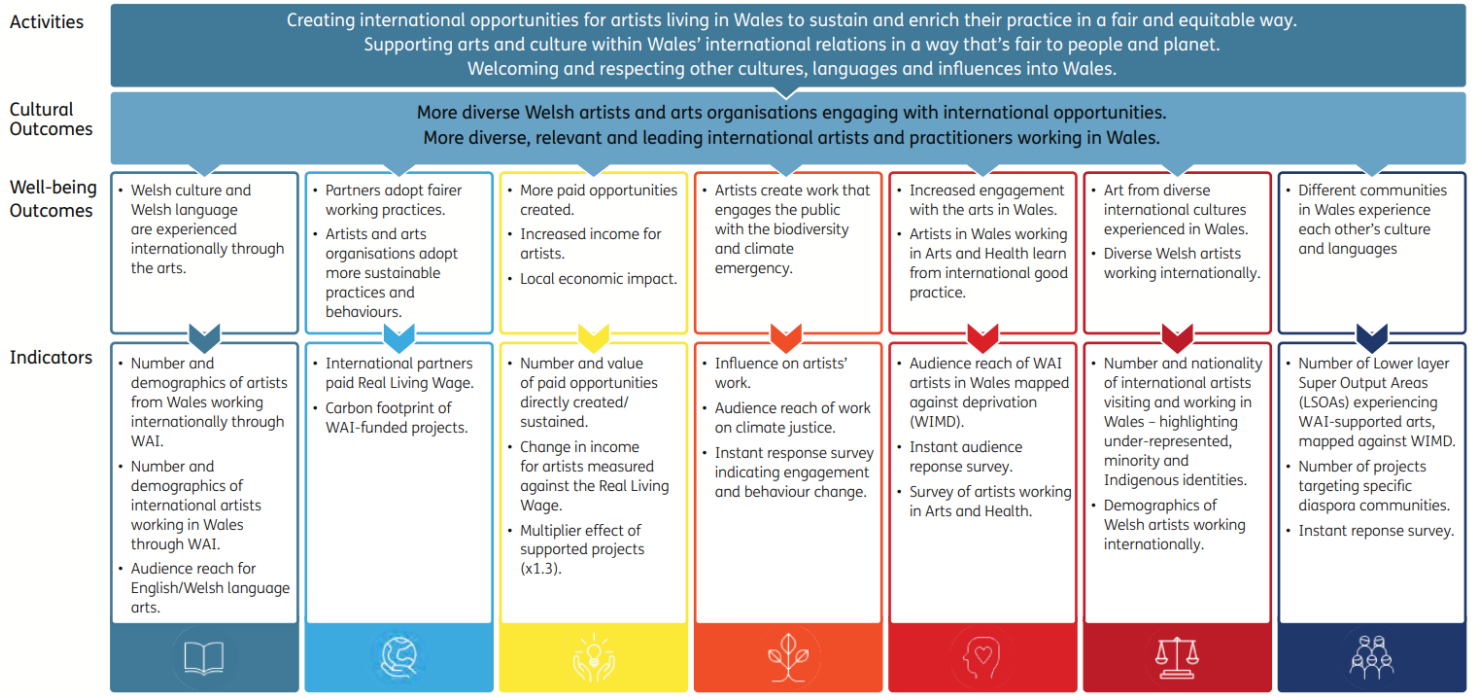
The Wales Arts International Strategy takes a values-led approach to Wales' cultural relations, rooted in shared humanity, peace and respect, and prioritising equality for women and LGBTQ+ communities. The Future Generations Act has also influenced the Strategy, by embedding a renewed sense of global responsibility and developing the concept of cultural wellbeing, with a focus on global and local justice.

> *"Cultural well-being is when people and communities take part in artistic and cultural activities that create a sense of place and belonging and lead to health and other benefits. Cultural well-being helps everyone in Wales to meet the well-being goals which include culture and Welsh language, health, diversity and inclusion, the climate and nature emergency and the economy. For cultural well-being to flourish, the well-being of artists and cultural workers is critical. Investment in the arts and participation is a co-investment in the cultural well-being of the nation and the world." (Wales Arts International, 2025, p. 6)*

On an annual basis, Wales has focused its international engagement on a specific country, combining economic interests with cultural exchange. The focus for 2025 is on Japan, building on the Rugby World Cup hosted there in 2019. Past editions have included France (2022), Germany (2021) and Ireland (2021). Furthermore, Arts Council of Wales and its international agency, Wales Arts International, have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the British Council Wales to support its international cultural relations.

There has also been a focus on aligning sport and cultural diplomacy to platform Wales on the global stage, as part of the Cymru campaign. The "Team Cymru" approach was set up in 2022 on the basis of shared values, such as "chwarae teg" or fair play. Wales has also implemented the "Wales and Africa" programme, to build and grow sustainable partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa that support the delivery of the SDGs. The programme includes international learning opportunities, fair trade initiatives, a Hub Cymru Africa and a Wales and Africa Grant Scheme. Whilst culture is not directly the focus of this initiative, it provides international connections and a mechanism for international cultural relations.

Figure 4. Evaluation and Impact Framework of the International Strategy Framework 2024-2034



Source: Arts Council of Wales and Wales Arts International, 2025, p. 16.[34]

[34] https://arts.wales/sites/default/files/2025-04/WAI_International%20Strategy%20Framework%202024-2034.pdf [accessed on 08.09.2025].

4.3. City-/Multilateral Level: UNESCO Creative Cities Network – The Braga Manifesto

What is it?

Launched in 2004, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) is an international network that fosters inter-city exchange and cooperation with a view to leveraging culture and creativity for sustainable urban development. The UCCN's overarching mission is to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable through international and multistakeholder cooperation. As a UNESCO programme, the Network is aligned with the Organisation's mandate, which promotes sustainable urban development through international cultural cooperation.

The UCCN has made the localisation of the SDGs a pillar of its mission, with a focus on sharing tools, experiences, solutions, and guidance towards advancing the SDGs at the local level, delivering both tangible and intangible results and enabling cities to collaboratively incubate and share good practices at local level. In the framework of the 2030 Agenda, the most relevant SDGs are SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). However, the breadth of member city's projects and initiatives exceed these two Goals, exemplifying the Network's transversal approach to localising the SDGs.

The network includes 350 cities in over 100 Member States, representing a population of 600 million. The Creative Cities cover eight creative fields—Architecture, Crafts and Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Media Arts and Music—with the aim to stimulate collaboration between cities that share similar creative interests. At its core, the UCCN is both a laboratory of good practices and a knowledge management platform, aimed at creating an enabling environment of cooperation, dialogue, and exchange for member cities to devise creative solutions to contemporary urban challenges.

How does it work?

Many Creative Cities work closely with their national governments and contribute to strengthening the international cultural influence and international cooperation of their countries. Coordinated by the UCCN Secretariat, the Network also provides cities of all sizes with the opportunity to engage in cultural exchange and city diplomacy. The UCCN strives to create an international platform, both in-person and virtual, where its mandate and priorities can be most effectively implemented. The UCCN also actively develops and maintains an open-access website, which hosts all the various reports and publications related to member city activity.

A key component to this platform is the UCCN Annual Conference, the Network's most important gathering for Creative Cities worldwide to exchange ideas and initiatives, fostering culture-driven solutions to contemporary urban challenges. In addition, the creative fields organise annual sub-network meetings, focussing on the specific opportunities and challenges to each creative field.

In terms of monitoring and reporting, the UCCN requires member cities to submit an activity report every four years through the periodic Reporting Exercise including details of city initiatives and projects, to inspire other cities and stakeholders pursuing similar goals. Recently, the UCCN Secretariat designed a new template for cities' reports, enabling more streamlined data collection and analysis. In an attempt to disseminate good practices initiated by member cities as widely as possible, these reports have been made publicly available on the UCCN website.[35] In 2024, a new part was added into the Reporting Exercise to reflect Creative Cities' contribution to the implementation of the priority areas of action identified in the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration.

Opportunities for International Cultural Relations (ICR)

The UCCN provides a unique forum for internal collaboration amongst cities. With 350 cities amounting to about 600 million inhabitants in over 100 Member

[35] https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-cities/monitoring-and-reporting [accessed on 26.06.2025].

States, the size and diversity of the UCCN make it a truly global platform for international cultural cooperation and to raise awareness of the transformative power of culture and creativity to drive sustainable urban development.

The UCCN is a unique platform for granting cities a voice in shaping the future of sustainable cities through culture and creativity. It offers opportunities for cities to draw on peer learning and collaborative initiatives, to fully capitalize on their cultural assets and leverage them as founding pieces for sustainable, inclusive and balanced development, contributing to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

At the XVI UCCN Annual Conference in Braga in 2024, mayors of Creative Cities endorsed the Braga Manifesto, which supports UNESCO's advocacy for culture to be recognised as a standalone goal in the post-2030 international development agenda, elevating the awareness of the potential of culture to drive sustainable development. It calls for "universal recognition and protection of cultural rights [...] and the socio-economic rights of artists and cultural professionals", as well as gender equality and women's empowerment and the protection of culture and cultural professionals at risk and in crisis. The Manifesto also highlights key policy areas such as digital technology, education, urban tourism, economic development, and the "profound impact of climate change on cultural heritage and creativity" (UNESCO Creative Cities Network, 2024).

Over the years, many collaborative initiatives have been born from exchanges at Annual Conferences, such as the Santos-Bandung Film Festival, a joint initiative to discuss shared socio-economic challenges between the Creative Cities of Santos (Brazil) and Bandung (Indonesia) through filmmaking. Similarly, the sub-network meetings are the stage for developing inter-city initiatives. For example, Reykjavík's dialogue with Dublin and Edinburgh led to Reykjavík's first Reading Festival inspired by the experiences of the latter two cities.

Also coordinated by the UCCN Secretariat, the UNESCO Cities Platform gathers eight city-related networks and programmes of the Organisation and reflects the transversal approach of UNESCO's work on and for cities towards the local implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Platform

allows these programmes and their cities worldwide to go beyond their respective fields and create synergies across UNESCO's different areas of expertise such as culture, education and science.

4.4. Regional-/Multilateral Level: African Union Agenda 2063 and Great Museum of Africa

What is it?

The African Union (AU)'s "Agenda 2063" was established in 2015, with seven so-called Development Aspirations, each equipped with a set of goals. Aspiration 5 calls for "an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics" (African Union, 2015). It emphasises the importance of Pan-Africanism, cultural renaissance, and the promotion of Africa's rich heritage as central to the continent's development and unity. It also calls for the restoration and preservation of African cultural heritage, including languages, and positions the creative arts as significant contributors to Africa's growth and transformation. Aspiration 5 is directly in line with the "Charter for African Cultural Renaissance", which places arts, culture and heritage at the heart of African history, identity, values, dignity and freedoms (see African Union, 2006).

A flagship initiative under Aspiration 5 is the establishment of the Great Museum of Africa (GMA) [36] in Algiers, Algeria, envisioned as a pan-African institution to preserve and showcase Africa's diverse cultural artifacts and history (African Union, 2022a and 2022b). In 2022, a temporary site of the GMA was launched to serve as a focal point institution and implement activities of the museum before the permanent site becomes operational. The GMA appears to be primarily an Africa-led initiative, with its development and funding managed within the continent.

[36] https://www.nepad.org/agenda-2063/flagship-project/great-museum-africa-gma [accessed on 19.08.2025]

How does it work?

Agenda 2063 identifies a number of key stakeholders for the implementation of the strategy, including regional economic communities, member states, civil society, and the private sector.

In terms of monitoring and measuring developmental progress of Africa 2063 Agenda, 'transformational outcomes' have been set, including specific outcomes for arts, culture and heritage, such as:

- doubling the creative sector's contribution to GDP (from 2013 levels);
- ensuring 20% of polytechnic institutions offer training in creative arts and cultural enterprise management to support the growth of the creative arts businesses; and
- reclaiming at least 30% of Africa's cultural patrimony by 2023 (new target to be set).

In its Second Continental report, 38 Member States submitted progress reports, with some using data from the SDG Voluntary National Reports due to the alignment with the Goals. Under Aspiration 5 – Arts, Culture and Heritage, "the First Ten Year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063 placed particular emphasis on entrenching Pan-African ideals in school curricula and promoting Pan-African cultural assets such as heritage, folklore, languages, music, theatre and literature among children in school" (African Union, 2022c, p. 54), in line with SDG 4 on Quality Education. There was moderate progress of 45% in this area, below the target set of 60% progress by 2023 due to "weak integration of indigenous African culture, values and language into primary and secondary school curricula" across the continent (African Union, 2022c, p. 15). Ethiopia, Eswatini and Ghana are seen as good practices for education that can be replicated elsewhere. Niger has also created a Ministry of Cultural Renaissance and included cultural renaissance as an essential condition for social, political and economic modernisation into its Economic and Social Development Plan 2017-2021 (African Union, 2022c, p. 55).

Opportunities for International Cultural Relations (ICR)

The GMA exemplifies international cultural relations (ICR) within Africa by serving as a collaborative platform where AU member states contribute to a shared cultural legacy. This initiative fosters unity, mutual understanding, and cultural exchange among African nations, reinforcing a collective identity and promoting intra-continental cooperation in cultural preservation and promotion. The museum is envisioned as a platform to showcase the extensive breadth of Africa's cultural heritage, including its influence on various cultures worldwide in areas such as art, music, language, and science.

In 2021, the African Union's annual theme was "Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want", demonstrating the value placed on cultural identity and expression for African development and international relations. The year 2025 has been designated as the "Year of Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations", underscoring the AU's commitment to addressing historical injustices, including the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, apartheid, and genocide. It builds on decades of advocacy and collaboration, aiming to foster unity and establish mechanisms for reparatory justice on a global scale.[37]

Aspiration 5 promotes values of unity, reconciliation, and social cohesion, seeing cultural initiatives as a means of fostering peace and development in line with SDG 16 on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The GMA shows a commitment to cultural relations and the strengthening of ties across African nations through shared heritage. By cultivating a shared cultural narrative and fostering cross-border collaboration, the initiative supports peacebuilding and mutual understanding across the continent, core principles in both the African Union's agenda and the SDGs. By engaging in joint efforts to establish the GMA, with the support of international bodies such as UNESCO and regional organisations like Afreximbank, African countries demonstrate a spirit of multilateral collaboration in line with SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals.

[37] https://au.int/en/theme/2025 [accessed on 19.08.2025].

The GMA initiative also ties directly into SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities, particularly Target 11.4, which calls for efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. The museum aims to institutionalise the preservation of Africa's diverse cultural legacies and establish a shared space for the conservation and display of cultural artefacts across the continent. This not only contributes to protection of cultural heritage, but also strengthens cultural infrastructure. Finally, Aspiration 5 contributes to SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth. By promoting the cultural and creative industries as drivers of innovation and employment, the AU supports economic development through heritage tourism, cultural programming, and the creative economy. Institutions like the GMA create opportunities for employment in heritage management, research, education, and the broader cultural sector.

4.5. Snapshots from Saudi Arabia, China and Brazil

While initiatives that concretely present potential measurement frameworks for ICR's contribution to SDGs exist, the majority of countries conduct their work in international cultural relations without specific measurement frameworks. Some countries have substantially invested in cultural relations, cultural diplomacy, and other initiatives mainly designed to achieve soft power goals, incorporating various SDGs as thematic goals in their programming objectives. However, this investment does not necessarily guarantee that the aforementioned initiatives, programmes, and financial support help towards achieving the SDGs, even when the SDGs are taken into account in the programme design.

Going against the flow of de-investment trends in the West, as of 2025, Saudi Arabia is significantly investing in international cultural relations and in cultural heritage as part of its Vision 2030 strategy to diversify the economy and enhance its global image. The Kingdom has committed USD 25 million to UNESCO for the protection of heritage, supporting activities such as the preservation of World

Heritage sites and the promotion of creative economies.[38] The Cultural Development Fund (CDF) has launched financing programmes supporting projects across 16 cultural sub-sectors, including film, music, and museums. Notably, the CDF has established a Film Investment Program with a budget of SAR 300 million and partnered to create the Saudi Film Fund, totalling SAR 375 million, with 40% contributed by the CDF. These initiatives aim to empower Saudi Arabia to emerge as a frontrunner in the film industry across the Arab world and the Middle East.[39]

Although the exact figures are scarce, in the same direction, China has significantly expanded its investment in international cultural relations, positioning culture as a strategic pillar of its foreign policy. Central to this effort is the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), launched in 2023, which promotes cultural exchange based on principles of equality, mutual learning, and inclusiveness (Zapata, 2023). The GCI complements China's broader diplomatic strategies, including the Global Security Initiative and the Global Development Initiative, aiming to establish a multipolar world order and foster global harmony.

In alignment with the GCI, China has intensified cultural cooperation with Africa through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation's (FOCAC) Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027). This plan encompasses a wide range of initiatives, such as joint archaeological projects, museum exhibitions, youth exchanges, and the establishment of cultural centres. In addition, China has been a significant contributor to various African infrastructure projects, such as the African Union Conference Center in Addis Ababa. These efforts aim to deepen mutual understanding and strengthen people-to-people ties between China and African nations.[40]

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[38] www.pif.gov.sa/en/private-sector-hub/leadership-vision/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=20449223983&gbraid=0AAAABozKaQxiHv6pliHcAiA1Ke6VOeuL&gclid=CjwKCAjw-svEBhB6EiwAEzSdruywpqzawFLd11rHN3V-hC3eYakTLRh__AX9NuHCHTM0SQRBB4zAZxoCUYUQAvD_BwE [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[39] https://cdf.gov.sa/index.php/en/news/6838? [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[40] https://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202409/t20240905_11485719.htm and https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zwbd/202405/t20240530_11365812.html [accessed on 08.09.2025].

As of 2025, Brazil is actively investing in international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy, marking a significant shift from previous years. Under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the country is reasserting its global cultural presence through a series of strategic initiatives and partnerships (Stott et al., 2024). One notable endeavour is the UK/Brazil Season of Culture 2025–2026[41], a collaborative effort between the British Council and Brazil's Instituto Guimarães Rosa, the foreign cultural institute of Brazil. This programme aims to deepen cultural ties between the two nations, featuring projects that address contemporary social issues through artistic collaboration. Selected initiatives include joint exhibitions, music and poetry projects, and climate-focused cultural events, fostering long-term partnerships between Brazilian and UK cultural institutions. Organised by the Institut Français and its Brazilian partners, the Saison Brésil-France 2025[42] also took place to celebrate the bicentennial of diplomatic relations, historic ties and friendship between the two countries.

In addition to European collaborations, Brazil is strengthening cultural relations with China. The two countries have designated 2026 as the Brazil-China Cultural Year, formalised during President Xi Jinping's visit to Brazil in November 2024. Preparations for this celebration include a programme of cultural festivities in São Paulo, aiming to highlight the diversity and creativity of both nations' artistic expressions[43].

In accordance with the scope of this research (see Chapters 1 and 2 of this report), the cases above present examples of government-led ICR initiatives primarily at national administrative level. These initiatives, which involve ICR in different extents, are highly centralised and predominantly driven by state institutions, with limited involvement from civil society, academia, or independent cultural networks. This raises concerns about the authenticity of their engagement with the SDGs, and whether these efforts constitute meaningful contributions or are merely forms of SDG-washing (the superficial use of SDG language for reputational gain).

[41] https://www.britishcouncil.org.br/en/programmes/arts/ukbrseason [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[42] https://www.pro.institutfrancais.com/en/programmes-and-projects/france-brazil-season-2025 [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[43] https://www.forumchinaplp.org.mo/en/economic_trade/view/8640 [accessed on 08.09.2025].

In China, for instance, projects like the Global Civilization Initiative and cultural cooperation within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) are framed under cooperation through multilateralism and shared development. However, these programmes operate within a context of tight governmental control and limited transparency, making it difficult to assess their actual impact on and incorporation of SDG values such as inclusion, gender equity, and artistic freedom in their programming. A similar dynamic is present in Saudi Arabia's cultural diplomacy: whilst it invests heavily in heritage preservation and high-profile global events to project soft power, these actions occur in an authoritarian context with significant restrictions on cultural freedom and civic participation. The same way these examples base themselves loosely on ICR towards the SDGs, Brazil also does not present any clear direction of travel. This raises the question of whether the SDGs are really a core objective for these government-led initiatives.

Often, culture is treated as a tool for branding or international positioning rather than as a transformative force for social development and rights-based progress. The invocation of the SDGs in such contexts risks becoming a branding exercise rather than a framework for systemic change.

5. Conclusion

The cultural sector has come a long way in terms of increasing public awareness on the importance of social, economic and environmental development and the role artists, civil society, cultural institutions, and governments can play to address these challenges, including in the latter's policies and actions.

For International Cultural Relations to be effective in fulfilling Sustainable Development Goals, mutual trust and understanding between those involved are fundamental. ICR is still closely linked to diplomacy and soft power in the way it is measured and valued. There needs to be a paradigm shift, where the attributes of both 'culture' and 'cultural relations' are seen as paramount for the achievement of sustainable development. If more closely aligned with sustainable development, ICR can be a way to connect the local with the global.

Whilst governments have a significant role to play, ICR requires a collaborative approach—as opposed to a top-down, one-sided nationalistic approach—and cross-sectoral effort that involves stakeholders beyond the cultural sector. ICR needs to be rooted in local context, requiring active participation of those delivering the work and engagement with local communities. This engagement should be grounded in a human rights-based—including cultural rights-based—approach and embed elements that promote sustainability to embody the spirit of the Goals. In addition, more investment of financial resources and staff capacities are necessary for ICR to play its part in achieving the SDGs.

There are several challenges with measuring sustainable development, and limited advancement in embedding culture—let alone ICR—on this matter. Governments should make use of existing SDG measurement tools and adapt them to their own contexts and ICR goals, including a cultural lens to their formal reporting (see Chapter 6 'Tips and Tricks'). Moreover, ICR is an approach to cultural work and development work. It can create the conditions for sustainable development to take place and the focus of measuring its impact should lie in the enabling environment it can provide.

6. Tips and Tricks for Embedding and Measuring ICR's Contribution to the SDGs

6.1. Tips

The following tips are intended for governments at all administrative levels as key points to consider and put into place when aligning international cultural relations (ICR) with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some of them may seem evident, but they are crucial steps to take in the planning and development phase, as well as for implementation, monitoring and evaluation. They provide the overarching conditions for impactful ICR in the context of sustainable development and complement the 'tricks' (see Section 6.2.), which are more practice-focused.

1. **Determine what is meant by ICR for sustainable development.** When measuring against the SDGs, it is useful to define the concept of ICR and its alignment with the relevant SDG(s) from the outset. This in turn helps align the efforts of all stakeholders involved, ensuring that everyone works toward the same goals with a common language. This clarity sets a solid foundation for effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of cultural initiatives.

2. **Identify short-, medium-, and long-term impact and change and define ways of measuring.** Objectives and outcomes should be clear and realistic, including determining what specific impacts or changes you hope to achieve in line with the SDGs, and establishing a timeline to track progress. Being deliberate about what you aim to measure, why it matters, and who will benefit ensures that your evaluation efforts are purposeful and meaningful. Developing an evaluation framework that includes qualitative as well as quantitative measures allows for a richer understanding of impact. Going beyond attendance or tourism numbers to assess deeper cultural and social changes provides a more accurate picture of how ICR contributes to sustainable development. Consistency in measurement avoids patchy or retrofitted data and builds credibility.

3. **Work collaboratively with key stakeholders at local, national and international levels.** This tip includes working across sectors relevant to different SDGs, and fostering international exchange and dialogue for buy-in and sustainability. Collaboration can involve cross-ministerial/departmental coordination, and partnership with universities, cultural organisations, NGOs, and multilateral/international organisations. Furthermore, networks can serve as spaces to share knowledge, jointly advocate for ICR, and pool resources across networks to increase effectiveness, avoid duplication, and promote coordinated action. Partnership for the Goals (SDG 17) creates a more resilient and inclusive approach by pooling knowledge and resources. This includes co-developing and co-delivering, and being transparent in the objectives and outcomes to help build trust and accountability.

4. **Establish shared international values.** ICR efforts should be rooted in mutual trust and understanding between peoples and cultures. Grounding initiatives in shared values like cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and human rights promotes mutual respect and supports effective international cooperation. Ensuring ethical standards, fair practices and working conditions, and equitable treatment strengthens cultural exchange and contributes to social justice, making ICR more sustainable, inclusive, as well as putting the SDGs—such as SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities)—into practice. They contribute to creating an enabling environment for sustainable development, whilst building trust and understanding.

5. **Create a sense of urgency to embed culture and ICR into the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.** There is an urgent need to integrate culture within the SDGs and sustain its role beyond 2030 for future generations. Recognising culture as critical to sustainable development helps secure its place in policy, encouraging long-term commitment and action. This includes within formal processes such as Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), and public policy consultations, as well as placing culture at the heart of relevant policy areas, for example within Nationally-Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans on Climate, as is the ambition of the Group of Friends for culture-based climate action (GFCBCA).

6. **Maintain the importance of culture at the heart of international policy platforms.** Keeping culture central in forums like the G7, G20, MONDIACULT, and the UN General Assembly ensures political commitment and reinforces its value in global governance. In addition to advocating for a specific goal for culture within the post-2030 Agenda, identifying the role culture can play within cross-cutting frameworks such as the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), will amplify the value of culture in wider policy fields.

7. **Focus on wellbeing of future generations through the 5 Ps of the UN Agenda 2030: People, Prosperity, Peace, Planet and Partnerships.** Aligning cultural initiatives with these core five pillars of sustainable development ensures that culture contributes to broad development goals—supporting wellbeing, social cohesion, environmental care, and inclusive growth. Sustainable development requires a long-term approach, with the active involvement of young people as well as consideration of the impact of our actions not only for today but also for the future.

8. **Position culture as a strategic axis in international cooperation policies and programmes (for national governments).** Promote cultural initiatives that directly address specific SDG goals such as quality education, gender equality, and sustainable cities. This strategic integration raises the relevance and impact of culture in global development frameworks, and encourages cross-ministerial collaboration and engagement with embassies and delegations internationally.

9. **Listen, learn from, and support civil society and the cultural sector operating on the ground.** For both ICR and sustainable development, these actors offer essential local insights that inform the design and implementation of relevant and participatory ICR initiatives. This is particularly relevant in diverse cultural contexts, where historical power dynamics and economic trends have impacted Indigenous people and marginalised communities. A spirit of co-design will ensure more long-lasting benefit and impact on the ground, as well as a more positive relationship to build trust and understanding.

10. **Allocate dedicated trained staff for culture and international cultural relations in relevant ministries and diplomatic missions.** Positioning cultural specialists in Foreign Affairs ministries, embassies, delegations, and consulates ensures consistent coordination and enhances cultural diplomacy. Failing this, there should be dedicated roles at different administrative levels who have received training about the value and impact of culture and ICR, and its relevance to sustainable development so that it is more automatically embedded as an approach and in reporting mechanisms.

11. **Allocate dedicated funds for culture and ICR within development budgets and SDG-related fields.** Consistent, targeted funding for ICR—especially in areas like education and environment—enables impactful programming and signals a strong commitment to culture and ICR approaches in development.

12. **Recognise the impact of disasters as triggers for cultural action.** The cultural sector and civil society often respond to crises in creative ways either immediately—as seen with the Notre Dame fire or the wave of artivism in protests such as in Sudan or Ukraine—or over the long term through social cohesion, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding efforts. In the current times, the role of arts and culture to process trauma, build resilience, and heal communities, is even more important and in line with SDG 16 (Peacebuilding and Stronger Institutions).

13. **Acknowledge the importance of medium-term planning in cultural strategies.** Whilst short-term action and long-term visions are essential, medium-range timelines are often where momentum is built, and change becomes visible. This time period serves as a bridge where cultural responses can adapt, mobilise communities, learn from experiences, and shape recovery strategies with sustained impact. Embedding a middle-scale perspective into cultural policy and programming ensures adaptive strategies that are both agile and sustainable over time.

14. **Enable international cultural relations through mobility.** This includes simplifying visa processes and promoting policies that facilitate the movement of artists, cultural professionals, and exchange of knowledge. Supporting people-to-people exchanges helps build shared values such as global citizenship, strengthens communities at multiple levels, and fosters intercultural understanding.

15. **Foster dialogue and network-based cooperation in ICR.** Move beyond traditional project-based approaches to ICR toward creating networked spaces of dialogue between ICR actors and citizens that influence and inform public policymaking. These cultural connections function as spaces of experimentation and democratic processes, revealing emerging societal shifts and creating pathways for responsive governance.

6.2. Tricks

The following 'tricks' provide practical steps that can be taken by governments at various administrative levels in order to better implement and measure the impact of international cultural relations to fulfil the SDGs. They build on the research conducted for this report including the experience from the deep dives, and include platforms and frameworks that could be used to measure the extent of international cultural relations (ICR) embedded into sustainable development efforts. They also aim to define the conditions and shared values that ICR can enable in order to contribute to sustainable development.

1. Advocate for ICR on international policy platforms (for Ministries of Culture and/or Foreign Affairs):

- Influence the design and adoption of a Culture Goal, discussed at UNESCO MONDIACULT 2025, the G7 and G20 Culture tracks and within cultural networks and movements such as the led by the #Culture2030Goal campaign.
- Position international cultural relations within the six key themes of MONDIACULT 2025, taking part in regional consultations on progress and reporting back on multilateral initiatives. Ensure ICR responses feed into

formal channels of reporting on sustainable development, such as the VNRs and VLRs.

– Align with global movements to place culture at the heart of specific policy areas, such as the Group of Friends on Culture Based Climate Action.

2. Design the future of sustainable development including ICR:

– Play an active role in the post-2030 Agenda negotiations (due to start in 2027), advocating for the international value of cultural relations, and culture's place in development including through ICR.

– Engage with other sector leads and UN bodies for a cross-sectoral approach to meaningfully address particular SDGs, such as UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF.

– Explore alternative pathways to sustainable development and the role of ICR within these, such as the Agenda Road to 2100[44].

3. Maximise regional and international networks and events:

– Advocate for sustainable development and the role of international cultural relations within global Culture Summits, such as the Abu Dhabi Culture Summit or the IFACCA Summit.

– Leverage existing international cultural networks to share knowledge, build partnerships for sustainable development and measure impact, for example through UNESCO Creative Cities network and the EU National Institutes of Culture (EUNIC).

– Support the creation of pilot projects between cities and cultural communities focusing on specific SDG targets. One example could be to consider supporting the Capitals of Culture and cities included in the UNESCO Creative Cities network.

– Recognise the role of cities rising to face local and global challenges, and make use of existing cultural and city networks (e.g. European Capitals of Culture, World Cities Culture Forum, C40, UCLG) as mechanisms to address SDGs locally and support international cultural exchange and collaboration.

[44] https://ourfutureagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2100-Roadmap-19Sep23.pdf [accessed on 19.08.2025]

4. Take a rights-based approach to ICR for sustainable development:

- Take a human rights-led approach, looking to reduce inequalities (SDG 10) with respect for freedom of expression (Art. 19 UNDHR).
- Ensure cultural rights are respected, including participation in cultural life (Art. 27 UNDHR), protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions (UNESCO 2005 Convention), and ensuring digital cultural rights (Mondiacult 2022 Declaration).
- Ensure fair and ethical practices, including just and favourable conditions (Art. 23 UNDHR), fair remuneration (Fair Culture Charter[45]), fair collaboration in cultural relations (EUNIC's Not a Toolkit[46]), ethical AI practices (UNESCO Recommendations on the Ethics of AI[47]), historical awareness and remembrance.
- Apply the principles of inclusivity and mutuality: Do no harm; Leave no one behind.

5. Ensure environmental sustainability:

- Commit to protecting nature and the environment as part of ICR initiatives, in line with SDGs 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life on Earth), SDG 15 (Life below water). This includes respect for indigenous knowledge and traditions, protecting of cultural heritage (tangible, intangible, natural), and care for biodiversity
- Adopt sustainable practices in cultural and creative industries in line with SDG 12 (Sustainable consumption and production), greening sectors and urban spaces in line with SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), and supporting innovative design for more sustainable solutions.
- Create green jobs and develop green skills across government at all administrative levels, including in relation to ICR practices.
- Develop and implement future-oriented policies and programmes, involving young people and encouraging intergenerational exchange for future generations, focusing on wellbeing for people and planet for generations to come.

[45] https://www.fair-culture.org/ [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[46] https://www.eunicglobal.eu/fair-collaboration [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[47] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence [accessed on 19.08.2025].

6. Invest in Culture and International Cultural Relations:

- Commit funding to the cultural sector, and include ICR initiatives under international development cooperation and foreign affairs.
- Fund joint programmes between national cultural institutes operating abroad and local partners, focusing on co-creation and knowledge exchange around global themes such as the environment, cultural diversity, and social inclusion.
- Diversify funding streams and maximise the use of funding channels to secure support for ICR towards SDGs (see examples below):
    - National level: Foreign aid/development aid; Humanitarian aid in line with SDG 1 (No Poverty); Designated funds for Disaster risk reduction (DRR), Climate adaptation and mitigation; the international dimension of Culture and Education budgets; Public Development Banks.
    - Regional / international level: Regional and international development banks; UN bodies, e.g. UNESCO International Fund for Cultural Diversity[48], Joint SDG Fund[49]; International Organisations[50]; Private trusts and foundations.
    - European level: Development funding; International cultural cooperation; Global Gateway; Culture Compass; AgoraEU; Preparatory Actions of the European Parliament; Emergency Response funding through the European External Action Service (EEAS).

7. Partner with other sectors related to the SDGs:

- Work with universities, researchers, scientists, psychologists to demonstrate the positive impact of ICR on various SDGs, fostering collaboration.
- Collaborate with leading institutions and organisations addressing specific SDGs or focused on economy, society and the environment to embed culture and ICR into these sectors and practices.

[48] https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/international-fund-cultural-diversity [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[49] https://jointsdgfund.org/ [accessed on 19.08.2025].

[50] https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/oda-eligibility-and-conditions/dac-list-of-oda-recipients.html#oda-eligible-international-organisations-list [accessed on 19.08.2025].

– Explore opportunities to work with the private sector as a key investor and partner on the ground.
– Partner with civil society to encourage ICR approaches in their work for knowledge sharing, long-lasting relationship building and wider impact within communities.

8. Upskill staff and local public servants on ICR and SDGs:

– Ensure those working in the field of ICR are familiar with the UN Agenda 2030 and its SDGs. Knowledge of UNESCO Conventions and global policy platforms and networks is also key.
– Facilitate workshops and training for local public servants on how to align cultural initiatives with the SDGs in international actions, and on the existence and use of different measurement tools (as mentioned in Chapter 3) that can be applied to ICR initiatives linked to sustainable development.
– Assign staff and resources for ICR.
– Provide spaces for knowledge exchange on the enabling conditions and positive impact of ICR towards achieving the SDGs.
– Share stories of change and impact across departments and between cities and countries as a source of inspiration and as evidence in reporting.
– Share evidence of impact in terms of alignment with SDGs and the principles of sustainable development, and wellbeing for future generations.

9. Take targeted action to address specific SDGs:

– Develop and launch annual thematic calls for proposals for cultural relations initiatives addressing specific SDGs, especially in national priority countries.
– Include SDG-related criteria in international cultural cooperation calls for proposals, encouraging applicants to consider cross-cutting themes such as social inclusion, the environment, and gender equality, in the development, monitoring and reporting on impact towards SDGs.

10. Share stories of impact and change:

– Make use of local and national public platforms (e.g. the media/press, conferences) to highlight the value of ICR initiatives on sustainable development.

- Provide spaces and platforms for those benefitting from ICR to share their own stories of impact and change with policymakers within official meetings, committees, legislative hearings, etc.
- Finance the creation of content to highlight stories of impact and change, such as but not limited to videos, impact reports, documentaries, and photography exhibitions.

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Appendix: Mapping the ICR and SDGs Ecosystem

The following tables—divided according to their level and scope of action (multilateral, regional, and national levels)—provide a main overview of key organisations, documents, platforms and networks as of June 2025. It is not an exhaustive list; it provides a snapshot of a constantly evolving ecosystem.

MULTILATERAL ACTORS		
Organisation	**Key Documents**	**Key Platforms/Networks**
UNESCO, including UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN); UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Geoparks; National Commissions to UNESCO	– UNESCO Conventions – Culture|2030 Indicators – MONDIACULT Declaration 2022 – Culture as a Global Public Good (2024)	– MONDIACULT Conferences – UN HLPF events on Culture and Development – Regional Committees and Consultations – Interagency and Expert Groups – EU-UNESCO Expert Facility
UN OHCHR - UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights	Report on cultural rights and sustainable development (2022); A/73/227: Universality, cultural diversity and cultural rights (2018)	Consultations on reports and special procedures
UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)	1995 Copenhagen Declaration	Second World Summit for Development 2025[51], specifically the Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD)

[51] https://social.desa.un.org/second-world-summit-for-social-development [accessed on 27.06.2025]

MULTILATERAL ACTORS		
Organisation	**Key Documents**	**Key Platforms/Networks**
UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD)		Creative Economy and Sustainable Development Conference, Indonesia 2021
UN Institute of Statistics	– Culture and Development Indicators – UNESCO Framework for Culture Statistics	
OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities	– How to measure the impact of culture, sports and business events (2023) – The Culture Fix: Creative People, Places and Industries (2022) – Culture and local development: maximising the impact (2019)	– OECD Trento Centre for Local Development – OECD Local Employment and Economic Development (LEED) Programme – OECD Conferences

REGIONAL ACTORS		
Organisation	**Key Documents**	**Key Platforms/Networks**
G20 Culture Working Group	– Rome Declaration (2021) – OECD Notes for G20 Culture Working Group	G20 Summits and working group meetings
G7	Culture Declaration (2024)	G7 on Culture

REGIONAL ACTORS		
European Union, including European Commission; EU-LAC Foundation; ACP-EU Culture; EU-African Union	– Open Method of Coordination (OMC) Reports – Towards a Joint Strategy for Cultural Relations – Council Conclusions	– Voices of Culture on International Cultural Relations, and on Culture within the SDGs – Relevant OMC groups
African Union	Africa 2063 Agenda	– AU Conference – AU-EU Summit – AU-EU Youth Facility

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS		
Organisation	**Key Documents**	**Key Platforms/Networks**
World Cities Culture Forum (WCCF)	Sao Paulo Manifesto	WCCF Annual Conference
UNESCO Creative Cities Network	Braga Manifesto	– UCCN Annual Conference – UCCN sub-working groups
EUNIC	– Report on Culture and Sustainable Development – Sustainability Guide – Fair Collaboration (Not) A Toolkit	Knowledge Sharing Workshops including on Culture and SDGs
Practitioners' Network	Measuring Culture's Impact in Development Cooperation: A practical guide (2024)	Culture and Development Workstream

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS		
United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)	– Culture in the Localization of the SDGs: An Analysis of Voluntary Local Reviews – A Culture Goal is Essential for Our Common Future	– Culture Summits – Culture 2030 Goal campaign

GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATIVE LEVELS AND THEIR POTENTIAL ROLE(S) IN ICR		
Administrative Level	**Examples**	**Potential ICR Roles**
Multilateral (Global and Regional)	– UN bodies – Regional blocs (European Union, ASEAN, African Union) – G20 Working Group on Culture and G7 Culture Track – International development banks (IADB, ADB) – Finance in Common Culture Working Group – OECD	– Promote cross-cultural dialogue; – Fund cultural exchange programmes; – Set global cultural policies (e.g., UNESCO).
National	– Ministries of Culture – Ministries of External / Foreign Affairs – Parliaments – National development banks – Embassies	– Develop and implement cultural strategies related to foreign policy, diplomacy and development ;

GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATIVE LEVELS AND THEIR POTENTIAL ROLE(S) IN ICR		
Administrative Level	**Examples**	**Potential ICR Roles**
	– Non-departmental public bodies – National Cultural Institutes	– Establish and support cultural institutions working abroad; – Fund arts and heritage initiatives connecting national and international practice.
Regional	– State/Provincial level (e.g. the State of Bavaria in Germany) – Metropolitan cities	– Develop cultural partnerships with other states / provinces of other countries; – Support local cultural initiatives abroad – represent regional culture on the international stage (e.g., regional cultural offices, state arts councils).
Local	– Municipal and district councils – County governments – Mayoral offices – UNESCO cities – Rural community and cultural centres	– Promote local cultural activities internationally; – Engage in city-to-city partnerships; – Rural exchange and festivals; – Host cultural exchanges at the community level (e.g.,

GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATIVE LEVELS AND THEIR POTENTIAL ROLE(S) IN ICR		
Administrative Level	**Examples**	**Potential ICR Roles**
		local festivals, twin city programmes).

About the Authors

Rosanna Lewis is a Culture Consultant based in Brussels. She has over 10 years' experience working on culture, international cultural relations, and sustainable development for the British Council, where she has managed programmes, led on advocacy, and conducted research including The Missing Pillar: Culture's Contribution to the SDGs (2020) and The Missing Foundation: Culture's place within and beyond the SDGs (2023). As an independent, she has worked with organisations such as the European Commission on research and evaluation, and the NGO IMPACT for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation.

Pedro Affonso Ivo Franco is a German-Brazilian consultant working across the cultural, creative and cooperation sectors. For over a decade, Pedro has delivered services to International Organisations, Governments, and Cultural Institutions, around Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Europe. Major research includes "The Impacts of COVID-19 on Brazil's Cultural and Creative Industries" for UNESCO, the "Cultural and Creative Industries Supporting Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Mapping and Analysis" for ifa, and "The Missing Foundation: Culture's Place within and beyond the SDGs" for the British Council. Pedro holds a Master's degree in International Relations and Cultural Diplomacy from Furtwangen University, Germany.

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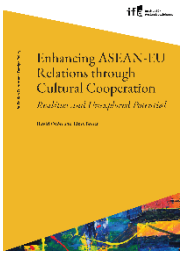

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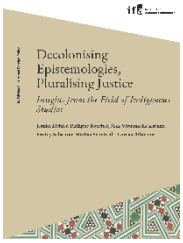

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International Cultural Relations to fulfil the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Challenges, Opportunities and Initiatives

This research focuses on understanding why government-led initiatives that address the direct connection between international cultural relations (ICR) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are largely absent. It highlights the challenges to implement, monitor and report impact and progress of ICR in general, and in the context of sustainable development. It also identifies initiatives that have attempted to do so at local, regional, national and multilateral levels, including policies, measurement frameworks, and implementation methods. The report concludes by outlining the importance of developing actions in this direction, especially in the current global context, and presents potential pathways forward.

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