

CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Urban transformation of cities can lead to a disruption of the concept of sustainable urban development. The Agenda 2030, under Goal 11 and Target 11.4, emphasizes the importance of culture for sustainable development and the strengthening of efforts to protect and preserve global cultural and natural heritage. Defining the framework of Cultura 2030, its goals, and indicators should enable further contributions of culture to sustainable development and the assessment of the transversal contribution of culture to sustainable development. The construction of buildings that use sustainable materials promotes modern living and working conditions, as well as inclusivity, which encourages the establishment of creative embassies as official institutions.

This research adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach, focusing on the conceptual and policy-level analysis of the role of culture in sustainable urban development. The methodology includes a critical review of strategic documents, comparative policy analysis, and case study review which enables a multidimensional assessment of the transversal contributions of culture to economic, social, and environmental sustainability, emphasizing policy relevance and practical implementation. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of how global Agendas conceptualize and integrate culture as a dimension of sustainability, identifies alignment, gaps and potential synergies that enables citizens to participate in decision-making and policy creation.

Keywords: *urban transformation; cities; culture; sustainable development; promotion.*

JEL Classification: Q56; R11; Z10

1. INTRODUCTION

The Agenda 2030 emphasizes an integrated approach to economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015). Although the Agenda 2030 sets concrete goals across multiple sectors, culture has not been explicitly recognized as a driver of sustainable development. The Culture 2030 Framework highlights the clear recognition of culture as a pillar for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2018a; UNESCO, 2019). The Culture 2030 Framework was developed to guide policies and practices that integrate culture into sustainable development strategies as a driving force for inclusive and sustainable progress (UNESCO, 2018a).

The Agenda 2030 acknowledges the key role of culture in several SDGs, including those related to quality education, economic growth, sustainable patterns of consumption and production, and peaceful and inclusive societies.

Culture is explicitly mentioned in SDG 11, which aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (UNESCO, 2016). Therefore, the New Urban Agenda, in the context of the SDGs, was shaped based on the vital role of culture in preserving urban quality of life, safeguarding urban identities, and promoting cultural expressions, arts, and heritage (UN-Habitat, 2016).

Culture – through cultural heritage and creativity – serves as a vital resource and instrument for the renewal and recovery of cities. It lies at the core of urban regeneration and recovery strategies, where reconstruction efforts must involve all relevant stakeholders, underscoring the need for an integrated approach to planning and decision-making (UNESCO, 2018b).

In addition, urban artistic specialization contributes to economic growth by stimulating innovation and drawing in creative industries (Markusen *et al.*, 2008).

An integrative approach to planning and decision-making in the field of cultural and sustainable urban policies should, also, be grounded in participatory citizen engagement. Research has examined both formal and informal modes of citizen participation in cultural policy decision-making processes in Switzerland (Marx, 2019), the connection between active participation in cultural activities and civic engagement in Italy (Campagna *et al.*, 2020), the identification of key challenges for enhancing participation in cultural heritage decision-making in France (Ministère de la Culture, 2022) and the co-creation approach in local cultural policy (Asare, 2022).

Research, also, explore the role of active citizen participation in sustainable urban development (Owuondo, 2024), how citizen engagement in the preservation of cultural heritage can contribute to sustainable development (Billore, 2021) and how community engagement can drive innovation in urban development and the creation of smart sustainable cities (Anthony, 2024).

2. THE CULTURE 2030 FRAMEWORK: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CULTURE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Culture 2030 Framework is an initiative launched by UNESCO in response to the recognition that culture plays a vital role in achieving sustainable development. Areas of focus within the Culture 2030 Framework include (UNESCO, 2018a):

- 1) Cultural Heritage: Protecting tangible and intangible cultural heritage is a fundamental pillar of the Framework.
- 2) Creativity and Innovation: Culture is recognized as a key driver of creativity and innovation.
- 3) Cultural Education: Integrating culture into educational policies and practices is a strategic priority.
- 4) Cultural Diversity: A core principle of the Framework is fostering cultural diversity which can enhance tolerance, understanding, and peace. The cultural identities of all people, including migrants, must be recognized,

and all groups should be ensured equal access to cultural resources and initiatives (UNESCO, 2016).

- 5) Cultural Diplomacy: Promoting intercultural dialogue through cultural exchange and diplomacy is an important aspect of the Framework.

The implementation of the Culture 2030 Framework has been accompanied by numerous challenges and obstacles (Table 1):

Table 1. Key problems and challenges in the implementation of the Culture 2030 Framework

Key problems and challenges	Solution according to Culture 2030 Framework
Global Inequalities: The unequal distribution of cultural resources and opportunities between countries and regions remains a significant challenge	More equitable access to culture and cultural participation for all people, regardless of their socioeconomic background
Policy Gaps: Many countries still lack comprehensive cultural policies that integrate culture into broader sustainable development frameworks	Integrate culture into broader sustainable development frameworks
Digital Transformation and Digital Divide: The rise of digital platforms and technologies offers both opportunities and challenges for culture	The preservation of traditional cultural practices and heritage in the digital age
Funding and Resources: Cultural initiatives often face competition for funding with other sectors, such as healthcare and education	Adequate funding and resources, especially in low-income countries

Source: (UNESCO, 2016; United Nations, 2019; UNESCO, 2018a)

2.1. Culture 2030 indicators and SDGs

The Culture 2030 Framework is an initiative created by UNESCO that aims to provide a roadmap for integrating culture into the broader framework of the United Nations Agenda 2030. Culture has gradually become a key dimension of sustainable development, even though it was not defined a specific SDG (Wiktor-Mach, 2018).

The Culture 2030 Framework can be structured based on the following elements: main goal, key objectives, indicators and prioritizes areas.

- 1) The main goal the Culture 2030 Framework is to highlight the role of culture in advancing the 17 SDGs, especially in terms of social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and economic development.
- 2) Key objectives of the Culture 2030 Framework are (UNESCO, 2018a): culture as a driver of sustainable development, interlinking culture with

the SDGs, advancing cultural right, partnership and collaboration, and monitoring and evaluation.

- 3) The Culture 2030 Indicators are supported by a conceptual framework of four transversal thematic dimensions: Environment & Resilience, Prosperity & Livelihoods, Knowledge & Skills and Inclusion & Participation.
- 4) The Culture 2030 Framework prioritizes areas relevant to UNESCO's mandate in the field of culture where meaningful quantitative or qualitative data are already being collected or are likely to be identified as contributions to the SDGs (Table 2).

Table 2. Key characteristics of the Culture 2030 Framework in terms of its contribution to the SDGs

Key characteristics	Meaning in the context of the SDGs
The cross-cutting nature of culture	The implementation of the Culture Conventions demands further attention to SDGs Target: • Target 17.9: Capacity building • Target 17.16: Global partnerships • Target 17.17: Public, private and civil society partnerships • Target 17.19: Measurement of sustainability
Collaboration	Culture synergizes with multiple sectors in achieving the SDGs: education, peacebuilding, social cohesion, tourism, creative industries and environmental protection
Resource mobilization for the achievement of the SDGs	Provision of various types of resources in order to contribute to the achievement of SDGs

Source: (United Nations, 2019)

2.2. Culture 2030 Framework and urban sustainable development

Culture and urban development are deeply interconnected within the Agenda 2030. UNESCO promotes the role of culture in sustainable development and has put an emphasis on its programs in urban development as part of the process that led to the adoption of the 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape and the integration of culture in the Agenda 2030 and the New Urban Agenda (UNESCO, 2011; UNESCO, 2018b; United Nations, 2015; UN-Habitat, 2016).

Through networks, such as, UNESCO Creative Cities, World Heritage Sites, and Regional Capitals of Culture, cities and regions can share best practices and learn from about cultural policies and strategies.

Research highlights the need-integrating cultural aspects into smart city planning enhances the achievement of the SDGs (Sharifi *et al.*, 2024), the importance of inclusive urban policies that take cultural and social factors into account for achieving the SDGs (Brelsford *et al.*, 2017), the contribution of

cultural practices and local initiatives to sustainable urban development, and the role of cultural policies and initiatives in promoting sustainability (Kagan, 2023).

The link between sustainable urbanization, job creation, livelihood opportunities, and improved quality of life, emphasizing the need for all these sectors must be included in every urban development or regeneration policy and strategy (UN-Habitat, 2016).

The inclusion of cultural sustainability as the fourth pillar of sustainable development is achieved based on urban planning strategies whose respect and integrate cultural heritage to support the SDGs (Skrede and Berg, 2018). A strategy for integrating cultural heritage into sustainable urban development is a response to the challenges of urbanization and globalization (Sanobar and Shooshtarian, 2022).

The smart city initiative and its contribution to the achievement of the SDGs includes numerous benefits, such as improved efficiency and innovation, as well as, several challenges, including concerns about privacy and social inequality (Sharifi *et al.*, 2024), improved living conditions that often result in increased inequality (Brelsford *et al.*, 2017) and the impact of urban densification on cultural heritage (Skrede and Berg, 2018).

The preservation of cultural heritage contributes to the identity and resilience of cities in line with the SDGs, particularly with SDG 11 (Sanobar and Shooshtarian, 2022) why it is important integrating culture into urban planning to achieve SDG 11 (Kagan, 2023).

Implementing measures that leverage the role of culture in building sustainable, resilient, and green cities, is a gradual process. Understanding traditional cultural practices, including vernacular building technologies, is essential for strengthening resilience. Resilience requires redundant and diverse approaches, which can be provided through cultural diversity. Recognizing social transformations supports the existence of multiple identities within urban communities (UNESCO, 2016).

Progress indicators in the context of SDG 11 include the following indicators (UNESCO, 2016): heritage listing, number of registered protected cultural heritage sites, number of representative elements of intangible cultural heritage, number of cultural facilities and actors, percentage of residential buildings with adequate access, number of cultural institutions and facilities, number of cultural events and programs, percentage of cultural infrastructure relative to national infrastructure, number of postgraduate programs, number of training sessions, participation in awareness-raising activities, number of visitors, percentage of people practicing traditions and customs, number of cultural experiences per household annually, number of music education programs, and indicators grouped under: budget and investment, heritage preservation, and employment and income.

3. DRIVERS OF CULTURE 2030 IMPLEMENTATION: KEY INITIATIVES AND PROJECTS

Managing urban cultural diversity is one of the main challenges that cities face under contemporary conditions. Culturally sustainable development represents both an ethical and practical responsibility for city authorities and residents (Throsby, 2015). Given the practical responsibilities of authorities, urban policies should prioritize inclusive pluralism, ensuring that opportunities outweigh threats and thereby enabling the realization of the diversity dividend (Wood and Landry, 2007).

The European Union promotes European cultural heritage through various policies and programs (EC, Culture and Creativity, 2025):

European Heritage Days whose allow citizens to connect with shared heritage and actively participate in its preservation. In addition to raising awareness about the richness and diversity of European cultural heritage and encouraging interest in the protection and promotion of cultural values, European Heritage Days inform the public and policymakers about the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage.

European Heritage Label recognizes sites that have symbolic value and play a significant role in European history, as well as, those that offer educational activities, especially for young people. Since 2013, a total of 67 sites have been awarded this label.

European Heritage Awards honor remarkable projects, initiatives, and individuals in the field of cultural heritage. The awards are granted in the following categories: Conservation & Adaptive Reuse, Research, Education, Training & Skills, Citizens' Engagement & Awareness Raising, and Heritage Champions.

The European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH) organized the European dance event "Work-it-Out" in 2018, during which more than 3,500 children and young people participated on May 1st at 32 locations across 10 countries.

3.1. Analysis of cultural Europe projects in the context of contribution to the indicators of the Culture 2030 Framework

Under the Creative Europe programme, the EU supports the cultural and creative sectors through the Culture strand, which includes architecture, cultural heritage, design and fashion design, literature and publishing, music, and other sectors (EC, Culture and Creativity, 2025). Under the Culture strand, projects contributing to the achievement of SDG 11 progress indicators are formally recognized and rewarded (Table 3).

Table 3. Contribution to progress indicators in the context of SDG 11

SDG 11	Indicator
Heritage Listing	European Heritage Days: 70,000 cultural events across 48 European countries
Number of cultural facilities and actors	European Heritage Days: 50 countries that are signatories to the European Cultural Convention
Number of cultural events and programs	Creative Climate Leadership enabled former participants to organize events in their communities, reaching over 3,000 creative professionals, and inspiring more than 20,000 people through creative works. HERITART Project: 2 national artistic productions and 1 international co-production performed during two festival editions, 1 training program for professionals, 1 international network established to continue knowledge-sharing
Number of visitors	We Are Europe: 1.5 million festival visitors discovered 1,200 artists and speakers, as well as, the host festivals-forums, cities, identities, and supported ideas. The We Are Europe community reached 11 million people
Amount of investment in cultural programs	Culture Moves Europe Budget: €21 million Implementation period: 2022–2025 Number of beneficiaries: approximately 7,000 artists, professionals, and organizations Implemented by Goethe-Institut

Source: author, based on EC, European Heritage Award

The subsequent analysis examines projects under the Culture Europe initiative, selected through a sampling methodology. Awarded projects, beyond their cultural outreach effects, have also enabled mobility, education related to reducing environmental impact, and adaptive reuse of spaces.

1) Mobility of cultural workers and artists:

Culture Moves Europe, as part of the Culture Europe initiatives, facilitates mobility for artists and cultural professionals. It is a programme that supports international mobility across all 40 countries participating in Creative Europe.

2) Education:

Education is a core component of many awarded projects and initiatives, particularly in terms of reducing environmental impact, revitalizing, and preserving the environment. For example, the Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme (Ireland) involves an ecologist to ensure a holistic approach to restoration. This scheme supports farmers in repairing traditional farm buildings in ways that minimize negative impacts on local wildlife populations, with a strong emphasis on ecology and biodiversity conservation.

The International Course on Wood Conservation Technology (ICWCT) (Norway) provides professionals with the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and skills in the conservation of wooden cultural heritage. Lectures are delivered by both national and international experts covering topics such as wood anatomy, biodeterioration, preventive conservation, structural repairs, and the effects of climate change on wooden heritage.

The Masters and Apprentices project (Finland) developed a groundbreaking model for transmitting intangible cultural heritage skills from current practitioners to future generations across Finland. Local communities and organizations – including heritage associations, museums, and municipalities – continue to carry out project activities coordinated by the Finnish Local Heritage Federation.

Adaptive Reuse of Spaces:

The reconstruction of King's Cross railway station, a Grade I listed building, was completed in March 2012. This extensive project enhanced passenger facilities, optimized operational efficiency, and expanded commercial opportunities within the station. The redevelopment encompassed three key areas of architectural expertise: adaptive reuse, restoration, and new construction.

The Ignacy Historic Mine in Rybnik stands as a unique example of restoration at a former coal mining site. In 2005, the mine's most valuable components were inscribed in the Register of Cultural Heritage. Restoration efforts, initiated in 2018, focused on three primary objectives: preserving the main complex and its distinctive industrial equipment, transforming the mine into a symbol of European industrial heritage, and adapting the site for contemporary cultural and educational purposes by opening it to the public as a space dedicated to history, culture, and community engagement.

Shrewsbury Flaxmill Maltings has been revitalized as a multifunctional space, functioning as a workplace, leisure destination, and hub for social initiatives. It serves as a prime example of successful industrial heritage regeneration, with a strong emphasis on sustainability, community engagement, and innovation.

The Royal Gardens in Venice have been fully restored and reopened to the public. The project recognized the vital role of gardens for society and the local community, as well as, the importance of restoring harmony between people and nature.

3.2. Analysis of citizens' participatory contribution to decision-making: cultural policies

Citizens are encouraged to take ownership of public urban spaces, in accordance with the principles set forth in the Agenda 2030: promoting sustainable cities, cultural cooperation, and environmental preservation through the following projects:

1) Flâneur – New Urban Narratives: The project was conceived as an international partnership involving 20 organizations from 11 different countries. It centered on artistic interventions in public spaces, challenging contemporary photography and encouraging artists to develop new interpretations of urban landscapes. Drawing on the concept of the 'flâneur' as a point of departure, the project examined the city's physical context as a social construct continuously undergoing flux and transformation.

2) We Are Europe: The aim of this project is to develop a forward-looking vision of electronic culture, technology, and entrepreneurship, while contributing to new social and political developments through an interdisciplinary approach. We Are Europe is an association of eight major European events that have joined forces to promote innovative cultural practices characterized by creative diversity and exchange. Launched at the end of 2015, We Are Europe unites eight music festivals alongside professional and reflective forums from eight different European countries.

3) Creative Climate Leadership: This innovative program is designed for artists and cultural professionals to explore the cultural dimensions of climate change and to take action with creativity, resilience, and impact. Through Creative Climate Leadership, new projects, collaborations, conferences, and publications were launched in participating regions, helping to shape a global response to the climate crisis rooted in the creative sector.

The initiative connected a global creative community, amplifying the impact of work carried out by a focused group of cultural professionals to reach a worldwide audience.

4) Ignacy Mine: The Ignacy Mine is an example of successful industrial heritage revitalization, driven by local community initiatives and supported through multi-level cooperation between authorities and experts.

5) The Mapping and Archiving Public Spaces (MAPS) project aims to identify, map, and archive public spaces, architectural structures, and monuments that form part of the cultural heritage but have not yet been officially recognized as such. MAPS has developed a methodology to redefine the role of public spaces and to reassess monuments as sites of significant symbolic meaning for local communities and users. Through the digitization of cultural heritage and the creation of participatory models, MAPS democratizes the heritage preservation process by actively involving the public in the project.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Integration of culture with sectors such as education, peace building, social cohesion, tourism, agriculture, and environmental conservation enables it to align with a broad spectrum of SDGs.

The environment and resilience highlight the central role of culture in shaping sustainable communities and ecosystems. Through cultural heritage and

traditional knowledge, this dimension emphasizes how communities can better manage their natural resources, protect their heritage, and enhance resilience to climate change and environmental degradation, as indicated by Culture 2030 Framework.

The indicators aligned with the Culture 2030 Framework confirm the measurable impact of these efforts: increased cultural participation, investment in infrastructure, awareness-raising activities, and inclusive policy-making processes.

The reviewed projects and initiatives highlight the growing importance of integrating cultural dimensions into urban development and sustainability strategies. Cultural policies and creative programs – such as: We Are Europe, Flâneur – New Urban Narratives, and Creative Climate Leadership – demonstrate how culture contributes to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG 11.

These initiatives emphasize the multidimensional impact of culture, including:

- 1) Cultural Mobility expressed through several Culture 2030 Indicators,
- 2) Environmental Education and Awareness: underscore the role of cultural heritage in environmental sustainability, resilience, and biodiversity preservation,
- 3) Reuse and Revitalization of Heritage Spaces: illustrate how adaptive reuse and heritage-led regeneration can transform cities, creating vibrant public spaces while preserving historical identity and
- 4) Citizen Participation: demonstrate the power of participatory approaches in urban and cultural governance.

These projects empower citizens to take ownership of public space, reframe cultural heritage, and actively shape local identities.

Integrating culture into urban planning promotes inclusive development, safeguards cultural diversity, and strengthens the social and environmental resilience of cities.

The full benefits of diversity can only be achieved through inclusive pluralism, multi-level governance, and a strong commitment to participatory democracy in cultural policymaking.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The crucial role of culture in achieving the SDGs is recognized through several interrelated dimensions, including cultural heritage, urban development, and other related aspects. The Culture 2030 Framework was developed to address the need for integrating culture into sustainable development strategies. Within the context of the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda highlights culture's pivotal role in preserving urban quality of life and promoting cultural arts and heritage. Embedding cultural policy within urban and sustainable city development remains a key priority for contemporary progress.

In the EU, numerous initiatives are underway to promote culture and cultural heritage, alongside networks such as the UNESCO Creative Cities. Analysis of award-winning projects demonstrates that culture-related initiatives contribute to sustainable development in multiple ways. Moreover, active participation from citizens and communities in the creation of cultural solutions and projects plays a crucial role in fostering stronger support for and the advancement of cultural policies.

In the future development of ideas and project activities, it is important to consider the possibilities of cultural sustainable development, as well as, to encourage citizens to participate in decision-making related to cultural policy. This participatory involvement is a key aspect of contributing to the development of sustainable cities as communities.

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