



VOICES OF CULTURE

Structured Dialogue between the European Commission and the cultural sector

Culture and the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and opportunities

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Summary

The United Nations' [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) is a 15-year global framework. It is centred on an ambitious set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 169 targets and over 230 indicators. The SDGs address all UN Member States and the European Union. They address governments, civil society and the private sector. And they include culture.



For cultural organizations, the Sustainable Development Goals create both challenges and opportunities. The main challenge is how to ensure the effective contribution of culture to the global policy agenda. The main opportunities lie in demonstrating culture's importance to society, and supporting advocacy.

The EU and its Member States are committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda. In November 2019 the Council amended its Work Programme for Culture to prioritise the SDGs, and invited the Commission to prepare an action plan on the cultural dimension of sustainable development.¹ In September 2020 senior officials of EU foreign and culture ministries discussed the issue.

To contribute to its reflection on culture and the Sustainable Development Goals the Commission has asked Voices of Culture to organize a conversation among stakeholders. This paper has been commissioned as input for the discussion. It suggests five areas where

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:2019:410:FULL>

the EU could support the cultural sector and international cultural cooperation in the framework of the SDGs.

- **Education.** What can the EU do to support arts education and citizenship education to promote peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies?
- **Growth and employment.** How can the EU help improve working conditions for artists? How should it support the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development? How should sustainable cultural tourism be promoted? (See also the findings of the previous Voices of Culture dialogue on developing entrepreneurial and innovation potential).²
- **Sustainable communities.** While there has been significant EU action to protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, particularly in the context of the 2018 European Year and its follow-up, are there other areas of culture policy where the EU could/should do more? For example, what more could/should the EU do to promote the sustainability of cultural infrastructures in communities, in light of COVID-19?
- **Climate action.** How should the EU support the cultural sector in strengthening resilience and adapting to climate change?
- **Freedom of expression.** What more should the EU do to protect artists at risk, and to promote freedom of expression and the right to culture in the European Union and around the world?

Recent Voices of Culture discussions on the themes of gender equality and social inclusion are also relevant to the SDGs. It would be open to the Voices of Culture group to revisit these themes, but given the limited time available to the group it might be preferable to draw out and promote relevant conclusions from the previous groups' discussions in these areas.

Introduction

In 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations unanimously adopted Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.³ The SDGs represent the world's most ambitious effort yet to fight hunger and poverty, tackle inequality and injustice, and protect the planet. Many of the SDGs relate closely to economic, social, and cultural rights; SDG 16 also covers many dimensions of civil and political rights.⁴ Together, developed and developing countries have pledged "to leave no one behind." The 17 Sustainable Development Goals "are our shared vision of humanity and a social contract between the world's leaders and the people," said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2015).

The SDGs **break new ground** in several ways.

² <https://voicesofculture.eu/2019/05/16/developing-entrepreneurial-innovation-potential-of-ccs-2/>

³ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/MDGs/Post2015/TransformingOurWorld.pdf>

For the first time, the world has been provided with a comprehensive and holistic policy agenda. The SDGs require countries to mainstream the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development across government policy, and to promote peace, justice and effective institutions at home and abroad. For the first time, too, culture is part of the global agenda for sustainability and development. All the world's governments pledged "to foster intercultural understanding" and recognized "that all culture's and civilisations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development."⁵

Secondly, the Goals address the entire international community. Unlike the previous Millennium Development Goals the SDGs do not mainly concern developing countries. Instead they set common targets for all countries, from Finland in the global North to the Philippines in the global South.

Thirdly, the Goals address not only governments and public sector agencies but the private sector and civil society as well. The SDGs explicitly envisage public-private and civil society partnerships (SDG 17.17). What is more, governments are expected to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress, drawing on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders (Agenda 2030, para. 79). A High Level Political Forum has been set up to assess progress annually. Civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders have been encouraged to contribute (Agenda 203, para. 84).

To the world of culture, the Sustainable Development Goals contain both challenges and opportunities. The **main challenge** is how to contribute to the global agenda. What can cultural organizations and enterprises, artists, and policy-makers do, concretely, to promote sustainability and good governance, nationally as well as internationally? Many cultural organizations and artists have already embraced the Goals and are contributing actively, but others have yet to engage.

At the same time, the SDGs provide the cultural sector with a **major opportunity**. The fact that all governments have accepted the SDGs means that they have agreed to promote culture as part of their national policy agendas. Cultural organizations can use this commitment to highlight culture's importance to citizens and society. Cultural policy-makers can use Agenda 2030 to raise the culture's visibility and profile across government and, crucially, to make the case for appropriate financing. For culture to contribute to sustainability, it must be financed sustainably. The SDGs, in other words, represent a major opportunity to make the public case for culture.

Some cultural organizations have already done so. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), for example, has highlighted how libraries contribute to the UN agenda.⁶ ICOM issued guidance on how museum and galleries can contribute to the

⁵Agenda 2030:Transforming the World; see also SDGs 4, 8, 11, 12, and 16

⁶ <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10546>

Goals⁷; publishers and booksellers set up an SDG Book Club for children ages 6-12⁸; and around 100 broadcasters, news agencies, radio stations and digital publishers joined the United Nations SDG Media Compact.⁹ A number of European cultural organizations have also published their ideas on implementing the goals.

The role of the European Union

In Europe cultural policy is predominantly the responsibility of EU member states. The EU, however, has an important supporting role to play, including by using the EU budget to promote culture both within the European Union and in the wider world.

The EU and the member states are committed to implementing Agenda 2030. The Council confirmed they will do so “in a full, coherent, comprehensive, integrated and effective manner” and underlined that the EU and its member states “will act as **frontrunners** in this respect.”¹⁰ The EU has said it will strengthen international cultural relations “by making the most of the potential of culture to foster sustainable development and peace.”¹¹ The Council has invited the Commission to prepare, in coordination with the Member States, an **action plan** on the cultural dimension of sustainable development.¹² The Council has mandated a working group under the Open Method of Coordination (an OMC group), to work on the same theme, and contribute to the action plan, provided the Commission decides to produce one.¹³ This OMC group, due to meet in 2021, was also invited to draw on the findings of this Voices of Culture dialogue.

Purpose of the paper

To contribute to its reflection on culture and the Sustainable Development Goals the Commission has asked Voices of Culture to organize a conversation among stakeholders. This paper has been commissioned as input for the discussion.

The purpose of the exercise is to identify how the EU could best **support the cultural sector** in promoting culture as part of the SDGs. What measures would help the cultural sector to support the SDGs nationally, and within the EU as a whole? And how could the EU best support the cultural sector’s cooperation with partners in other parts of the world?

⁷ <https://curatingtomorrow236646048.wordpress.com/2019/08/21/how-can-museums-support-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

⁸ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sdgbookclub/>

⁹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2020/05/un-sdg-media-compact-100-members/>

¹⁰ Council Conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations, 23 May 2017, p. 6

¹¹ Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022, OJC 460/12, 21.12.2018

¹² Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Cultural Dimension of Development, 22 November 2019, p. 7

¹³ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6161-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

Participants may also wish to use the occasion to reflect on their own role and to share their insights and experience. As mentioned, some organizations have already integrated the SDGs in their strategy, activities, and advocacy. What have they learned? What could others learn from them?

The 17 SDGs are interdependent; success in one area (e.g. poverty) requires action in other areas (e.g. education). This means that all Goals can be considered as in some way relevant to culture, either directly (culture as a driver of sustainable development) or indirectly (culture as an enabler). Nevertheless, it is proposed to focus the discussion on 5 of the most relevant Goals. These cover the role of culture in education (SDG 4), growth and employment (SDG 8), sustainable communities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13), and freedom of expression (SDG 16). Below, relevant sections will be cited, as will examples of work by cultural organizations. To help guide the discussion a limited number of questions have been included **(in bold)**.

1. *Education (SDG 4)*

Education should aim at “a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.” (Target 4.7)

Arts and heritage education plays an important role in developing creative and critical skills and in helping learners to appreciate cultural diversity, as shown by the World Alliance for Arts Education¹⁴ and during UNESCO’s International Arts Education Week.¹⁵ Researchers in the UK found that participation in structured arts activities can increase cognitive abilities by 17%, and that students from low-income families who took part in arts activities at school were three times more likely to get a degree.¹⁶ In 2010 the World Conference on Arts Education adopted international goals for arts education.¹⁷

What more should be done to promote arts and heritage education within the EU and internationally?

UNESCO’s Global Citizenship Education empowers learners of all ages to understand global issues and to become active promoters of more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable societies.¹⁸ The Council of Europe runs a programme on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, based on its Charter on Education for Democratic

¹⁴ <https://insea.org/advocacy/waae-world-alliance-arts-education>

¹⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/artseducationweek>

¹⁶ <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/evidence/key-research-findings-the-case-for-cultural-learning/>

¹⁷ http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/CLT/pdf/Seoul_Agenda_EN.pdf

¹⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced>; see also <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced/resources>

Citizenship and Human Rights Education.¹⁹ The European Commission supports some projects through its Europe for Citizens programme.²⁰

What more should be done to promote citizenship, peace, and cultural rights education within the EU and internationally?

2. *Economic growth and employment (SDG 8)*

Target 8.3 is to promote, inter alia, “job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation.” Target 8.9 is to “devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.” (Target 12. B sets a similar objective.)

COVID-19 has dealt a major blow to artists, freelance cultural workers and cultural institutions in the EU²¹ and across the world. UNESCO set up ResiliArt.²² An EU expert group (OMC) and a Voices of Culture dialogue will study working conditions and sustainable financing in the EU.

Worldwide, the cultural and creative industries generate around 3% of GDP and 30 million jobs.²³ In some EU countries the percentage is even higher. The United Nations has declared 2021 as the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development.²⁴ The SDGs provide opportunities for the EU to reach out to partners globally, including through the UNESCO Sustainable Cities Network.²⁵

Does your organization plan to promote or get involved in the International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, if so how?

Cultural tourism accounts for 40% of tourism in Europe; it is also a major driver of tourism worldwide. In 2019 EU experts published an analysis.²⁶ Since then COVID-19 has hit the sector hard.

What more could be done to support sustainable tourism that promotes local culture and products?

3. *Sustainable communities (SDG 11)*

¹⁹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/home?desktop=true>

²⁰ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/europe-for-citizens_en

²¹ See for example <http://europeanwriterscouncil.eu/ewc-survey-covid19/>

²² <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-launches-resiliart-movement-artists-and-cultural-professionals-face-covid-19>

²³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_16_2075

²⁴ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3835223?ln=en>

²⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/home>

²⁶ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/164ea9c5-2255-11ea-af81-01aa75ed71a1/>

Goal 11 is to “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. Under Target 11.4, governments have pledged to “Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.” (Target 11.4) At EU level, cultural and natural heritage have recently been discussed comprehensively, including with cultural sector stakeholders, in the context of the European Year of Cultural Heritage and its follow-up Framework for Action. So instead of focussing here again on the heritage target, we propose to invite stakeholders to discuss the role of culture in meeting the overall goal. Building on one stakeholder’s existing work²⁷, we propose the following two questions for the group under SDG 11:

The Council Work Plan for Culture highlights that “special attention should be paid to the role of culture at local level...and to culture-led social innovations contributing to the development of cities and regions across the EU”. The European Urban Agenda includes culture in its scope of action, and promotes a multilevel approach to governance.

What more could be done to promote culture-led social innovation, working with the cultural sector, eg through Cohesion Policy, the European Urban Agenda, and the response to Covid-19?

4. *Climate action (SDG 13)*

Target 13.1 is to “(s)trengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries.”

Climate change poses a major threat to the cultural sector, and in particular to cultural heritage. In many countries policy measures are overdue. At the same time, there is much that cultural organizations can do to reduce their own carbon footprint. A Climate Heritage Network has been formed²⁸, and ICOMOS and Europa Nostra will publish a European Heritage Green Paper in 2020. At EU level, the Council World Plan for Culture includes a working group of Member State experts on the topic of heritage and climate change.²⁹ This group’s mandate is currently being finalised, to include climate change mitigation as well as adaptation.

How could the cultural sector, including heritage, be supported in strengthening resilience and adapting to climate change?

²⁷ <https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2019/09/Implementing-Culture-in-Sustainable-Development-Goals-SDGs.pdf>

²⁸ <http://climateheritage.org/>

²⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018XG1221%2801%29>

5. SDG 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions)

In many countries, freedom of expression and the right to culture are under sustained attack. Censorship and self-censorship pose a growing threat to artists, journalists and academics, as do other practices by authoritarian governments, including in the EU. European aid and diplomacy have not managed to stem the tide. The Commission is preparing to launch a Democracy Action Plan and a Digital Services Act at the end of 2020. The Council Work Plan for Culture includes a workshop on artistic freedom, hosted by the Commission, followed by a possible conference, “in order to raise awareness of its relevance.”

What more should be done to protect artists at risk, and to promote freedom of expression and the right to culture in the European Union and around the world?

About the author:



Gijs de Vries is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) where his areas of research include international cultural relations.

In 2018-2020 he was an external expert in the German Foreign Ministry's Reflection Group on Germany's future strategy for international cultural cooperation (AKBP).

He has been a member of the Board of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), a trustee of the European Union Baroque Orchestra (EUBO), and a member of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Gijs de Vries is a former Leader of the Liberal and Democratic Group in the European Parliament. He also served as State Secretary in the Government of The Netherlands and as the Dutch Government's representative in the European Convention. He is a former senior adviser to EU Secretary-General/High Representative Javier Solana and a co-founder of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

His publications include *Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: the Role of the European Union* (Stuttgart: Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2020)