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# Culture & SDGs

## The Challenge of Moving from Goals to Practice

Conference Policy Brief

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## Conference Policy Brief

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## *CONTEXT*

Established in 2017, Culture Next is dedicated to European Capital of Culture candidates, current or former, awarded or not. Its mission is to support more European cities and regions to implement the cultural programmes, partnerships and long-term development ambitions generated through the ECoC process, regardless of the final competition result.

**The 17th Culture Next Conference, hosted in Oulu, European Capital of Culture 2026**, brings together Culture Next member cities, local cultural actors, international practitioners and policy experts for a focused conversation on Culture & the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The conference starts from a practical challenge: how can the cultural sector move from recognising and aligning with the SDGs to using them more consistently in everyday decisions, programmes, partnerships and long-term development?

Within the Culture Next 2025-2028 Creative Europe programme, the Oulu Conference is the second thematic conference under the work package dedicated to artists and cultural professionals (Empowering the CCS). The same work package connects conferences, a Thematic Working Group, mobility, policy and advocacy actions. Taking place in the final years of the UN Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals, these activities create a space for cities and cultural organisations to learn from one another and translate shared ambitions around sustainability into practical tools, stronger organisational approaches and policy recommendations.

## *THE OULU CONTEXT*

Oulu offers an especially relevant setting for this conversation. As European Capital of Culture 2026, the city and its wider region are testing what long-term cultural transformation can mean in practice through the idea of Cultural Climate Change. The conference therefore takes place not in an abstract policy setting, but during an ECoC year in which questions of legacy, environmental responsibility, cultural participation, technology, regional cooperation and resilience are visible in real time.

**The programme connects policy discussion with Oulu2026 practice.** Local cultural projects, organisations and legacy actors are invited into the conversation, while the conference also creates links with the CreArt 3.0 community and other international participants. The local focus is important: sustainability becomes meaningful when global frameworks are translated into choices about programmes, organisations, public investment, mobility, infrastructure, participation and the long-term conditions for cultural work.

Oulu also makes it possible to broaden the meaning of sustainability. In a northern European context shaped by long distances, strong relationships with nature, technological capacity and regional interdependence, the discussion can connect environmental sustainability with social, institutional, cultural and human sustainability. This creates a valuable setting for asking what sustainable cultural development means in different contexts, for different communities and over different time horizons.

## *RATIONALE*

Culture is increasingly expected to demonstrate its contribution to major societal goals: climate action, health and well-being, inclusion, education, democratic participation, innovation, resilient communities and sustainable urban development. The SDGs provide a globally recognised language through which these contributions can be described and connected. For cultural organisations and cities, this shared language can help make culture visible across policy silos and strengthen the case for long-term investment.

The relationship between culture and the SDGs is nevertheless still developing. Culture is not represented by a standalone SDG, while cultural activity can contribute across many goals at the same time. This creates both an opportunity and a practical challenge: cultural organisations need ways to connect their work to the SDGs without oversimplifying cultural value or reducing sustainability to reporting. Measurement also needs to recognise

outcomes that are relational, long-term, qualitative or difficult to attribute alongside those that can be captured through quantitative indicators.

The policy challenge is therefore to move from alignment to practice. The relevant question is not only which SDGs a cultural programme contributes to, but how the framework can support better decisions: what is funded, who participates, what evidence is collected, how different objectives are balanced, how organisations cooperate across sectors, and how long-term value is sustained after a major cultural programme ends.

For ECoC cities this is particularly important. The ECoC process combines cultural programming with urban and regional transformation over many years, including the value and learning generated through the bidding process itself, whether or not a city ultimately receives the title. It can therefore become a testing ground for integrated sustainability planning, but only if sustainability is embedded from candidacy and programme design through implementation, evaluation and legacy. This perspective also connects to Culture Next's ongoing work on the legacy of bidding and the long-term value created by ECoC candidacies.

## *ADDRESSED TOPICS*

The Oulu conference concentrates on the practical and policy conditions needed to move from shared sustainability goals to meaningful cultural practice. It combines reflection on the strengths and limitations of existing frameworks with concrete examples of implementation, evidence-building and organisational change. The aim is to understand where the SDGs add value for culture, how they can be adapted to different local realities, and where complementary cultural concepts and indicators can strengthen the framework.

### *1. CULTURE'S CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABILITY: WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY TRYING TO ACHIEVE?*

The first policy question concerns the meaning of sustainability itself. Cultural policy often uses the term broadly, covering environmental responsibility, social cohesion, organisational resilience, economic viability and long-term legacy. The conference asks whether these dimensions can be held together and whether the SDGs adequately capture culture's distinctive contribution to sustainable development. This question is increasingly relevant as the 2030 horizon approaches and international discussion begins to consider what should follow it. For Culture Next, the value of an established shared framework is an important starting point: the task is not to begin again from scratch, but to learn from its use, strengthen

what works, address gaps and help ensure that culture contributes to keeping sustainable development frameworks relevant beyond 2030.

The discussion should help distinguish between **culture as a sector** that must become more sustainable and **culture as a force** that can help societies imagine, negotiate and enact sustainable futures. Both matter, but they require different policy instruments, evidence and responsibilities.

## *2. THE CHALLENGE OF MOVING FROM GOALS TO PRACTICE*

A meaningful Culture & SDGs approach needs to connect strategic commitments with everyday practice. This means integrating sustainability into strategy, commissioning, procurement, funding criteria, partnership design, audience development, mobility, infrastructure and legacy planning. It also means being able to work constructively with the choices and trade-offs that cultural organisations face, including international cooperation and travel, major events and resource use, digitalisation and its material footprint, and the balance between environmental, social and artistic objectives.

The conference therefore explores how the SDGs can become a practical decision framework for cultural organisations and cities. It asks explicitly: what needs to change for the SDGs to influence everyday cultural decisions rather than remain primarily a strategic reference? Used as a practical framework, they can help make priorities clearer, support learning across sectors, strengthen accountability and provide a common language for connecting cultural work with wider sustainable development objectives.

## *3. FROM GOALS TO PRACTICE: TOOLS, GOVERNANCE AND ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY*

Cities and cultural organisations need practical ways to translate broad goals into operational choices. The Oulu programme brings together examples from cultural organisations, municipalities and European initiatives that are already integrating sustainability into their work. These cases can clarify what capacities are needed: leadership commitment, staff skills, cross-departmental cooperation, access to data, realistic indicators, peer learning and funding models that allow organisations to invest in change rather than merely report on it.

For Culture Next, this practical dimension is directly connected to the work on creating a shared Culture & SDGs approach for ECoC cities with the endgame of helping cities plan and

evaluate cultural strategies through a comparable but adaptable framework, rather than impose a single uniform model on very different local contexts.

### *4. EVIDENCE, MEASUREMENT AND AI: WHAT SHOULD COUNT?*

Evidence is essential if culture is to be taken seriously in wider sustainability policy, but evidence systems must fit the realities of cultural work. Quantitative indicators can support comparison and accountability, while qualitative evidence can capture changes in relationships, confidence, belonging, imagination, institutional practice and community capacity that are difficult to reduce to single metrics.

The conference also explores the use of new technologies, including AI, to support evidence generation and the connection of cultural data with wider social and sustainability goals. These tools can lower the burden of data processing and reveal patterns across datasets, but they should support rather than replace transparent methodological choices, human interpretation and context-sensitive evaluation. Better technology does not resolve the prior policy question of what is worth measuring.

### *5. FROM EXTERNAL GOALS TO INTERNAL CHANGE*

Sustainability is not only a set of external outcomes. It also depends on the internal capacity of people and organisations to work differently. The conference opens a connection between the SDGs and approaches such as the Inner Development Goals, which focus on the human capabilities needed for complex transformation: reflection, collaboration, empathy, courage and the ability to act under uncertainty.

For the cultural and creative sectors, this perspective is particularly relevant. Artists and cultural professionals are increasingly involved in responding to complex societal challenges. A sustainable cultural ecosystem therefore requires not only ambitious public goals, but also institutions, resources and working environments that enable the people delivering cultural work to develop, collaborate and sustain their contribution over time.

## *POLICY DIRECTIONS TO TEST IN OULU*

The conference is designed as a working moment in the development of Culture Next's approach to Culture & SDGs. The discussions will test a set of emerging policy directions:

- embed sustainability from the beginning of cultural strategies and ECoC programmes;

- use the SDGs as a common language while allowing locally relevant cultural indicators;
- combine environmental, social, cultural, institutional and human dimensions of sustainability;
- recognise and manage trade-offs;
- invest in the capacity of cultural organisations to collect and use evidence;
- connect cultural data with wider city and regional data systems;
- protect space for qualitative evidence and long-term effects; and
- ensure that sustainability ambitions are supported by adequate resources, skills and fair working conditions.

A further direction is to treat ECoC programmes as European-scale learning environments. Candidate, title and legacy cities can test approaches over several years, compare results and share what did not work as well as what did work. Making this European-scale learning environment operational requires more than occasional knowledge exchange: it needs ongoing liaison between evaluation teams, international relations teams and other relevant staff across cities, supported by shared questions, compatible evidence approaches and regular opportunities to compare learning over time. This sustained collaboration can help build a Europe-wide and longitudinal evidence base for culture's contribution to sustainable development.

## *FURTHER READING*

Centre for Cultural Value, Evaluation Principles (2021): a practical framework for meaningful evaluation in the cultural sector, prioritising learning, stakeholder involvement and holistic understanding of impact. https://culturehive.co.uk/CVIresources/evaluation-principles/

## *POST-CONFERENCE*

The outcomes of the 17th Culture Next Conference will feed into Culture Next's wider policy and advocacy work on Culture & SDGs and on empowering the cultural and creative sectors. Conference discussions will relate to the network's Thematic Working Group, the SDG Lab and the Culture Next Policy & Advocacy Task Force, in line with the network's connected-actions approach.

The resulting work will move beyond a conference summary. It will consolidate practical lessons from Oulu2026, Culture Next member cities and invited experts; it will add to Culture

Next's past work on identifying how the SDG framework can be made increasingly useful for cultural policy and practice, including the formulation of recommendations for European institutions, national governments, local and regional authorities, ECoC bodies, cultural networks and cultural operators.

A central output of this work is the finishing of Culture Next's shared approach to planning and measuring culture's contribution to the SDGs (*see Culture Next Evaluation Framework Using Sustainable Development Goals (CNEF) - Overall Framework + Applied City Analysis + Cross-Analysis, 2024, https://bit.ly/CNext_SDG_Framework*) with the ambition of having a framework that is rigorous enough to support evidence and advocacy, but flexible enough to reflect different cities, cultural ecosystems and stages of the ECoC journey.

**The Oulu conference is a policy laboratory for moving from goals to practice**: testing how the SDGs can support better cultural decisions, stronger organisations and more sustainable cultural development.