

Boosting the cultural dimension of sustainable development – from grassroots to policy level

 Mihaela Clincu^a,  Alexandru Bănică^{a, b} ✉

^a Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania; ^b Romanian Academy, Iași Branch, Geographic Research Center

Abstract

The current article explores the integrative dimension of culture within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the European level while fostering cultural stakeholders' empowerment. As sustainable development is an international priority, the interest in the significance of the cultural sector to the transformative process towards sustainable development has risen. The dominant explanation for this trend is given by the cross-cutting dimension of the cultural field and its premises to connect the three pillars of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental. The article supports this connection by using data from semi-structured interviews with representatives of ten organisations active in the cultural field from Belgium, Greece, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Hungary. The research findings show the relevance of the cultural sector as enabling sustainable development through its transversal dimension. The results are directed towards facilitating better understanding and increased attention to the benefits of trans-sectorial cooperation between grassroots, research and decision-making actors as a contributive approach to the SDGs.

Keywords: sustainable development, culture, NGOs, SDGs, European Union

Introduction

The society's various aspirations towards cohesion, economic development, quality of life, and environmental protection depend on our capacity to manage sustainable development. These aspirations are more likely to be fulfilled through enhanced knowledge, active participation, and shared responsibility. Achieving sustainable development requires improving policy complementarity across various sectors to meet the challenges. Such a vision must reflect shared core values and the involvement of as many stakeholders as possible. The paper approaches the relevance of the cultural sector for sustainable development at the European level as

✉ Bănică Alexandru, Lecturer PhD. Researcher, Faculty of Geography and Geology, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi and Romanian Academy, Iași Branch, Geographic Research Center; email: alexandru.banica@uaic.ro.

the central theme, with particular consideration of the cultural activism's premises in tackling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It integrates the cultural field from a cross-cut perspective through the three main pillars of sustainable development: environment, social, and economic. This approach highlights the harmonisation between the three dimensions, centred on the preservation of the world's natural capacity and the use of resources in a way that is not harmful in the long term, while economic growth is supported alongside addressing the social needs. Additionally, we emphasise the role of culture as a driver and an intrinsic component of all sustainable development-centred approaches. A culture-driven sustainable development complies with the three main pillars of interconnection, pursuing the transformative potential of Agenda 2030. The three main pillars consist of interrelated concepts that should be integrated into all aspects of decision-making (Mensah & Ricart Casadevall, 2019). Moreover, policymakers should consider a country's cultural features when addressing SDG performance (Sedita et al., 2022). The myriad ways development processes and systems influence each other, from decision-making to private sectors and grassroots level, call for harnessing positive connections while addressing development challenges.

The paper's main objective is to explore the relevance of the cultural pillar within the SDGs among practitioners in Europe's independent, non-governmental cultural and creative sector. The present study approaches the implications of the cultural domain from the perspective of the NGO sector. It analyses the arguments that facilitate the transversal dimension of culture regarding the SDGs.

Among the SDGs, the paper focuses on four objectives: SDG 4: Quality education; SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth; SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities; and SDG 13: Climate action. The arguments for selecting these particular SDGs are primarily given by including culture-related issues within their targets. Moreover, we aim to encompass all three spheres of sustainable development: environmental, social, and economic. The strategy focused on four SDGs facilitated the process of incorporating the three pillars into a unified approach to better understand the connections among the elements in a system and to see sustainable development as a whole.

The analysis underlines that, at the European level, certain cultural actors and organisations are approaching this relationship between culture and sustainable development by developing people-centred strategies and playing an active role in local development policies. In addition, integrated cultural grassroots actors' involvement contributes to joined-up approaches, enabling public entities to address development priorities coherently and cohesively. Thus, by promoting strategies with a "bottom-up" approach, cultural actors support the active involvement of citizens and promote the local dynamics. Civil society may address public policies in practice through targeted actions. It may mobilise people at the grassroots level by raising their awareness of sustainable development and prioritising achieving participatory attitudes.

1. Theoretical background

Sustainable development balances environmental concerns and economic development goals while strengthening social relations. Sustainable development implies the congruence of the three fundamental pillars: economic, social and environmental “to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future” (United Nations [UN], 1987, p. 39). It implies a radical integrative approach to the territorial capital, aiming for a healthy environment, a prosperous economy, and a just and cohesive society. Effective action on economic development, global environmental changes and social challenges depends on the reconciliation between meeting real needs and resource conservation.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2001) defines culture as encompassing a society or group’s spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that shape its ways of life, human values, traditions, and beliefs. Culture can manifest in different forms, including words, sound, images, movement, monuments and objects, digital media, or traditional knowledge (UNESCO, 2024). Tangible and intangible heritage and creativity are appreciated as resources that enable culture-forward solutions to address the SDGs (Hosagrahar, 2017).

1.1. Framing culture into sustainable development

A reflection on culture and sustainable development has been emerging since the 1990s. The socio-economic significance of the cultural field was understood more deeply by Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) in their study of the cultural industry, originating in critical theory. Wallerstein (1991) argued that sustainable development is intricately related to the geocultural construct of development. The narrow economic perspective was enlarged by Throsby (1995), the first to investigate the notion of “sustainable cultural development”. Other papers highlight this link by mentioning “the social and economic opportunities and requirements to mainstream investments in cultural heritage and the living arts” (Serageldin & Martin-Brown, 1999, p. ix).

Culture fundamentals the way we interact, communicate and live, and it has the premises to stand as a connecting pillar for sustainable development. Culture shapes “practices and beliefs that can support or inspire the necessary societal transition to more sustainable living” (Kangas et al., 2017, p. 130). Also, cultural heritage is considered a development factor (Council of Europe, 2000). The critical elements of this fourth pillar of sustainable development promote cultural identities, tangible and intangible heritage, cultural pluralism, cultural industries and geocultures to address global disparities in the cultural arena (Nurse, 2006). Nurse (2006) also argues that culture should be the central pillar of sustainable development integrated with all the

others. Most of these approaches give culture equal importance as the other three pillars (Hawkes, 2001; Petrișor & Petrișor, 2014; Todoran & Patachi, 2015). Other approaches include culture in the psychological and cultural environment dimension of sustainable development (Ianoș et al., 2009). Cultural analyst Jon Hawkes (2001), author of “The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: the Essential Role of Culture in Public Planning”, offers an integrated community development model encompassing four categories: social, cultural, environmental and economic. Culture brings communities together and builds a shared understanding of where we live. It is a resource of the past and an asset for the future because “a sustainable society depends on a sustainable culture” (Hawkes, 2001, p. 12).

Culture defines our social construct and encompasses our learning patterns. Culture has a wide range of influences and interconnections with education, such as within the curriculum framework, the teaching methods or the disciplines, and its integral function at the level of mental collectivism and way of life (Hishma, 2018). Beyond shaping attitudes and values, culture also has economic effects by generating employment opportunities and revenues. Cultural activities and products enhance economic activities, promoting creativity and cultural innovation while leading to the development of the cultural economy (Kong, 2000). Moreover, cultural heritage and local cultures can be supportive mechanisms and resources for more sustainable cities by enforcing a sense of belonging and facilitating more cohesive communities that are culturally and environmentally sensitive (Rivero Moreno, 2020). As addressing the climate change challenges involves a collective commitment, culture has an increased potential for raising awareness and tackling climate change mitigation not only at the level of cultural heritage but also at a larger scale by promoting more sustainable behaviours.

Within the international policy, the theme of the interdependence between culture and sustainable development has highlighted the importance of cultural components (both traditional knowledge and heritage and modern culture, tangible and intangible assets) in building a sustainable future (United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992; United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The cultural sector’s role concerning the three pillars of sustainable development, environmental, social and economic, has been presented as the fourth pillar of sustainable development in various strategic and planning documents. The fact that the cultural field is part of the sustainable development dimension of our current global societies has already been publicly reiterated, with the role of culture being highlighted in policies aimed at sustainable development. Culture has been endorsed internationally as a pillar of development through Agenda 21 for Culture of the Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments, a guide for cultural policies and a contribution to the cultural development of humanity (United Cities and Local Governments, 2004). It was UNESCO that indicated the need to take culture into account in international cooperation and in the concept of development with the integration of human development that goes beyond economic growth and

promotes development as a process of enhancing people's capabilities and broadening their horizons. Therefore, it is necessary to refer to the United Nations, especially UNESCO, as a primary supporter of the relationship between culture and development.

When the Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda was adopted in 2015, culture was also recognised as intrinsically dependent on sustainable development (Sabatini, 2019). The seventeen SDGs are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda as they address all significant issues of the current world and integrate economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects in different combinations. The SDGs involve global engagement by all UN member states by 2030. Achieving the development goals requires community engagement through consensus and sustained partnership.

1.2. Means of action and policy support

Considering the systemic view of sustainable development and the bottom-up model proposed by “Triple helix” and “Quadruple-Helix” collaboration models (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; König et al., 2020), one of the most powerful engines of sustainable policies are represented by significant actors participating in the development process (the public sector, business sector, academic sector and lately the civil society, including the NGOs sector). Moreover, parties in sustainable development have been identified as “governmental bodies, private producing parties, science and technology, and NGOs, including consumers and local communities” (Jansen, 2003, p. 233-234). The NGO sector is being referred to through the lens of its capacity to combine roles (Lewis & Kanji, 2009), becoming a community facilitator for grassroots development since it builds social cohesion, trust and shared values among citizens. As a bridge between decision-making bodies and citizens, civil society triggers a sense of community and cultural awareness. It is particularly valuable in tackling culture as an influencing factor of public perceptions and behaviours, while collectivism is positively related to environmental consciousness (Gammoh et al., 2019). While perceiving culture as an integral part of sustainable development reflects an increased level of interest, understanding the relationship valences between culture, sustainability, and development and effectively integrating culture as a horizontal dimension in SDGs remains challenging (Opoku, 2015).

A commitment to sustainable development entails adopting participatory mechanisms involving a wide range of social groups and ensuring effective cooperation in adapting policies and strategies to local conditions in a pluralistic sense. A core advantage of NGOs is that “they have the potential to translate the global context of SDGs through performing action-oriented programmes at the local community level” (Hassan et al., 2019, p. 402) and contribute to collective awareness as the more connected to an issue people feel, the more likely they are to take responsibility and feel a sense of commitment.

Addressing cultural sustainability goes beyond conceptual identifications to cultural practices embedded in our daily lives and publicly discussed by various social actors, including non-governmental, governmental, and intergovernmental bodies (Isar, 2019). The “cultural system”, a concept used by Holden (2006), presents an interdependent relationship in the cultural sphere among politicians, policymakers, and professionals for the benefit of the public. Cultural organisations, a subset of the cultural system, “have the potential to become places where better understanding and greater support for public culture could be forged” (Shorthose, 2020, p. 20). Moreover, arts and cultural organisations “have an opportunity to lead in driving societal change and transformation towards sustainability” (Domingues et al., 2023, p. 1).

Culture contributes to building a European identity rooted in the shared values of solidarity and participation, promotes mutual understanding across Europe and stimulates active European citizenship. “The “cultural value” framework helps people and organisations understand themselves, articulate their purposes, and make decisions” (Holden, 2006, p. 57).

Culture frames the perceptions of the European Union and shapes the European identity, strengthening the link between the EU institutions, policies, ideologies and values to people’s daily lives (Bellier & Wilson, 2000). At the European Union level, the role of culture in sustainable development is emphasised in policy papers and support actions. The European Parliament report on EU action for sustainability envisages that “cultural institutions and organisations should be innovators and models in the field of sustainability” (European Parliament, 2017, p. 47). The New European Agenda for Culture foresees the influence of the member states on the input of culture to other policies, such as SDGs (European Commission, 2018). Moreover, the Commission aims to enhance dialogue with organisations from the cultural sphere. The Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022 included five priorities for European cooperation in cultural policy-making: sustainability in cultural heritage, cohesion and well-being, an ecosystem supporting artists, cultural and creative professionals and European content, gender equality, international cultural relations (Council of the European Union, 2018) and by an amendment, the sixth one: culture as a driver for sustainable development (Council of the European Union, 2020). In 2021, under the “culture as a driver for sustainable development” priority, a working group of Member State experts within the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) was established on the cultural dimension of sustainable development. In December 2022, the “Report for the Commission on the cultural dimension of sustainable development in EU Actions” was published, highlighting culture and SDGs in the EU policies (European Commission, 2022a).

In terms of European programmes, the European Union also presents a synergic approach within the measures, calls and operational programmes relevant to the cultural sector, for example, the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), Horizon 2020 and programmes such as COSME, Erasmus+, Creative Europe

and European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (European Commission, 2014). In the post-pandemic context, the sector has received increased attention at the European level through the Next Generation EU recovery instrument. Thus, the new Multiannual Financial Framework, the EU Recovery Plan, in conjunction with the commitment to the New European Bauhaus and the European Green Deal, as well as initiatives from stakeholders in the sector, constitute an essential basis for the prospects of the cultural domain in relation to sustainable development.

This is because sustainable development is never an isolated process; it requires multi-stakeholder involvement in the process of social change by integrating sociocultural approaches (Servaes & Lie, 2014). Active participation in decisions and actions at the European level is essential if we build more democratic, tolerant and prosperous societies. Active participation in community life involves more than exercising the right to vote although this is a representative democratic factor. Participation and active citizenship mean having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, if necessary, the support to influence decisions and engage in community actions and activities to contribute to sustainable community development. Information is essential in encouraging more active participation of citizens in the community, as is the right to access information about opportunities and issues that affect us. In this way, citizens will gain knowledge and confidence in their decision-making power through the information they acquire and become aware of their responsibility as active citizens in developing a democratic society through involvement in policy- and decision-making.

2. Methodology

Our research starts from comprehensive conceptual and theoretical insights into the relationship between culture and sustainable development. It empirically assesses the perception and knowledge of cultural organisations regarding the contribution of their domain and activity to SDG by using targeted semi-structured interviews and the content analysis of these interviews. The interview is a qualitative technique that is more time-consuming than simple questionnaires but offers the opportunity for the researcher to interact and communicate with the respondents to obtain a deeper and more personalised view of the topic that can be actively interpreted (Hussein, 2022; Ilovan & Doroftei, 2017). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher asks pre-determined but open-ended questions to determine the respondent's in-depth perspective on a specific topic (Ayres, 2008).

The qualitative analysis is based on ten semi-structured interviews with representatives from ten organisations in Belgium, Greece, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain. The selection criteria included geographical coverage, EU member countries, cultural profile, diverse level of

involvement—local, national, and international—and diverse range of actions—grassroots activities and policy involvement.

The interview-specific objectives were related to assessing the perception of the representatives of the NGO sector in three areas: 1) Framing the culture as an intrinsic component of sustainable development; 2) Illustrating the specific inclusion of cultural aspects in four of the current SDGs, i.e. SDG4 (quality education), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG13 (climate change); 3) Performing an insight in current EU policies that already include, *de facto*, culture as a driver of sustainable development among civil society stakeholders.

The second objective was set following the results of the study “Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs: Strategies and Priorities in the European Union Countries” (Vila et al., 2021). It identified that SDG 11, SDG 4, SDG 13, and SDG 8 are among the eight most referred to SDGs in the EU countries’ cultural policies. To go into more depth, Table 1 shows the targets associated with the four objectives, including references to cultural activities. The other four SDGs referred to within the study are SDG10, SDG17, SDG16, and SDG5, whereas “the other SDGs have no occurrence or are so minimal that they cannot be taken into account.” (Vila et al., 2021, p. 80). Reference to the four selected SDGs under analysis is underlined as well within the study “Culture in the sustainable development goals: The role of the European Union”, including culture in education (SDG4), the cultural and creative industries and tourism (SDG8), protecting the cultural and natural heritage (SDG11) and disaster risk prevention (SDG13) (Vries, 2020).

Table 1. The SDGs explored in the analysis

SDG pillar	SDG	Target
Economic	SDG8: Decent work and economic growth	Target 8.3: Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services. Target 8.9: By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.
Social	SDG4: Quality Education	Target 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyle, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

Environment	SDG13: Climate change	Target 13.3: Improve education, awareness-raising, and human and institutional capacity for climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning.
Transversal	SDG11: Sustainable cities and communities	Target 11.4: Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

Source: authors' representation

The interviews were conducted between 20 April and 05 May 2021 and were recorded on the Zoom platform for approximately 40 min/interview duration. Profile of the organisations participating in the interview: non-governmental, independent organisations with a profile of activity in the civic, cultural, educational and youth sectors, with activity implemented at local, national and European levels (Table 1).

Table 2. The cultural NGOs participating in the current study

No.	Region	Country	EU membership	NGO year of foundation	NGO main areas of action	Role of the respondent (R)
1.		Romania	2007	2007	culture, youth, education, human rights	Executive President
2.	Central and Eastern Europe	Poland	2004	2016	youth, education, culture, environment	International projects coordinator
3.		Hungary	2004	2013	education, policies, cultural diversity	Expert in youth policies
4.		Slovenia	2004	2004	youth, education, culture	Coordinator
5.	Western Europe	Belgium	1958	1994	culture, policies	Policies director
6.		France	1958	2010	education, culture	Coordinator
7.		Greece	1981	2004	youth, education, culture	Director
8.	Southern Europe	Italy	1958	2006	youth, education, culture, environment	Director
9.		Portugal	1986	2013	youth, education, culture, social entrepreneurship	President
10.		Spain	1986	2014	youth, education, culture	Director

Source: authors' representation

All participating organisations support European values and objectives, active European citizenship and involvement in European Union policies and programmes. The respondents know EU policies and programmes and are actively involved in the NGO sector through projects that respond to the development needs of their communities.

According to the study mentioned above, “Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs: Strategies and Priorities in the European Union Countries”, the interviewed respondents’ countries were situated at different levels of SDGs inclusion in the EU cultural policies. France, Belgium, Spain and Italy are perceived among the most active countries in the EU in terms of SDGs and cultural policies, Poland in the medium average, while Hungary is perceived with the fewest SDGs within the cultural policies (Vila et al., 2021). The study does not provide information on Romania, Slovenia, Greece, and Portugal. According to the Interview answers, the means of action implemented by the respondents include training courses, volunteering, research, involvement in policy level, fashion events, fashion theatre (R1), mobility projects and volunteering, job shadowing (R2), lectures, researches, policy papers, cultural programmes, training programmes, youth forums, seminars (R3), week of the culture festival, youth exchange, non-formal education (R4), cross-sectorial, trans sectorial cultural networking, policy monitoring, policy initiatives, policy campaigns (R5), cultural projects (R6), events to promote the SDGs agenda, intercultural dialogue, creating online tools, activities for refugees (R7), mobility of youth from peripheral areas, mobility projects (R8), European volunteering, training courses, sport activities (R9) and youth exchanges, murals with urban art (R10). In terms of specific cultural areas highlighted in relation to the SDGs and sustainability, these are creative industries, cultural heritage, visual arts, linguistic particularities, intercultural learning, and cultural diversity.

We transcribed the interviews to perform the content analysis. Then, we used the ATLAS.ti software as a tool for qualitative data analysis and visualisation. We obtained our findings in a three-stage approach. In the first stage, a comprehensive reading and understanding of the empirical data was performed based on the interview objectives, and a classification of themes and sub-themes was created. In the second stage, we identified code labels and associated terms and assigned them to quotations within the ten data sets. In the third stage, we conducted the analytical connections on the code labels, explored code co-occurrences, and examined the main notions frequencies.

The code labels are: European Union, NGOs, culture, sustainability, SDGs, SDG4, SDG8, SDG11, SDG13.

The key concepts and associated terms introduced in the analysis in relation to each code include:

- European Union: policy, programme, initiative, funding, Europe, international, opportunity, support;
- NGO: project, youth, organisation, society, young person, citizen;

- Culture: culture, dialogue, intercultural, people, creative;
- Sustainability: sustainable development, growth, future, sustainability, community, Europe;
- SDGs: sustainable development, goals, cultural, European, sustainability;
- SDG4: education, quality, information, access, inclusion, youth, social;
- SDG8: work, economic, industries, growth;
- SDG11: city, community, rural, urban, development;
- SDG13: climate, climate change, environment, awareness.

3. Results and discussions

The content analysis adds depth to understanding the multi-faceted dimension of culture related to sustainable development. The role of culture is explored in its capacity to make transition actions possible and its potential for transformation towards the SDGs aligned to the interest that has flourished during the last decades “in investigating the role of culture in sustainable development” (Verina et al., 2021, p. 74).

3.1. Frequent terms and overall connections

The respondents in the interview recognised in culture the potential to improve identity, promote a creative, innovative, and inclusive society, be open to the new, play an essential role in life quality, be preventive of social difficulties, and even prevent conflict. They linked it with social development and recognised it as a generator of creativity, a prerequisite for social cohesion, and a strong community bond. The interviews show that participants are well acquainted with the importance of the cultural field for sustainable development. They were actively involved in projects of cultural interest. In this context, we underline the relevance of cultural organisations to become places of dialogue, to facilitate a culture of an inclusive society and quality of life, and that accessibility of culture and active participation strengthen civic awareness and can contribute to sustainable development.

As illustrated in Figure 1, there is a preponderance of terms in relation to the content of all ten interviews: cultural, culture, people, European and sustainable. The terms education, projects, organisation, young people, union, and countries are also critical.

According to the figure presented, the participants in the interview are involved in activities promoting the SDGs as a whole and specific activities related to the SDGs. Concerning the interview content, culture and SDGs are linked by association and mutual correspondence at the European Union level. In the interview, four of the SDGs that are part of the 17 goals were mainly analysed, namely SDG4, SDG8, SDG11 and SDG13.

3.2. Culture and Sustainable Development Goals – a Common Ongoing Path

The interview content was divided into main themes and sub-themes following the topics under discussion, and common patterns were identified.

Figure 3. Mind-map: Themes and sub-themes



Source: authors' representation

Figure 3 presents the relations mind-map between the paper's central concepts, themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview content analysis. Having at its core the culture and sustainable development nexus, the interviews explore five main directions and particular sub-themes: culture and SDGs with focus on the societal role of culture and the four SDGs, culture and SDG4 that highlight the intercultural education, culture and SDG8 that encompasses two main directions, the decent work with a focus on working conditions and the economic growth with a focus on sustainable industries, culture and SDG11 that brings a focus on communities and collaboration, and culture and SDG13 that emphasises culture's raising awareness potential. The organisational cooperation framework encompasses the culture and the SDGs emerging analysis directions.

The relevance of the cultural domain for SDGs is argued to take into consideration the local practices and grassroots social actors as active contributors to the global visions as “all sustainable practices and policies that will be achieved through these goals must be adapted through a cultural context of a specific area” (R4) considering that “development processes have everything to gain from observing local practices” (Bandarin et al., 2011, p. 19).

The societal role of culture in sustainable development is highlighted in consideration of “the meaningful content of human societies and communities” (Dessein et al., 2015, p. 30). Thus, the social dimension highlights that “culture is about the social fabric itself; it is about who we are as a society” (R5). The role of culture is underlined in terms of sustainability “because culture represents our traditions, our past, our directions as human beings, we cannot dissociate a human being or society from culture because culture is our supporting environment” (R1).

At the same time, it is mentioned that the link between culture and the SDGs must be a mutual one and “there are two sides to this issue, one is whether the sustainable development agenda takes into account a cultural dimension and promotes it and the other would be to what extent the cultural dimension promotes the SDG agenda” (R7).

Figure 4. The co-occurrences between the main domains included in the analysis

	○ Culture	○ European Union	○ NGO	○ SDG11	○ SDG13	○ SDG4	○ SDG8	○ SDGs	○ Sustainability
○ Culture		67	102	71	54	70	63	133	101
○ European Union	67		78	39	27	49	44	79	72
○ NGO	102	78		73	43	76	71	107	97
○ SDG11	71	39	73		24	36	37	80	84
○ SDG13	54	27	43	24		55	27	49	33
○ SDG4	70	49	76	36	55		41	65	54
○ SDG8	63	44	71	37	27	41		58	60
○ SDGs	133	79	107	80	49	65	58		119
○ Sustainability	101	72	97	84	33	54	60	119	

Source: authors’ representation

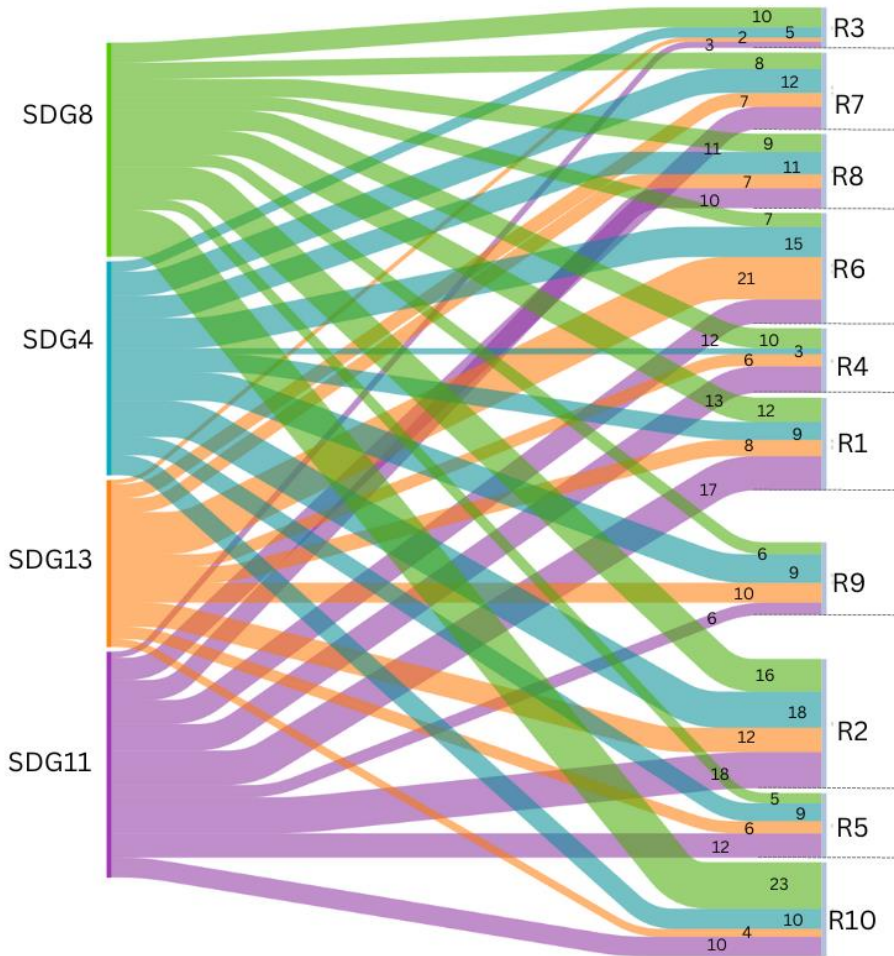
As presented in Table 3, the correlations between the critical domains (assessed by key codes) identified within the interview analysis have different strength levels. The level of linkage between the cultural domain and the SDGs is the strongest, with a frequency correlation of 133 and the concept of sustainability (101), underlining their interconnection and relevance. This view benefits both sides, reinforcing the call for united actions, as echoed in the “Unite to Act” SDGs global campaign initiated by the UN (UN, 2023). A representative correlation is also observed between the cultural domain and NGO (102) that reiterates the level of involvement of civil society in cultural initiatives. Regarding the relevance of the cultural domain to the four SDGs analysed, according to the results of the interviews, it is observed that the cultural domain is the most relevant through the connection with SDG11 (71), followed in order of frequency by SDG4 (70), SDG8 (63) and

SDG13 (54). Concerning SDG11, Target 11.4, which envisages the protection of cultural and natural heritage, highlights the risk of environmental degradation and the importance of ensuring a balance between the past generations' inheritance and future advancements. For SDG4, culture is a binding element of learning and a supportive factor in overcoming barriers to education for all. As for SDG8, cultural labour markets and cultural participation are social capital and economic dynamics factors, thereby contributing to long-run development objectives. Even though perceived as least relevant, there is no lack of importance in the power of culture to shape change that is aligned with environmental concerns.

The link between cultural domain, SDGs and sustainability in relation to the European Union shows a medium co-occurrence intensity between values 67 - 79. A stronger link is observed between culture, SDGs, sustainability and NGOs, with values between 97 and 133. This underlines that accomplishing the SDGs depends on active engagement and shared responsibility at all levels, from decision-making to grassroots. It considers how inter-sectorial cooperation enhances the extent to which SDG targets are mainstreamed into cultural programmes and initiatives and integrates culture into sustainable development policies.

As presented in Figure 5, the interviewed stakeholders had different perceptions regarding the contribution of the cultural field to the four SDGs focused on within the paper. These differences highlight the capacity of cultural organisations to contribute to the SDGs at different levels and the transversal influence of the cultural field within the SDGs. Figure 5 presents the four SDGs according to the main pillars: economic (SDG8), social (SDG4) and environmental (SDG13), as well as the transversal SDG11 associated with the interviewed stakeholders opinions. Therefore, it is noted that SDG8 is highly perceived as relevant for two of the respondents (R10 and R2), SDG4 is strongly considered by the other two respondents (R2 and R6), SDG13 is appreciated as highly relevant by one of the respondents (R6), and SDG11 is stronger considered by two of respondents (R2 and R1). It is also noted that even if the total SDG11 is appreciated as the most relevant for the cultural stakeholders, analysed individually per respondent, the highest values are concerning SDG8 (the value of 23 at R10) and SDG13 (the value of 21 at R6). Also, Figure 5 reveals that two respondents (R2 and R6) consider their organisations very close to the four SDGs, with a total value for the four SDGS of 64 and 55, respectively. By comparison, one of the respondents (R3) considers the four SDGs less relevant, with a total value of 20. We further elaborate on the culture's relevance for each of the four SDGs from the viewpoint of the cultural stakeholders and based on the literature.

Figure 5. The emphasis of the cultural stakeholders’ discourses on the four selected SDGs



Source: authors’ representation

Culture and SDG4

Culture contributes to the overall education process as a means of collective identification. “Culturally sustainable education includes creativity, cultural customs, cultural heritage and an awareness of history, cultural landscapes, interaction between generations, internationality, locality as well as multiculturalism and diversity in education” (Laine, 2016, p. 64).

The cultural relevance of SDG 4 is confirmed as a consensus among the interviewed respondents, being appreciated as highly relevant with multiple benefits. Perceived as “the most obvious ally that we do have” (R5), all cultural dimensions are considered very appropriate to quality education (R6). Cultural education contributes to raising younger generations to express their concerns and vision for European society by developing awareness of responsible and sustainable behaviour, as “you cannot talk about quality education without talking about inclusive education and intercultural education” (R7). The role of culture is considered a basic one: “For me, I think it all starts there” (R9), with education among children being emphasised first and foremost. The cultural dimension and education are appreciated as interconnected and mutually supportive, considering that “education and culture team up together” (R5).

Regarding this objective, quality was also mentioned beyond the provision of educational conditions and content. Because primary conditions are insufficient, a more sustained quality education is necessary.

Culture and SDG8

The relevance of the cultural domain to SDG 8 is identified from the two main components: decent work and economic growth. Considerations that the cultural dimension should be emphasised are noted in that the tendency to interpret SDG8 is “mainly through economic criteria” (R7). This underlines the need to harness the cultural dimension, considering that the type and composition of the cultural sector can influence economic development. “Generally speaking, every field of culture – be it profit or non-profit, public or private, based on heritage or creative industry – is known to produce employment and revenues” (Bandarin et al., 2011, p. 18).

The participants stress the contribution of the cultural sector to economic development through its potential for creativity and innovation through cultural and creative industries and the capacity to be a development engine that brings together other sectors, such as tourism or economic investment, “to see product or services in terms of sustainability” (R10).

Concerning decent work, the relevance of culture in social construction and the creation of an awareness of rights at work is deepened, especially “in the part of the SDG 8 that deals with work conditions, decent work conditions. I think that there is a strong cultural dimension” (R7). Moreover, decent work represents an index of human development and quality of life, and “every work should be decent and have the appropriate conditions” (R4).

Culture and SDG11

Interviewed respondents believe the cultural dimension is necessary for achieving the targets leading to sustainable cities and communities. However,

regarding this target, focusing on sustainable communities rather than sustainable cities is considered a higher priority. “I have a bigger faith in the sustainable communities” (R4) because achieving the target from a community perspective is more realistic. Both overcrowding and excessive digitalisation in urban areas are perceived to be far from what a sustainable community is, and “we need to keep the balance between the opportunities of the people of the village and the cities” (R10).

The cultural dimension is strongly perceived as a connecting factor and mediator, and the capacity of culture to connect tradition and new technologies is stressed (R1), as well as the importance of increased “intra-sectoral and intersectoral collaboration” (R1) and “to work together with the institutions” (R8).

Culture and SDG13

When considering the cultural NGO sector’s contribution to SDG3, it is not considered the most relevant. The possible directions of the cultural dimension concerning SDG13 have been emphasised in terms of awareness impacts. “Awareness has been considered an important accelerator for change towards sustainability” (Dessein et al., 2015, p. 44). The cultural pillar is perceived from its capacity of “communicating to a large audience and make them aware” (R1) as “the people can be moved through campaigns” (R8) as well as through targeted initiatives “in our level only by projects, in raising awareness” (R2). Moreover, a dual influence is remarked: “the greening of the cultural sector itself and the cultural sector being an ambassador in the green transition in a more holistic understanding of it” (R5).

However, it remains a sector worth to be further approached as the “transformative power of the cultural and creative sectors is not yet sufficiently exploited in the fight against climate change, and the shift towards new sustainable models” (Kamara, 2022, p. 217) and increased support is considered as needed to “put more empowering in that” (R9).

3.3. Sustainable development through empowerment of cultural NGOs

Culture, as a factor in shaping identities, creates a value system that is a social bond, promotes creativity and innovation at different levels and supports active involvement. Involvement in cooperation initiatives brings added value by creating synergetic effects in the culture and other fields and developing European partnerships at various levels. “Cooperation with different partners from civil society (artists, activists, NGOs, experts, and concerned citizens) allows for more prosperous, just, and inclusive societies” (Hristova et al., 2015, p. 4). The organisations’ role stands out as a connecting factor by their capacity “to create broad coalitions with people, to initiate bottom-up, grassroots activity, build up coalitions and be together a civil society” (R5) and role of “bringing cooperation at different levels, to foster and to go beyond the limits that governmental organisations may

have” (R8) as well as “to provide support and to include people in the society” (R7). Considering the organisations’ role, “they are most active in the fields that are least covered by public action and build cross-sectoral connections” (Delfín, 2022, p. 117). A mobilisation of cultural sector stakeholders towards enabling the cultural domain within sustainable development policies is the “Culture 2030 Goal” campaign (Arterial Network et al., 2022). The civil society sector is perceived as a contributor to the social reality, enriching European cultural and value systems while adding elements of attractiveness and multi-layered initiatives as mediators to reinforce cultural identity. Another relevant aspect is cultural participation, which could be pivotal in taking action as “cultural participation in all its dimensions is a key resource for human well-being, capabilities and resilience” (European Commission, 2022b, p. 51). Conversely, the civil sector faces challenges and limitations in its capabilities and potential, which stands at the delineation between the motivation of involvement and real impact. While some initiatives could be effective, the organisations do not have the capacity to get the funding and implement them (R3).

In response, with its vast cultural and creative potential, Europe has a wealth of experience in using and implementing programmes that stimulate cultural initiatives, “The European Union gives a high importance to the social and culture, actually in all fields of policies and it has developed a wide range of funding opportunities and programmes” (R7). As “dialogue between the European Commission and NGOs is an important complement to the institutional process of policy-shaping” (European Commission, 2000, p. 7) in 2007, the European Agenda for Culture introduced two new instruments for cooperation in the field of culture at the EU level: the open method of policy coordination with EU Member States and structured dialogue with civil society. The structured dialogue with civil society in the field of culture was developed through two complementary instruments: the Civil Society Cultural Platforms and the European Cultural Forums. Since 2015, the European Union has implemented a structured dialogue platform called Voices of Culture, approaching themes aligned with the priorities of the EU Council work plan for culture and with policy discussions between Member States’ experts. This structured dialogue process involves the cultural sector in the cultural policy debates at the European level, facilitating collaboration between the cultural sector and the European Commission. The culture–sustainable development topic was approached within the call “Culture and the Sustainable Development Goals: challenges and opportunities” (Voices of Culture, 2020-2021), ending up with a dedicated brainstorming report (Goethe-Institut, 2021).

Sustainability is a crucial concept at the EU level, with more and more events repositioning sustainability at the centre of political and theoretical discussions, a fact underlined as well by the respondents: “I think that sustainability is part of all the European programmes, it is like a pillar for all the policies of the European Union” (R10). The process towards the desideratum of the SDGs requires

collective awareness and involvement with a sustained connection between public policy and grassroots agents to have a democratic debate at the public level through cross-sectoral collaboration. “The European Commission, as any democratic government, has a two-fold incentive to support European Civil Society: input legitimacy in the policy-making process, and the creation of a vibrant polity or social sphere for social cohesion and policy entrepreneurship” (Mahoney & Beckstrand, 2009, p. 7). The EU’s commitment to implementing the UN 2030 Agenda, together with its member countries, has already been acknowledged, as mentioned in the following statement: “I know that the European Union is very active, one of the most important partners. It is completely legitimate that the European Union is one of the leaders of this initiative” (R4). Delivering this ambitious agenda will make Europe more robust and influential and will sustain its leadership on global priorities. For “a new generation of sustainability leaders and citizens in the EU and elsewhere, we believe there is a need to create innovative models for learning that emphasise systems thinking and the use of participatory methods” (Meehan et al., 2017, p. 259).

This requires increased action of culture for sustainable development to support and highlight this cultural dimension to bring culture into the public debate, the democratic debate and the policy-making table alongside initiatives in education for sustainable development, sustainable lifestyles and raising awareness. Moreover, “coordination and collaboration need to be further improved, including between the EU and national capitals” (Vries, 2020, p. 6).

3.4. Discussions

The paper explores the process of culture integration within the realm of sustainable development and the contributions of grassroots actors to this debate. A bottom-up approach enables a focus on the dynamics of interactions between and within sectors, as well as collaboration across dimensions, to identify a common path. Addressing culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development supports an integrative view of the SDGs that stand on the roots of human values, harnessing the power of emotions and beliefs as a reservoir of mindset influence. Shared values, customs, and beliefs form the foundation of societies, as people shape civilisation and drive sustainable development (Aririguzoh, 2022).

Underlining the SDGs as the imperative mission in sustainable development, envisaging development settings as a series of live interactions and understanding the links among constituent targets is essential. While an increased number of voices is thriving to shed light on the culture’s contributive potential to the SDGs, we focus on a complex approach of the culture’s answer to SDGs challenges, which produce effects beyond the sum of the SDGs targets. Thus, culture as a field per se is a generator of solutions, resource consumption, and environmental impact generator. In this consideration, the perspective of culture as a transversal input is perceived as

both a connecting and beneficial factor, as well as bringing more challenges in dealing with the complexity of SDGs.

A distinct focus on four SDGs offered a deeper understanding of the culture's interaction with the social, economic and environmental dimensions in the grassroots - decision-making angle.

The relationship between culture and quality education approach is perceived as essential to human development. As a core point of agreement, culture is acknowledged as bringing multiple benefits to educational content and quality commitment. Despite dedicated policies addressing quality education, accessibility issues and inequalities in education remain, and there is a need for increased efforts and rationale to be put forth in grassroots measures and actions (Kuroda & Nakasato, 2023).

Regarding the cultural dimension within SDG8, the two main components, decent work and economic growth, bring an intertwined perspective. On the side of decent jobs, it enriches the vision of well-being, stressing the endorsement of social relations and investment in social infrastructure (Rai et al., 2019). On the other side, the challenges in measuring culture raise difficulties in addressing the culture's impact on economic growth. However, the distribution of income and wealth in society is intertwined with the cultural background under the influence of economic institutions and political system mechanisms (Petraakis, 2014).

Looking at the breakdown of SDG11 within the interview analysis, the direction of the community's approach prevails over the city's dimension when it comes to envisioning culture on the sustainability horizon and the need for development opportunities for rural and urban environments. In addition, in the context of a growing urbanisation framework, the governance premises are vital for the SDGs alongside the recognition of stakeholders' cooperation in providing transit solutions (Küfeoğlu, 2022).

As for the cultural dimension in SDG13, while the cultural sector is not perceived as a forefront domain, it can still bring its input through increased contribution to climate awareness and environmental sensitivity. Moreover, it facilitates a linking climate policy to lifestyles and stimulates proactive behaviours towards embracing climate action (Franco et al., 2020).

Given the European area of our study, the EU framework is perceived as a beneficial support for accelerating the accomplishment of SDG targets through dedicated programmes and measures. A common language and communication approach in the frame of SDG indicators and cultural sustainability at the level of the EU and a coordinated strategy among nations and public institutions would facilitate reaching different stakeholders and increase the level of engagement (Ferran Vila et al., 2022). Therefore, continuous action is still needed to support the commitment towards future generations.

In light of this transversal approach, cultural perspectives become leverage points in SDGs efforts and contributive factors through integrated catalytic

interventions from policy to grassroots levels. While an ambitious task, investigating the cultural dimension of sustainable development is certainly worth further exploration to generate new prospects on the knowledge path.

3.5. Limitations and possible future directions

The findings presented in this paper should be considered from the perspective of several limitations. First, the paper is subjected to a limited scope of the target group of 10 NGOs scattered in the European Union countries that generate the identified results and relations in the content. Given that representatives of different countries completed the interviews, intercultural communication may be a factor in terms of differences in the interpretation provided by the cultural backgrounds and perspectives of cultural understanding. Therefore, a future study may explore the topic by enlarging the geographical scope and number of interviewed experts.

Considering the focus on the four SDGs, we have approached four goals in detail while bringing other goals into discussion might bring new perspectives on the paper's objective. In addition to the in-depth analysis of the four SDGs addressed in the research, participants also mentioned the importance of other SDGs concerning the cultural dimension, which may be a possible future direction of the current study. The goals added are SDG 5 - gender equality and SDG 17 - partnerships to achieve the goals. "I think there are still more SDGs that, maybe, are more important from this perspective and for the cultural side because, for example, there is the SDG on the partnership of institutes, and I think this is one of the most important in this area because through a partnership it would be much easier to develop such projects" (R3). The importance of a multi-perspective approach and the relevance of culture as a whole is also stressed. "It is essential that this cross-sectorality does not leave culture to humanists and science to scientists, but explores synergies and ways of doing things together [...] the word community is a keyword for our understanding of culture" (R5).

Conclusions

As sustainable development is an international priority for the efficient use of resources following the development needs of contemporary society while also aiming, in the long run, towards a clean and resilient environment and an equitable and prosperous society, the theme of the paper brings an integrative approach to the cultural field related to the SDGs and supports its relevance. Culture involves people's actions, so that we build our communities through culture, use culture as a platform for dialogue to rethink the link between social, environmental and economic areas and bring a new framework around culture as a development engine.

Regarding the analysis focused on four of the seventeen SDGs, based on the ideas shared by the representatives of ten prestigious cultural NGOs, we can draw the following conclusions:

- SDG 4 - Quality education: culture proves to be relevant in contributing to the achievement of this goal, from the fundamental implications of the goal, such as supporting a quality educational process.
- SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth: culture has multiple valences, from supporting professional ethics, deontology, and social equity to contributing to economic growth. In this sense, the contribution of cultural and creative industries as generators of economic development following current opportunities and challenges is noteworthy.
- SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities have representative associations with the cultural field from the perspective of culture as a community binder, promoter of human values with collective impact, and open to innovative approaches in community development.
- SDG 13 - Climate action, although it has lower associations, the contribution of culture in raising awareness of environmental challenges and the effects of climate change in sociocultural processes is noticeable.

Therefore, becoming a society that aligns with sustainable development principles requires a complementary approach in which economic, environmental, and social dimensions are interlinked. In the broadest sense, culture is a community identification process that contributes to the overall purpose of development. There is a high consensus that the cultural domain represents a value system of its own while acting as a social bond of community, developing horizons and strengthening policy dialogue and the cultural contribution is an investment in sustainable development. The need to link European, national and local policies on the place and space of culture in sustainable development is also highlighted in the system of governance to strengthen public participation.

Acknowledgement: The authors acknowledge the grant from the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitisation, CNCS - UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCCE-2021-1878, within PNCDI III, project – Institutions, Digitalisation and Regional Development in the EU.

References

- Aririguzoh, S. (2022). Communication competencies, culture and SDGs: effective processes to cross-cultural communication. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01109-4>
- Arterial Network, Culture Action Europe, ICOMOS - International Council on Monuments and Sites, IFCCD - International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity,

- IFLA - International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, IMC - International Music Council & UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) Culture Committee - Agenda 21 for Culture). (2022). *Culture 2030 Goal*. http://culture2030goal.net/sites/default/files/2023-02/EN_culture2030goal_declaration%20CultureGoalMondiacult_2.pdf
- Ayres, L. (2008). Semi-structured Interview, in: L.M. Given (ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 810-811), Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909>
- Bandarin, F., Hosagrahar, J., & Sailer Albernaz, F. (2011). Why development needs culture. *Journal of cultural heritage management and sustainable development*, 1(1), 15-25. <https://doi.org/10.1108/20441261111129906>
- Bellier, I., & Wilson, T. M. (2000). Building, imagining and experiencing Europe: Institutions and identities in the European Union. In *An anthropology of the European Union* (pp. 1-27). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.4.1231>
- Carayannis, E. G., & Campbell, D. F. (2009). 'Mode 3' and 'Quadruple Helix': toward a 21st century fractal innovation ecosystem. *International journal of technology management*, 46(3-4), 201-234. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTM.2009.023374>
- Council of Europe. (2000). *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent* adopted at the 12th Session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning on 7-8 September 2000 in Hanover, European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning, CEMAT(2000)7. <https://rm.coe.int/1680700173>
- Council of the European Union. (2018). *Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022*. Official Journal of the European Union. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018XG1221\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018XG1221(01)&from=EN)
- Council of the European Union. (2020). *Council conclusions amending the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022*. Official Journal of the European Union. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0609\(03\)&from=GA](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020XG0609(03)&from=GA)
- Delfin, M. (2022). Opening up cultural governance through civil society participation. In *Re/shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing culture as a global public good* (pp. 117-137). UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474>
- Dessein, J., Soini, K., Birkeland, I., Fairclough, G., Horlings, L., De Beukelaer, C., Matejic, J., Stylianou-Lambert, T., Mihaila, M., Spinozzi, P., Cicerchia, A., Johannisson, J., Kangas, A., Lapka, M., Dragicevic Sestic, M., Siivonen, K., Skjerven, A., Plebańczyk, K., Tomka, G., ... Reimer, M. (2015). *Culture in, for and as sustainable development: Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability* (pp. 30 – 44). University of Jyväskylä. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3380.7844>
- Domingues, A. R., Mazhar, M. U., & Bull, R. (2023). Environmental performance measurement in arts and cultural organisations: Exploring factors influencing organisational changes. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 326, 116731. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2022.116731>

- European Commission. (2000). *The Commission and NGOs: Building a Stronger Partnership, COM 11 final*, 18 January, Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2000:0011:FIN:EN:PDF>
- European Commission. (2014). *Enabling synergies between European Structural and Investment Funds, Horizon 2020 and other research, innovation and competitiveness-related Union programmes*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/wikiguide/gn0098_guide_on_synergies_en.pdf
- European Commission. (2018). *A New European Agenda for Culture, COM 267 final*, 22 May, Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0267&from=EN>
- European Commission. (2022a). *Report on the cultural dimension of sustainable development in EU actions, COM 709 final*, 09 December, Brussels. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=COM:2022:709:FIN>
- European Commission. (2022b). *Stormy Times Nature and humans: Cultural courage for change*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0380f31c-37c9-11ed-9c68-01aa75ed71a1>
- European Parliament. (2017). *Report on EU action for sustainability*. Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, 2017/2009(INI). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0239_EN.html
- Ferran Vila, S., Miotto, G., & Rom Rodríguez, J. A. (2022). The SDGs in the EU Cultural Policies: an institutional communication perspective. *Communication & Society*, 35(4), 117-131. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.35.4.117-131>
- Franco, I.B., Tapia, R., & Tracey, J. (2020). SDG 13 Climate Action. In: Franco, I., Chatterji, T., Derbyshire, E., Tracey, J. (Eds.), *Actioning the Global Goals for Local Impact* (pp. 219-228). Science for Sustainable Societies. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9927-6_14
- Gammoh, B. S., Okoroafo, S. C., & Koh, A. C. (2019). Cultural influences on environmental consciousness and green environmental behavior. *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, 11(1), 20-29. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v11n1p20>
- Goethe-Institut. (2021). Voices of Culture, Brainstorming report *Culture and the Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities*. <https://voicesofculture.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/VoC-Brainstorming-Report-Culture-and-SDGs.pdf>
- Hassan, M. M., Lee, K. E., & Mokhtar, M. (2019). Streamlining non-governmental organizations' programs towards achieving the sustainable development goals: A conceptual framework, *Sustainable Development*, 27(3), 401-408. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1912>
- Hawkes, J. (2001). *The fourth pillar of sustainability: Culture's essential role in public planning* (p. 12.). Common Ground.

- Hishma, M. (2018). Culture: Functions, Characteristics and its Influences in Education. *International Journal for Empirical Education and Research*, 2(10), 42-52. <https://doi.org/10.35935/edr/25.5242>
- Holden, J. (2006). *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy: Why culture needs a democratic mandate* (p. 57). Demos.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (1944). The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. In Horkheimer, M. and Adorno, T. W. (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* trans. Edmund Jephcott (pp. 94-137). Stanford University Press.
- Hosagrahar, J. (2017). Culture at the heart of the SDGs. In E. Falt (Ed.), *The UNESCO courier* (pp. 12-14). Unesco. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248116.locale=en>
- Hristova, S., Dragičević Šešić, M., & Duxbury, N. (2015). *Cultural sustainability in European cities. Imagining Europolis*. (1st ed.) (pp. 4). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772028>
- Hussein, H. (2022). Interview Method. In M. R. Islam, N. A. Khan, & R. Baikady (eds.), *Principles of Social Research Methodology* (pp. 207–219). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5441-2_14
- Ianos, I., Peptenatu, D., & Zamfir, D. (2009). Respect for environment and sustainable development, *Carpathian journal of earth and environmental sciences*, 4(1), 81-93.
- Ilovan, O. R., & Doroftei, I. (2017). *Qualitative research in regional geography: A methodological approach*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană. https://doi.org/10.23740/QUAL_METHODS2017
- Isar, Y. R. (2019). 'Culture', 'sustainable development' and cultural policy: A contrarian view. In A. Kangas, N. Duxbury & C. De Beukelaer (Eds.), *Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development* (pp. 20-30). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351025508>
- Jansen, L. (2003). The challenge of sustainable development. *Journal of cleaner production*, 11(3), 231-245. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-6526\(02\)00073-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-6526(02)00073-2)
- Kamara, Y. (2022). Culture and sustainable development: a still untapped potential. In *Reshaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing culture as a global public good* (pp. 217). UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474>
- Kangas, A., Duxbury, N., & De Beukelaer, C. (2017). Introduction: cultural policies for sustainable development. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23(2), 129-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2017.1280790>
- König, J., Suwala, L., & Delargy, C. (2020). Helix Models of Innovation and Sustainable Development Goals. In Leal Filho, W., Azul, A., Brandli, L., Lange Salvia, A., & Wall T. (Eds.), *Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure*. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71059-4_91-1
- Kong, L. (2000). Culture, economy, policy: trends and developments. *Geoforum*, 31(4), 385-390. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185\(00\)00004-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(00)00004-X)

- Küfeoğlu, S. (2022). SDG-11: sustainable cities and communities. In *Emerging Technologies: Value Creation for Sustainable Development* (pp.385-408). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07127-0_13
- Kuroda, K., Nakasato, L. (2023). The Historical Development of SDG4: Evolution of the Global Governance of Education. In: Urata, S., Kuroda, K., Tonegawa, Y. (Eds), *Sustainable Development Disciplines for Humanity: Breaking Down the 5Ps— People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships* (pp. 37-53). Sustainable Development Goals Series. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4859-6_3
- Laine, M. (2016). Culture in sustainability—defining cultural sustainability in education. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 7 (2), 64. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dcse-2016-0016>
- Lewis, D., & Kanji, N. (2009). *Non-Governmental Organizations and Development*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203877074>
- Mahoney, C., & Beckstrand, M. (2009). *Following the money: EU funding of civil society organizations*. In: APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper (pp. 7). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1450818>
- Meehan C., Bennich T., & Collste D. (2017). Progress in Education for Sustainable Development: Improving Learning Using System Dynamics. In Diemer, A., Dierickx, F., Gladkhyk, G., Morales, M., Parrique, T., & Torres, J. (Eds.), *European Union and Sustainable Development* (pp. 259 - 268). Editions Oeconomia.
- Mensah, J., & Ricart Casadevall, S. (2019). Sustainable development: Meaning, history, principles, pillars, and implications for human action: Literature review. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1653531>
- Nurse, K. (2006). Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development, *Small states: economic review and basic statistics*, 11, 28-40.
- Opoku, A. (2015). The Role of Culture in a Sustainable Built Environment. In: Chiarini, A. (Eds.), *Sustainable Operations Management. Measuring Operations Performance* (pp.37-52). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14002-5_3
- Petrișor, A. I., & Petrișor, L. (2014). 25 Years of sustainability. A critical assessment, *Present Environment and Sustainable Development*, 8(1), 175-190. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pesd-2014-0016>
- Petrakis, P. E. (2014). *Culture, growth and economic policy*. Springer Berlin, Heidelberg. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-41440-4>
- Rai, S. M., Brown, B. D., & Ruwanpura, K. N. (2019). SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth—A gendered analysis. *World Development*, 113, 368-380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.09.006>
- Rivero Moreno, L. D. (2020). Sustainable city storytelling: Cultural heritage as a resource for a greener and fairer urban development. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 10(4), 399-412. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-05-2019-0043>

- Sabatini, F. (2019). Culture as fourth pillar of sustainable development: Perspectives for integration, paradigms of action. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 8(3), 31-31. <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2019.v8n3p31>
- Sedita, S. R., Blasi, S., & Yang, J. (2022). The cultural dimensions of sustainable development: A cross-country configurational analysis. *Sustainable Development*, 30(6), 1838 - 1849. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2351>
- Serageldin, I., & Martin-Brown, J. (Eds.) (1999). *Culture in Sustainable Development: Investing in Cultural and Natural Endowments*. Proceedings of the Conference Held at the World Bank, Washington, DC, USA, 28–29 September 1998. The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/100961468770395932/pdf/multi-page.pdf>
- Servaes, J., & Lie, R. (2014). New challenges for communication for sustainable development and social change: a review essay. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 10(1), 124–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2014.982655>
- Shorthose, J. (2020). Dialogical value for cultural organizations. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 15(1), 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973258619872909>
- Todoran, S. M., & Patachi, L. (2015). Cultural Sustainability and Issues of Urban Memory, *Acta Technica Napocensis: Civil Engineering & Architecture*, 58(4), 227-234.
- Throsby, D. (1995). Culture, economics and sustainability. *Journal of Cultural economics*, 19(3), 199-206. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01074049>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2001). *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/unesco-universal-declaration-cultural-diversity>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2024). *UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education*. UNESCO. CLT-ED/WCCAE2024/1 https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/02/WCCAE_UNESCO%20Framework_EN_0.pdf
- United Cities and Local Governments. (2004). *Agenda 21 for culture*. https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/documents/multi/ag21_en.pdf
- United Nations. (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future*. New York (pp. 39). <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>
- United Nations. (1992). *Convention on biological diversity*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. <https://www.cbd.int/doc/legal/cbd-en.pdf>
- United Nations General Assembly. (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Seventieth Session, Agenda Item 15 and 116, A/RES/70/1. New York. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/291/89/PDF/N1529189.pdf?OpenElement>
- United Nations. (2023). *Unite to act*. <https://sdgactioncampaign.org/>

- Verina, N., Astike, K., Grybaite, V., & Budanceva, J. (2021). Culture as a driver of sustainable development in Europe. *Economics and Culture*, 18(2), 73-82. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jec-2021-0016>
- Vila, S. F., Miotto, G., & Rodríguez, J. R. (2021). Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs: Strategies and Priorities in the European Union Countries. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 10(2), 73-90. <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2021.v10n2p73>
- Vries, G. D. (2020). *Culture in the sustainable development goals: The role of the European Union* (pp. 6-7). DEU. <https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.06.2020>
- Wallerstein, I. (1991). World system versus world-systems: A critique. *Critique of anthropology*, 11(2), 189-194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X9101100207>

APPENDIX

A1. The interview guide

Topic: The cultural dimension of sustainable development at the level of UE

No.	Section	Question
1.	Personal introduction,	purpose of the interview, privacy terms, interview format.
2.	Section one: interview participant identification	Please tell us some information about yourself including information on education and training as well as professional involvement.
3.		Please introduce us the represented organisation including objectives, organisational structure, current programmes and activities.
4.		How do you see the role of non-governmental organisations in the cultural field?
5.		In your opinion, how do you appreciate the relevance of the cultural dimension in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?
6.	Section two: framing the cultural dimension in sustainable development	Please tell us how do you perceive the involvement of cultural organisations in the sustainable development?
7.		Have you supported specific cultural initiatives for sustainable development? If so, what was the reason for these initiatives?
8.		Who was with you?
9.		How do you appreciate the results obtained?
10.		Please tell us how do you appreciate:
11.	the relevance of the cultural field for quality education;	
12.	the relevance of the cultural field for decent work and economic growth;	
13.	the relevance of the cultural field for sustainable cities and communities;	
14.	the relevance of the cultural field on climate change.	
15.	Section three: reporting on four SDGs: SDG 4,8,11,13	From your personal involvement, what difficulties have you encountered in relation to these four perspectives?
16.		What solutions have you developed?
17.		What opportunities have you identified?
18.		How were they received by the community?
19.	Section four: reporting to the European Union	What do you know about the involvement of the European Union in supporting the importance of the cultural field in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?
20.		Do you know any initiatives, strategies, programmes supported by the European Union?
21.		Have you been involved in the implementation of specific projects carried out with the support of the European Union?
22.		How have European Union programmes influenced your organisation?
23.		What from the education and experience gained, you used to implement these projects?
24.	Thanks, conclusions.	What do you think will be useful in the future from the experience gained in the project?

Source: authors' representation

A2. Profile of the respondents' organisations extracted from the interview transcript

Respondent (R)	Country	Organisation description
R1	Romania	“the organisation started as a research project, in the area of the sustainable development of the cultural pillar and in this area we were in the topic of the creative industries and more specialised development of the fashion field as a more ethical and professional field.”
R2	Poland	“a basis for and a key direction of our organisation is precisely focused on the SDGs. They are englobed in our agenda and the foundation is having completely a branch which is tending more the environmental protections, urban development, development of young women also the interculturality.” – needs to be rephrased ¹
R3	Hungary	“it’s much like a think-thank so we are organising different events, we have lectures, researches, policy papers, we are involved in cultural programmes, promoting the cultural diversity of the EU and inter-regional collaboration.”
R4	Slovenia	“our main goal, main vision is to bring that cultural deficit into the area, into the society to make young people interested into cultural topics.”
R5	Belgium	“the major cross sectorial, trans sectorial cultural network in Europe bringing together cultural networks, cultural organisations, but also individuals, policy members, academics, activists on all the topics of culture, and also bridging the gap towards other sectors.”
R6	France	“it is an organisation that is structured on giving opportunities to people to express themselves culturally and linguistically.”
R7	Greece	“so far we have implemented a series of projects for youth empowerment, youth engagement, the development of the strategic youth policies regarding the participation of youth at the local level. We also deal a lot with the sustainable development agenda.”
R8	Italy	“we are organising forums, festivals, concerts, foster the mobility of youth from peripheral area.”
R9	Portugal	“this organisation works mainly for the youth, empowering them to fight youth unemployment. We are also involved in many different projects about European volunteering, fashion and sustainability, sport, entrepreneurship, and social inclusion.”
R10	Spain	“we promote human rights, tolerance, positive values in all areas such as understanding, interfaith dialogue, sustainable development, cooperation with other institutions, educating young people to achieve a better future for us as a society.”

Source: authors' representation