



CULTURE IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE 2022 REPORTS

In 2019, the Culture 2030 Goal campaign released its [evaluation](#) of the place of culture in Voluntary National Reviews over the first four years of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. This was followed up, in 2021, by an [analysis of Voluntary Local Reviews](#).

Culture, in these reports and in line with the definition set out in the [MONDIACULT 1982 conference](#), is understood not just in the narrower sense of the cultural industries and heritage, but also more broadly as a factor shaping the way in which people live, take decisions, and work together. The two are, however, connected, with the sorts of intervention enabled by cultural policy helping to shape wider cultural attitudes and approaches.

[Voluntary National Reviews](#) are a key part of the implementation mechanisms of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, in which Member States self-assess their own work to realise the Agenda, present a report on this, and then receive questions and comments from peers and other stakeholders. These assessments are, according to the [guidance issued by the United Nations](#), supposed to be based on a widespread consultation with a full range of actors, including civil society and academia.

The overall conclusion of these two Culture 2030 Goal Campaign reports was that while some governments – national, regional and local – had indeed understood the potential of culture to support development, it was too often ignored, under-estimated, or simply treated as a side-issue. While local and regional governments tended to pay more heed to the importance of culture and cultural policy than national ones, far too few countries, regions and localities made sure to see culture as a pillar of sustainable development, to be integrated throughout wider development policy processes.

This report follows on from these two major publications, offering a short overview of the Voluntary National Reviews published and presented in 2022. It does not offer the depth of analysis of the reports, but rather highlights some of the different ways in which culture is addressed in these Reviews, celebrates good practices, and indicates areas for further focus.

The report has two major sections. The first looks at overall conceptions of the place of culture in development in the reports, from a defining national characteristic to a specific enabler – or barrier – to policy effectiveness. The second addresses a range of the SDGs in conjunction with which culture is referenced. First however, there is a brief overview of the 2022 set of VNRs.

THE 2022 VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS

44 countries undertook VNRs in 2022, of which 42 have published reports – the condition for inclusion in this report. Of these, 11 countries were presenting for the first time, 28 for the second, 3 for the third time, and 2 for the fourth.

In terms of the split between continents, there were:

Asia-Pacific: 5 countries

Europe and North America: 9 countries

Latin America and the Caribbean: 7 countries

Middle East and North Africa: 3

Sub-Saharan Africa: 20 countries

This represents a relatively ‘standard’ year in terms of the numbers, although the large number of African countries undertaking VNRs is notable. A potential future angle of analysis, not covered here, is the degree to which there may be regional characteristics in the way that the place of culture in development is understood and mobilised.

The full list of countries is included in annex.

METHODOLOGY

This report was put together on the basis of a review of the 42 Voluntary National Review reports that have been published at time of writing. A simple word search for “cultur*” was carried out in order to identify where culture was mentioned in each report, and then analysis carried out on the basis of the context of each reference.

The references were then categorised according to the ways in which they addressed the connection between culture and development, and then as to whether they addressed specific SDGs. These categories form the sub-sections of the rest of this article.

Due to limited time, we have not carried out, this year, a similar quantitative analysis to the 2019 and 2021 reports, focusing on the number of references to culture as opposed to those related to economic, social and environmental development. At least on a cursory inspection, it does appear that there continues to be, with some exceptions, a significantly greater focus on the other pillars of sustainable development. In developing countries in particular, agriculture also tended to receive a greater focus than culture, underlining that there is still plenty of work to do.

WHERE CULTURE FITS INTO DEVELOPMENT

In its work, the Culture 2030 Goal campaign argues that culture should be recognised as the fourth pillar of sustainable development – an essential, cross-cutting factor that should shape decision making, from the strategic to the operational, in all other policy areas.

Crucially, the campaign envisions a future model of development with culture at its heart, which is far more centred on people and the fulfilment of their rights, as well as placing an emphasis on cohesion, dialogue, and wellbeing.

Achieving this relies on the integration of culture right from the planning phase of development policy. The crafting of priorities, and the way in which they are delivered, needs to build on a strong understanding of culture. This is essential if policies are to be accepted and effective in changing behaviours, maintaining and strengthening links between people, and stimulating innovation and creativity.

The campaign is not naïve as to the fact that some manifestations of culture can have detrimental impacts, facilitating the survival of harmful practices and assumptions, but we take the view that this only strengthens the case for cultural action as the most effective way of delivering progress; it takes cultural intervention to change cultures.

Beyond this, culture and related themes should also be seen as an end in themselves, beyond their importance in delivering other outcomes. The cultural industries are significant employers, and it is widely accepted that artistic expression and the preservation of heritage are intrinsic goods which should be pursued regardless of any instrumental value.

This section therefore looks at how 2022 Voluntary National Reviews approach the overall place of culture in development.

Culture as a defining national characteristic

10 of the 42 reports explicitly present culture as being a source of national identity and strength, underpinning the societies and economies in which the SDGs are being implemented. These include broad references to **pride in national culture**, such as in Belarus, Sao Tome and Principe, Latvia, and Lesotho.

The specific importance of **heritage** as a manifestation of national culture appears as a point of pride, for example in Andorra, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates. In parallel, some countries specifically focus on **cultural diversity** as a strength (Andorra, Lesotho, Luxembourg), while Switzerland sets out the variety of cultural spaces it has as something that sets the country apart. Guinea-Bissau implicitly underlines that its own **cultural capital** can be an asset for its own development.

La sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel et naturel et la promotion de la diversité sont quelques-uns des éléments clés qui forment l'identité de l'Andorre (Andorra).

Culture as a goal in itself

Closely linked to the above is the inclusion of specific goals related to culture within national development strategies. 21 of the 42 reports do this in one way or another.

At the highest level, some countries explicitly state that culture is a **pillar of national strategy**. This is the case for Andorra (where culture is ‘a pillar of state strategy’), as well as Argentina, Cameroon, Italy, Liberia, Montenegro and the United Arab Emirates (where cultural development is mentioned alongside economic, social and environmental development). Ethiopia even includes culture as a **fourth pillar of sustainable development** in its constitution, while Guinea-Bissau explicitly links culture to human development in general, and Luxembourg with urban development. The Netherlands notes that culture is a dimension of sustainable development, but one which suffers from a lack of relevant metrics.

La culture, un vecteur puissant de coopération: En incluant la culture dans cette RNV, il s'agit de reconnaître la dimension culturelle largement établie du développement durable et la contribution du secteur culturel à la mise en œuvre d'au moins 9 des 17 ODD. Le ministère de la Culture a engagé des réflexions sur le sujet, notamment en matière d'écoresponsabilité, et participe aux travaux multilatéraux en cours. Un dialogue s'est également établi avec des organismes et acteurs du secteur dont certains se sont déjà dotés d'une charte en la matière. (Luxembourg)

The themes present in the previous section also appear, but in more active terms – i.e. the **preservation of heritage** (both in general, and attached to specific areas) and the **promotion of cultural diversity**.

In the case of the former, Andorra makes safeguarding national and cultural heritage a priority, and in particular its food heritage, as does Montenegro and the Netherlands (Aruba). Argentina highlights its work to register heritage and add items to the World Heritage List, while Cameroon and Kazakhstan underline increased spending on cultural heritage and Eritrea presents its Cultural and National Heritage Proclamation of 2015. Italy and Luxembourg set out how they incorporate the preservation of heritage also into their international cooperation efforts.

The specific merit of supporting the work and impact of cultural institutions such as libraries and museums receive specific focus in Latvia's VNR, which dedicates a whole section to this theme. Uruguay talks more broadly about levels of government spending on culture.

As for cultural diversity, Andorra commits to promoting this proactively, as does Dominica, which highlights the need to support the ‘cultural development of people’ and Suriname. Related to this, arguably, is the focus on promoting international cultural relations which appears in the review of Djibouti, and Grenada's noting of cultural events organised by the Confucius Institute.

The **defence of cultural rights** as a goal appears in the reviews of Argentina (which makes the link with the right to the city), Dominica, Guinea-Bissau. It could be argued that Italy's focus on addressing cultural gaps is also a recognition of the need to enforce rights, as is Pakistan's focus on access to culture for all, and Jamaica's on ensuring that cultural provision is universal and inclusive.

Finally, **work to help the cultural sector respond to and recover from COVID** is highlighted, emphasising the importance of their continued survival and flourishing into the future. This is

the case in Argentina, as well as in Montenegro, which looks to draw on the experience of the pandemic to strengthen the field

The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced cultural institutions and industries for which there was a need to identify new opportunities for cultural and creative production, dissemination and consumption of cultural goods and services. Activities of recovery and response should focus on development of a common marketing strategy to increase investment in cultural heritage, establishing new institutional capacities and implementing innovative management templates that can reduce the administrative, social and economic obstacles between cultural heritage and potential investors. (Montenegro)

Culture as a policy enabler

Picking up on a theme already touched on in the examples of countries integrating culture as a pillar of sustainable development above, there is a recognition in 17 reports of the general role of culture in supporting the effectiveness of broader sustainable development policy.

As a first step, the **need for cultural awareness and sensitivity when developing policy** is a recurring theme, with the implication that this is necessary in order to plan effectively and usefully. Argentina, Jamaica and Liberia underline the need to incorporate cultural perspectives alongside other factors, while Dominica and Switzerland talk about the value of culturally sensitive development. The Netherlands (Curacao) mentions its work to carry out cultural impact assessments of other projects and policies, while Suriname talks specifically about the need to respond to climate change in ways that respect local culture, and the UAE underlines the need for attentiveness:

“the strategy requires deep attention to the specific needs and aspirations of the local community, which ensures public and private investments are well-targeted and likely to result in meaningful improvements to the quality of life.” (UAE)

Others describe **culture as a positive driver of development**, such as Cameroon, Montenegro and the Netherlands (which argues that the creative industries should be positively involved in addressing challenges around sustainability). There is particularly intensive attention to this in Italy, which provides a list of the ways in which culture underpins development:

Culture plays an important role in promoting social cohesion, freedom of expression, identity building, civic empowerment and intercultural dialogue. It strengthens communities and helps build resilient, peaceful and stable societies. It stimulates economic development, local production and job creation. (Italy)

Latvia also digs into the role of culture, emphasising the role of culture and cultural spaces in enabling learning, discussion, compromise building, and social cohesion, in order to maximise the chances of success.

Cultural heritage, in turn, strengthens sustainability and provides an impetus for sustainable action, for example, by promoting a circular economy.

Three factors are emerging in Latvia that have great potential to improve Latvia's ability to accelerate progress on sustainable development. [...] The cultural space is increasingly becoming a safe place for raising awareness of inclusive sustainable development.

Culture is a source of positive change and knowledge, it connects people and places, fosters a sense of civic responsibility, belonging and solidarity, and enables peaceful conflict resolution.

The legacy that we receive from the past, enjoy in the present, and will pass on to future generations gives insights and opportunities for recovery and renewal, and serves as a beneficial resource that has been at the disposal of mankind throughout history. (Latvia)

Montenegro also offers a thorough rationale:

Creativity and diversity are key to the sustainable development of Montenegro. Within its activities, culture helps foster sustainability, promotes inclusive and balanced economic development and environmental protection (Montenegro)

More practically, **cultural institutions and infrastructures' role in supporting delivery of the SDGs** appears in the VNRs of Equatorial Guinea, Latvia and Switzerland, while Luxembourg again stresses good links between governments and the cultural sector as a basis for collaborations which help deliver the goals.

9 VNRs also talk about the importance of **generating a 'culture of doing something**, a priori as a form of shorthand for saying that something has become part of everyday practice and reflection. While often far away from what is often seen as cultural policy, these references are interesting as they highlight the connection between behaviour and attitudes, and policy change.

Examples of this include Andorra (which talks about a culture of equality), Eritrea (which focuses on civic culture), Italy (a culture of sustainability), Latvia (a culture of debate), Luxembourg (a culture of participation), and Sao Tome and Principe (a culture of exports). Meanwhile, Dominica and the United Arab Emirates make much wider references, for example to cultures of evaluation or statistics.

Culture as a policy blocker

Closely linked to the role of culture as an enabler of development is that of culture – or at least cultural factors – as a barrier to development. This is particularly the case where traditional attitudes and practices can stand in the way of achieving goals around equality in particular.

16 of the 42 reports mentioned culture in this sense, with Equatorial Guinea making a general reference.

The relation of **culture to gender equality** was a particular theme, as highlighted by Guinea-Bissau, Jordan, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Pakistan, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Somalia (which highlights in particular the issue of female genital mutilation), Togo and Uruguay.

Factors such as the social class, social and cultural norms, age, education-level, marital status, presence of male family members, number of children etc., are just some of the variables that have been identified as having an impact on women's decision to work in Pakistan and have resultantly contributed to the country's low labour force participation rate.

Encouragingly, Botswana's and Switzerland's VNRs highlighted that **cultural change was not only possible, but is being achieved**, in order to ensure that women could take on their fair share of leadership roles.

Beyond gender, culture is cited as a reason for Somalia not making more use of its aquatic resources, while Montenegro highlights that culture can act to limit children's rights, for example through traditions of child marriage, or by not recognising a child as an entity with legal rights and obligations.

Culture in SDG implementation governance

Finally, some VNRs set out how, in the context of a wider effort to incorporate culture into the planning and implementation of national development strategies, **cultural actors themselves have been engaged in relevant policy processes**.

2 of the 42 reports available point to such a practice. Italy's Forum for Sustainable Development has six working groups, of which one is focused on Culture for Sustainability, and there is a Working Group on Sustainability Culture as part of the infrastructure for implementing the National Sustainable Development Strategy.

Meanwhile, Luxembourg underlines the engagement of its Ministry of Culture on the topic of sustainable development, which has in turn engaged other stakeholders in the field.

CULTURE DELIVERING ON SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The 2030 Agenda is intended to represent a new and cross-cutting approach to development. Rather than highlighting any one policy area, it encourages decision-makers to consider all policy areas in a connected and coherent fashion. This fits well with the emphasis of the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, which seeks to promote a new approach to policy design and implementation that properly recognises the role of culture.

Nonetheless, it is worth looking at the ways in which culture is referred to in different policy areas, both to provide examples of the integration of culture in practice, and to illustrate the breadth of its relevance. This part of the report does this, looking at groupings of SDGs.

Culture and Education (SDG 4)

The relationship between culture and education goes in both directions, looking across the 8 VNRs which make this connection.

First of all, **education is presented as having a key role in achieving desirable cultural goals**, and in particular cultural diversity, as is the case in Andorra, Suriname, and the United Arab Emirates. The same goes for the role of education in promoting wider cultural change, not least that of a culture of peace, global citizenship and sustainable development, as suggested by the Dutch and Italian VNRs. Meanwhile in Suriname, arts education full stop is seen as a desirable thing as part of its Review.

Education programmes should also integrate culture to be most effective. As indicated above, this is both about making education culturally sensitive (a point made in the Philippines' VNR), but also about looking positively to incorporate cultural content, actors, and institutions.

For example, Sao Tome and Principe celebrates the inclusion of culture into extracurricular education, and the UAE incorporates culture in general. Latvia highlights efforts to bring the collections of cultural institutions into schools and other learning spaces. Italy suggests that incorporating culture may even be central to rethinking how we do education in general.

Rethinking educational models with a life-long learning approach also means enhancing the places of culture and education outside formal learning contexts – e.g., museum institutions, which are increasingly taking on the role of enabling subjects for the cultural, social, economic and participatory growth of cities in order to face the challenges and choices linked to ecological transition. (Italy)

Culture and Equality (SDGs 1, 5, 10)

When it comes to the interaction between culture and questions of promoting equality and tackling poverty and exclusion, there is again a two-way relationship apparent in the 17 reports which make this link.

At a high level, a number of countries highlight the importance of a **culture of inclusion and equality**. As already highlighted above, this is apparent in the various reports which suggest that transformation is needed to deliver a culture that values the rights of women (Botswana, Eswatini), children (Montenegro), persons with disabilities and others (Uruguay).

Similarly, Andorra's and Argentina's VNRs underline efforts to promote a culture of inclusion. In these, it is often a case of reversing cultural assumptions and practices which serve to exclude.

Other countries specifically refer to the **role of culture and cultural initiatives in achieving more goals such as cohesion within communities, fighting crime** (Kazakhstan), **rehabilitation of prisoners** (Côte d'Ivoire), **reducing poverty** (Jamaica), and **promoting diversity** (UAE). Greece's VNR, for example, talks about working through culture to help with the integration of migrants and Roma, while Italy sets it out as a tool for promoting cohesion at the level of towns and cities. The Netherlands (Aruba) highlights how the creative industries have been mobilised as part of projects to promote diversity and inclusion, as well as global citizenship.

Andorra's report stresses how culture can and should be something that brings people together, thereby strengthening their ability to take the action necessary for sustainable development. These both place a strong emphasis on the duty on the cultural sector itself to promote inclusion and sustainability.

Linked to this is the need to make sure that everyone has the possibility to participate in culture. This is underlined in some reports, echoing points about cultural rights made above. Italy's VNR underlines that cultural gaps need to be addressed, and Jamaica talks about working to make sure that the provision of culture is universal and inclusive.

Andorra highlights in particular efforts to make cultural content accessible to people with disabilities, and Belarus's talks about its work to allow children with developmental difficulties to be involved in cultural activities.

Culture and Economy (SDG 8)

One of the explicit references to culture in the 2030 Agenda is that to cultural tourism, seen as a way of bringing in new revenues, making the most of unique local characteristics and without compromising the future. Of course, culture is at the heart of the work of the creative industries, on whose success a significant part of total GDP and employment can depend, a point made by Italy and Montenegro in their VNRs.

The importance of safeguarding heritage and contemporary culture in order to attract tourists appears in the reviews of Andorra, Belarus, Senegal and Sri Lanka.

El Salvador talks specifically about developing a strategy for tourism that promotes local culture and produce, as does Sao Tome and Principe, which sees strong growth potential in the area. The Netherlands (Curaçao) does so also, while Greece focuses extensively on the importance of its culture for attracting visitors who can support its economy.

Culture, Climate, Environment and Agriculture (SDGs 2, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15)

Finally, there is the role of culture in association with goals related to environmental and climate issues. There is of course already a strong link between the two, with the connection between nature and culture (and natural and cultural heritage) clear in SDG 11.4, something that Eritrea's report underlines. Similarly, agricultural practices themselves can represent a key part of national culture, and potentially offer alternatives to more damaging modern practices, as set out in Lesotho's VNR.

Once again, VNRs touch both on issues of how to ensure a culture of sustainability, i.e. the adoption of attitudes and behaviours that favour the action needed to achieve relevant SDGs, and the specifics of how cultural policies can contribute to these goals.

Italy in particular highlights in some depth the work of the Culture for Sustainability Working Group of the country's Forum for Sustainable Development, which aims, unsurprisingly, to promote a sustainability culture. Achieving this, the Report explains, will require work around information, education, training and communication.

As for the specific role of cultural interventions, Italy's report highlights how these can boost resilience in the face of climate change, while Greece points out its plan for climate and cultural heritage, and Latvia's suggests that heritage can be put to work to promote sustainable consumption and a circular economy.

Luxembourg's underlines its conviction that the European Capital of Culture title held by Esch-sur-Alzette in 2022 offers a chance to use culture as a basis for a new approach to ecology and energy, amongst other issues. The United Arab Emirates highlights efforts to combine cultural and environmental initiatives in order to maximise the effectiveness of policy in this area.

Culture, Democracy and Civic Participation (SDG16)

While not referred to much, at least two countries make a link between culture and promoting democracy and civic participation.

Latvia's VNR talks more specifically about the **role of cultural institutions such as museums and libraries in promoting a culture of democratic and civic participation** – in other words, helping people to feel part of a polity. Luxembourg also talks about a culture of participation.

CONCLUSION

This assessment of the 2022 Voluntary National Reviews in many ways reconfirms the conclusions of the fuller analyses that took place in 2019 and 2021 of VNRs and VLRs respectively. There is a tantalising insight into what is possible, with a number of countries clearly recognising the potential of culture as a pillar of sustainable development, and accelerator in achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Yet these countries are too few in number, and are primarily European (Andorra, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Montenegro), with Argentina as the stand-out from outside of Europe.

Overall, countries can perhaps be divided into three overall categories:

1. Leaders, who are effectively already acting as if there was an explicit culture goal, and on this basis making culture central to their development efforts. This involves not just efforts focused on the cultural sector itself, but also consideration of cultural factors in policy-making, and realising the potential of cultural capital to drive progress.
2. Starters, who tend to see culture in a much narrower perspective, for example just as a potential driver of tourism or other export revenue earner. Here, there is recognition of the value of a flourishing cultural sector, but it risks still being seen in isolation.
3. Still at the starting line: a number of countries still appear to be failing to see the connection between culture and development, or even see it as something holding development back.

The goal, not just for those in the cultural sector, but also for anyone committed to effective sustainable development, has to be to encourage countries in groups 2 and 3 to think more ambitiously and comprehensively about culture and how it can contribute to development. Fortunately, the examples of those countries in group 1 can hopefully serve as a model and inspiration for this.

Clearly, in the longer term, there also needs to be a much stronger signal at the whole-of-UN level about the importance of culture. If it continues to be seen only the priority of a sectoral agency such as UNESCO, without even the profile that an explicit goal would give, progress is likely to be more difficult. The Culture 2030 Goal campaign is of course focused on achieving just this, and is looking forward to engaging interested parties in defining what such a goal could look like.

ANNEX – 2022 Voluntary National Review Countries.

Country	No. of VNR	Link	Note
Andorra	2nd	Link	
Argentina	3rd	Link	
Belarus	2nd	Link	
Botswana	2nd	Link	
Cameroon	2nd	Link	
Côte d'Ivoire	2nd	Link	
Djibouti	1st	Link	
Dominica	1st	Link	
El Salvador	2nd	Link	
Equatorial Guinea	1st	Link	
Eritrea	1st	Link	
Eswatini	2nd	Link	
Ethiopia	2nd	Link	
Gabon	1st	Link	
Gambia	2nd	Link	Report not published
Ghana	2nd	Link	
Greece	2nd	Link	
Grenada	1st	Link	
Guinea-Bissau	1st	Link	
Italy	2nd	Link	
Jamaica	2nd	Link	
Jordan	2nd	Link	
Kazakhstan	2nd	Link	
Latvia	2nd	Link	
Lesotho	2nd	Link	
Liberia	2nd	Link	
Luxembourg	2nd	Link	
Malawi	2nd	Link	
Mali	2nd	Link	
Montenegro	2nd	Link	
Netherlands	2nd	Link	
Pakistan	2nd	Link	
Philippines	3rd	Link	
Sao Tome e Principe	1st	Link	

ANNEX – 2022 Voluntary National Review Countries.

Country	No. of VNR	Link	Note
Senegal	2nd	Link	
Somalia	1st	Link	
Sri Lanka	2nd	Link	
Sudan	2nd	Link	
Suriname	1st	Link	
Switzerland	3rd	Link	
Togo	4th	Link	
Tuvalu	1st	Link	No report published
United Arab Emirates	2nd	Link	
Uruguay	4th	Link	

