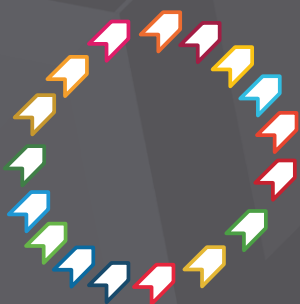




CULTURE: A STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

CULTURE IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS 2026

The title of this report “Culture: a strategic infrastructure for sustainability” finds its inspiration in the wording used in the Italian Voluntary National Review 2026.

This report has been elaborated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in the context of the #Culture2030Goal campaign.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 36 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) prepared and presented by UN Member States at this year's High-Level Political Forum demonstrate once again that, even in the absence of a dedicated culture goal in the 2030 Agenda, governments around the world recognise the role of culture in sustainable development.

A study of references in the Reviews shows that it is standard practice both to see culture as a goal in itself – from upholding cultural rights to protecting heritage and promoting creativity – and as a driver and determinant of success in other areas.

The different areas of action covered by the targets included in the Culture2030Goal campaign's Draft Culture Goal are present across a wide range of VNRs, with over half referring to four or more. No target is present in fewer than 20% of VNRs, and a significant group of countries refers to 8 or more.

Similarly, the analysis points to good awareness of the different ways in which culture interacts with sustainable development policies, as well as the range of SDGs for which culture is relevant.

Importantly, there are examples of good practice from very different geographies and economic situations, demonstrating that a culture goal does have global relevance. Examples of particularly strong consideration of culture, based on the evidence of this report, are Bahrain, Brazil, Estonia, Italy, Jamaica, the Marshall Islands, Moldova, Saudi Arabia, Tonga, the UAE and Uruguay. Each nonetheless takes its own, nationally relevant approach to doing so.

At the same time, there is also evidence of a need to do more to connect vibrant cultural sectors in lower income countries, as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa, with those responsible for sustainable development planning and reporting. Even then, there is awareness of the need to focus on culture to achieve goals.

All of this points to a value both in continuing the types of exchanges between culture ministries and equivalents made possible by the MONDIACULT process, but also to work towards a dedicated culture goal in the post-2030 Agenda. In their VNRs, Jamaica and Uruguay already explicitly call for this. This would provide a much surer basis for ensuring that the importance of culture as a goal is recognised, and its potential in enabling the achievement of other goals is realised.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 5th edition of the [Culture2030Goal campaign](#)'s annual review of the place of culture in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Like the four that have come before it (for [2022](#), [2023](#), [2024](#) and [2025](#)), this report is intended to demonstrate how, even without the impetus of a dedicated culture goal in the 2030 Agenda, governments are integrating cultural targets, actors and considerations into how they pursue sustainable development.

VNRs themselves are a key part of the wider process around the SDGs. In parallel with efforts led by the United Nations and its agencies to gather data on indicators, as well as thematic explorations of focus Goals, Reviews offer an opportunity for governments to provide a comprehensive overview of what they are prioritising, how they are doing, and what they can share. In short, they offer a snapshot of what matters in sustainable development policy from each national perspective.

The Culture2030Goal campaign is the successor to the Culture2015Goal campaign and was established in order to make the case for culture to be seen as just as important a factor in development as any of the policy areas explicitly counted among the SDGs. Bringing together global and regional cultural networks, the campaign argues that it was a mistake not to have a culture goal in 2015. This is due both to the risk of signalling that culture is somehow less important an issue for government engagement and support, and the message it sent to the culture sector itself.

However, governments can find a remedy to this situation by themselves choosing to make culture a major part of their implementation of the SDGs, going beyond the limited and scattered references that there are in the current agenda (notably to safeguarding heritage, cultural tourism, and promoting cultural diversity). This report assesses whether this is working.

The campaign's work reflects a broad understanding of culture – one that is also shared in this year's Italian VNR: *'Culture – understood broadly as everyday practices, collective values, business and third-sector culture, as well as heritage and the arts – is formed through intergenerational transmission and cross-fertilisation between peoples, places, and forms of knowledge'*.

In this context, the campaign more broadly is encouraging governments to look at how they can do this, and in support has published an updated version of its [Draft Culture Goal](#). This was launched at MONDIACULT 2025 and aims not only to provide a practical tool for decision-makers, but more broadly also to show that such a dedicated goal is feasible.

The basis for this report is a review of the texts of the reports submitted by the 36 countries doing VNRs and held on the [UN website](#). To carry out the analysis, each report was downloaded, and a Ctrl+F search was used to look for any references to "cultur*", meaning that references to all of culture, cultures, cultural and similar would be picked up. The same approach was used in other languages when an English language version was not available at the time of analysis. When words had no direct relationship (such as 'agriculture') these were not counted.

The resulting references were then matched with one or more elements of each of the three different approaches mentioned below, and then included – in whole, in part, or via reference – in the report itself. This process was carried out by a human with no AI use other than spell- and grammar-check.



The report follows the same structure as in previous years. Following this introduction, a Part 1 will look at the [Culture2030Goal Draft Goal](#) and its ten different targets. The objective of this session is to look at how far the draft is already (implicitly or explicitly, informally or formally) present in national SDG implementation and reporting.

Next, Part 2 will turn to a list of different dimensions of the relationship between culture and development, going beyond specific policy goals. This helps understand more about the breadth of the connection.

Finally, Part 3 looks at how culture is associated with efforts to achieve a set of clusters of SDGs, helping to demonstrate the cross-cutting relevance of culture (or not) for governments.

In each case, in addition to a look through references within VNRs, there is also an overview of how regularly each target, dimension, or cluster of SDGs is cited, as well as a brief look back at evolutions over time.

Finally, in annex, there is both an overview of which countries refer to which Culture Goal targets under the SDGs, and then a full list of the countries carrying out VNRs and links to the pages where reports can be found. To note, in some cases reports were previously available and subsequently have been taken down. This report is based on those available in the run-up to this year's High-Level Political Forum.

PART 1: REFERENCES TO THE CULTURE GOAL TARGETS

The first substantive part of this report uses the revised [Draft Culture Goal](#) as a framework for exploring the treatment of culture in the VNRs. This is the first time that the new version has been used, since its launch at the UNESCO MONDIACULT Conference in September-October 2025 in Barcelona. This version incorporates a number of small changes compared to the previous, but at the level of the ten targets, the focus is broadly similar.

The targets used therefore are as below, with a shorthand provided at the end of each:

- **Target 1:** Realise cultural rights for all, by fostering inclusive access to and participation in cultural life, creativity and diversity of cultural and artistic expressions, in particular for women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and vulnerable populations (Cultural Rights);
- **Target 2:** Promote a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural and biological diversity (Culture of Peace);
- **Target 3:** Protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, and leverage it as a resource and enabler for sustainable development (Safeguard Heritage);
- **Target 4:** Protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions to strengthen the creativity, development capacity, resilience, and regenerative capacity of individuals and communities (Promote Creativity);
- **Target 5:** Promote the economic and social rights of artists and cultural professionals, artistic freedom and safety, as well as local art, culture and products, notably in the context of artificial intelligence (Artists' Rights);
- **Target 6:** Enhance legal conditions and practical opportunities for mobility of cultural professionals and cross-border creativity in the creation of cultural goods, services and practices (Cultural Mobility);
- **Target 7:** Enhance the conditions for Indigenous peoples to strengthen their own institutions, cultures and languages, and to pursue their development in keeping with their self-determined needs and aspirations (Indigenous Governance);
- **Target 8:** Implement a regenerative cultural approach to ecosystemic governance, including environmental protection, sustainable urbanisation, land planning, landscape management, biodiversity stewardship, agriculture and natural areas management (Regenerative Approach);
- **Target A:** Strengthen cultural institutions, including through international cooperation, to build capacity at all levels and in all policy areas to realise cultural rights and sustain cultural pluralism (Cultural Institutions);
- **Target B:** Ensure that cultural considerations are considered in all international development goals, at the outset and throughout all policy-making processes, whether or not associated with pre-existing cultural targets (Policy Integration).

Target 1: Cultural Rights

Target 1 of the Culture2030Goal campaign draft culture goal focuses on the importance of recognising and upholding cultural rights. Overall, 21 VNR countries in 2026 do this in some way.

While the reference is not always explicit, the Democratic Republic of the Congo does cite the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as a guide for its implementation of the SDG's (p47), as does Senegal (p111). Brazil underlines that there is a right to culture (p51), while Egypt highlights its work to guarantee the cultural rights of older persons (p67), and Guinea-Bissau relates heritage work to efforts to ensure that everyone enjoys their rights and freedoms (p63).

A number of countries highlight core themes for cultural rights, such as the connection between engaging in history, language and heritage and wider social and economic growth (Marshall Islands p36), between culture and citizenship (Uruguay, p41), and with wider quality of life (Moldova, p9 and Saudi Arabia, p226)

Italy's review focuses extensively on the importance of ensuring cultural justice as part of wider development issues, focusing on how unequal access to skills can lead to 'a profound cultural fragility that limits people's ability to participate, choose, and act' (p69).

To improve regional access to culture and support both the development of future cultural professionals and the growth of informed audiences, the Cultural Backpack support measure has been implemented since 2022. The initiative enables children and young people to visit theatre performances, cinemas, museums and other cultural institutions or events as part of their educational programme.

Estonia, p80

More specifically, the value of access to culture features regularly. Bahrain's review celebrates how the RAK Art Foundation facilitates community engagement (p74), while Saudi Arabia gives various examples of how urban art programmes facilitate participation (p262). Uruguay too highlights the value of the accessibility of cultural urban landscapes (p146), and Tunisia stresses its engagement through libraries to make this happen (p93).

Estonia's review is particularly strong in this regard, setting explicit targets for participation in cultural activities (p80), and linking this to a broader sense of belonging to the community. It celebrates the Cultural Backpack initiative which 'enables children and young people to visit theatre performances, cinemas, museums and other cultural institutions or events as part of their educational programme'. Like Tunisia, Estonia also sees investment in ever improving libraries services as a major way of doing this.

That this access needs to be equal is also clear. Albania (p50), Moldova (p83) and Norway (p115) are concerned about geographical inequalities in access to culture, and Bahrain has an emphasis on bringing youth into contact with culture (p39). Albania also highlights low-income households, Roma, persons with disabilities, older persons, children and women as particular areas of focus (p155), while Estonia discusses initiatives for larger families (p10). Algeria (p71) and the UAE (p92) both talk more broadly about approaches that aim to address gaps in access.

Language preservation ensures that future generations stay connected to their heritage and that oral histories and traditions are not lost.

Marshall Islands, p36

languages and identities more broadly (p32). The UAE also sets out how education is being redesigned in order to connect 'children with identity, language, and cultural knowledge through activities and programmes that can be applied within the school environment.'

The relevance of promoting the use of local languages also features elsewhere. Burkina Faso highlights how mainstreaming the use of national languages is part of its efforts to build cultural sovereignty (p56), while the Marshall Islands are integrating it more into education (p38). Estonia meanwhile notes work to support language learning among Estonians abroad (p84), also with the goal of helping them to retain their roots and collections.

Access to and engagement with heritage also plays a role. The Italian VNR suggests that heritage should be seen as a 'community right' (p67), while Tonga suggests that local culture is under threat from globalization (p16) and Kiribati sets out worries about climate change and associated issues (p28). In response, there is a focus on preserving heritage and knowledge. Saudi Arabia more broadly is working to preserve placenames and the stories behind them, given their strong link to local identities and belonging (p219).

Target 2 – Culture of Peace

The draft Goal's second target focuses on the role of wider cultures in ensuring not just a focus on inclusion and diversity, but also in shaping attitudes in ways that support the achievement of the wider 2030 Agenda.

Burkina Faso for example focuses on its effort to work through culture as well as faith groups to promote respect for other beliefs (p93), while Cabo Verde talks both about work to promote national identity and the value of interculturalism (p35). Guinea-Bissau in turn sets as a goal to make the most of its cultural diversity in order to support wider social cohesion as well as resilience (p10), and the UAE cites cultural cohesion as a major area of focus (p10). Estonia too refers in broad terms to work to promote cultural diversity (p80).

Others making the link between cultural identity and peace including Algeria (p12) and Bahrain (p75). Tonga refers to its wider Strategic Development Framework as being rooted in sustainability and resilience, which in turn are rooted in a traditional culture that focuses above all on people (p13), while Tunisia affirms strongly that it is driving work to promote a culture of respect for others (p27). Saudi Arabia has made the promotion of cultural understanding part of its education curriculum (p76).

Going beyond pure access, some reviews also highlight the importance of fuller participation. Brazil is strong on the need to provide the conditions for Indigenous peoples to live their culture (p66) in particular, while Tunisia focuses on the participation of persons with disabilities in cultural life (p27), and Italy on the young (p65), underlining that initiatives should be both 'by and for' young people. Saint Kitts looks in particular at engaging girls in creativity (p73), while Norway stresses the need to promote minority cultures,

Going further, there are also references to exchanges as means of building mutual understanding. Bahrain is strong on this, referencing programmes which enable national youth to participate in international experiences (p38). Benefits from this include stronger inter connections between faith groups, and otherwise to build a culture of working together. Italy echoes this, highlighting how cultural sharing can build stronger community cohesion, as well as social justice and sustainability (p90).

Culture represents a key enabler of dialogue, resilience and social cohesion. It contributes to the advancement of peaceful, just and inclusive societies by fostering mutual understanding, strengthening community ties and promoting shared values, in line with the principles and objectives of the 2030 Agenda

Italy, p62

The UAE sees its international cultural cooperation as enabling wider efforts to build peace, domestically and internationally (p101), as does Uruguay, which argues that such cooperations help make links between peoples (p169).

In turn, Saint Lucia notes how its Bloom Where You've Been Planted initiative created cultural spaces where it was possible to explore identity and belonging and strengthen social support networks (p73). Italy too notes how cultural institutions and sites can be vital infrastructures for building a wider culture of peace and sustainable development, and to do this for communities as a whole, not just individuals (p65).

Finally, there are also countries which draw a line between culture and the promotion of education for sustainable development (ESD). Italy discusses this extensively, seeing both a role for culture in supporting the necessary mindset changes (p35), as well as arguing that ESD is about creating a different culture within the population – a 'culture of sustainability' (p168). This concept also appears within the Reviews of Tunisia (p96), the UAE (p14) and Uruguay (p66).

Target 3 – Protect Heritage

The third target focuses on both protecting and promoting heritage, as a value in itself and as an enabler of wider changes. With SDG 11 (which includes a target on the protection of cultural and natural heritage) one of the focus SDGs in 2026, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are extensive references this year, with 27 countries doing so.

The Kingdom believes its sustainability is directly linked to the sustainability of culture through active preservation, revitalization of historic cities, and the protection of authentic national traditions.

Bahrain, p12

Many countries already argue that heritage preservation is a value in itself. Brazil highlights work to preserve collections (p51), while Burundi focuses on rehabilitating and restoring historic sites (p137). Guinea-Bissau (p37), Jamaica (p179 – which specifically talks about the inclusion of the Blue and John Crow Mountains on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Kiribati (p89), Moldova (p83) and Saint Kitts and Nevis (p118) all assert the importance of protecting heritage, which Egypt (p43) links to the wider African Union 2063 Agenda. Guinea-Bissau indeed cites heritage protection as a key pillar of its wider national plans (p37).

Algeria makes an effort specifically to highlight the importance of all types of heritage (p71), which implicitly raises the question of intangible heritage. A number of countries do call this out explicitly. Cabo Verde highlights its work to consolidate and promote Morna as a musical genre (p70), while Moldova notes new laws to develop registers and promote more active engagement in safeguarding and valorising this (p83). Norway also points to traditional practices in general (p58) and Tunisia to fishing customs (p134) as things worthy of protection.

Going beyond the intrinsic value of preservation, a number of reviews set out how they see heritage as underpinning broader national identity, and so providing an essential context for efforts to achieve the SDGs. Bahrain sets out how heritage is linked to identity, belonging, creativity and wider national life (p62). The UAE also connects heritage and identity (p10) and even argues that its entire Review is rooted in cultural heritage (p92). Kiribati too argues that 'strong cultural traditions and community resilience remain central to I-Kiribati life' (p89).

Echoing some of the examples given under Target 1, the relevance of access to heritage comes out in a range of reviews. Algeria looks to give as many people as possible the chance to experience heritage (p71), and Saudi Arabia's Konozi initiative works to 'document, preserve, and disseminate Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage, knowledge, and achievements' (p219). Estonia shares information about its Cultural Heritage Digitisation Plan, working to maximise access to (and awareness of) works held within memory institutions. The goal is that this also then enables more innovative work to preserve, share, and engage with this heritage (p81).

The programme adopted a "Build Back Better" approach, transforming cultural heritage recovery into a driver of resilience, inclusion, and sustainable local development. The programme restored and revitalised 23 cultural heritage sites across some of the most affected municipalities, while strengthening disaster-risk management, heritage governance, and long-term sustainability

Albania, p155

Heritage is also recognised as contributing to a range of other policy goals, such as in Albania where the National Strategy for Culture has explicitly looked to mobilise it to align with wider agendas (p146), while in the Marshall Islands, the Allele Museum is cited as a good example of how to mobilise knowledge and sites for broader impact (p37).

A common reference is to the place of heritage within broader regeneration efforts. Albania for example cites the specific example of recovery efforts from an earthquake, with an emphasis on supporting wider employment, development and resilience (p150). It underlines how heritage can 'serve as a catalyst for more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities' (p155). Algeria (p71), Bahrain (p65), Jamaica (p179), Jordan (p144), Saudi Arabia (p202), Tunisia (p125), and the UAE (p61) all connect efforts to restore and spotlight preservation with wider work to build the attractiveness of cities and create jobs and life. In doing so, there have also been opportunities to improve accessibility for all, as noted in Uruguay's review (p146). Jamaica suggests that it is by placing heritage at the heart of such development efforts that it becomes possible to ensure that communities are engaged meaningfully (p184).

Heritage initiatives are also seen as supporting tourism, as highlighted by Jamaica (p184), Burkina Faso (p72), and Tonga (p25). In particular in Burkina Faso, this is a reason for investing more in heritage itself (p73), while Saudi Arabia highlights how the incorporation of heritage into wider investments

in urban change can support tourism potential (p263). Bahrain extends this to intangible heritage, suggesting that traditional crafts are seen as a source of wider growth (p70).

The Regeneration Programme for Old City Centres (PRCA) stands out as a transformative lever, connecting heritage preservation, economic inclusion of young people and revitalisation of neighbourhoods, despite the difficulties linked to the vulnerability of interventions in the face of unpredictable funding

Tunisia, p125 (translated from French)

SDG11 already cites natural and cultural heritage alongside each other. A range of 2026 VNRs explore this connection in more depth, with Jamaica underlining the strong interconnection between both land and marine environments and culture (p243). Tonga recognises how traditional knowledge and cultural practices provide a basis for sustainable resource use and environmental stewardship (p55), a point that is made in the Marshall Islands' review (p36). More broadly, Bahrain explicitly argues that the sustaining of heritage is vital for the country's wider sustainability (p12), while Italy argues that more can be done to realise the potential for positive synergies (p67).

Implicit in some of the references made already is an awareness of the risk of loss. This comes out clearly in the Reviews of Cameroon (p62), with climate change seen as posing particular problems in Jamaica (p147), Kiribati (p48), and the Marshall Islands (p36). Demographic change is seen as an issue in Jamaica (also p147), while Norway (p85) and Tonga (p16) argue that there are a complex range of challenges. Norway in particular cites the need to act to make heritage crime a crime (p96).

A few reviews go into some of the practical steps to optimize the management of heritage. The relevance of building partnerships in order better to realise the potential of heritage appears in the VNRs of Algeria (p71) and Kiribati (p31), while Egypt highlights an agreement with Vodafone to integrate technology into the offering of the Grand Egyptian Museum. Improving documentation is a major theme in Bahrain (p74), Kiribati (p31), Moldova (p83), and the UAE (p92).

Kiribati refers to efforts to build more comprehensive legislation and regulation (p28), and Bahrain cites improved planning rules (p66) as a success. Moldova has invested effort in strengthening local government capacity to work with heritage (p83), while Tunisia sees finding solutions around land ownership conflicts as a priority (p125). Elsewhere, the UAE highlights engagement in international heritage cooperation (p100), and Estonia has strengthened research into culture and heritage (p82).

Finally, a few reviews provide indicators around heritage. Most common are those around spending (following the wider SDG indicator framework), as seen in Gabon (p46), Liberia (p61), Malawi (p92), Moldova (p82) and Saint Kitts and Nevis (p121). In many of these cases, there is recognition that investment should be higher. Finally, Algeria shares information about the number of sites included on national heritage lists as an indicator of activity (p71).

Target 4 – Promote Creativity

The fourth target in the Draft Goal focuses on the importance of promoting local culture and creativity, with exactly half (18) of the 2026 VNRs doing so. There are general references to the importance of supporting creativity in Cabo Verde (p35), and the Marshall Islands (p37), while Estonia sets out the vitality of its cultural space overall as a core goal (p3). There is a specific focus in Brazil on doing this among marginalised communities (p51), while Kiribati also emphasises the value of building community-based programming (p31). More broadly, Guinea-Bissau references the need to realise the value of its culture (p10), while Jamaica worries that population ageing will have a negative impact on this (p29).

There are a wide range of references to efforts to support the creative industries, notably in Albania (p155), Bahrain (p12), Brazil (p258), Jamaica (p147), Rwanda (p8), Saudi Arabia (p218), and the UAE (p92). Uruguay highlights how initiatives to support the social economy tend to benefit the creative sector in particular (p68), and Estonia and Moldova highlight their investment in festivals and events as key ways of favouring creativity (p81, p84), as well as in boosting creative entrepreneurship (p83).

Bahrain's approach recognizes that culture is not a backdrop to development, but rather an important driver of job creation, economic diversification and social cohesion, while also serving as a connector to the world"

Bahrain, p49

Italy notes how heritage institutions can help here (p62), as does Moldova which relates its efforts to develop libraries with work to help domestic publishing (p84), Saudi Arabia through its investment in film (p220), and the Marshall Islands see the promotion of local products as part of their work here (p67). Brazil notes the potential of creative industry growth to create opportunities for artisans and youth from groups at risk of marginalization (p121).

Saudi Arabia provides extensive detail, noting numbers of companies involved and individuals mobilised in order to boost outputs (p220). Bahrain references efforts to regulate markets in way that support fair competition and access, as well as to give local companies the tools to succeed internationally (p78).

These results show how cultural policies, creative professions, data, grants, training, employment pathways, and market access can work together to position culture as a driver of economic diversification.

UAE, p100

The specific connections between culture and tourism are also on display. In addition to the examples around heritage provided under Target 3, there are both countries which see tourism as a potential source of revenues for culture (Albania, p83 and Bahrain, p119), and those that argue that culture itself can be a draw for tourists (Burkina Faso, p72, Cabo Verde, p12, Kiribati, p24, Saudi Arabia, p267, and Tonga, p25).

Similarly, a number of countries highlight their work to create opportunity for craft workers. Bahrain has developed a national register as well as dedicated craft spaces (p70), while Egypt has used awareness campaigns to showcase local cultures and handicrafts (p157). In the Marshall Islands, local organisations conduct workshops to teach traditional techniques (p37), and in the UAE, the Culture Ministry launched the Craftsmen Pavilion to promote such skills (p100).

Meanwhile, Jamaica provides a strong example of reflection here, both seeing culture as a competitive advantage (p288), but also worrying about the under-utilisation of the creative and cultural economy (p150).

Target 5 – Artists’ Rights

The next target shifts from broader support to the cultural sector to work to improve conditions for individual creators; 10 VNRs reference this. There is some crossover with the examples provided in the previous section, such as efforts to offer more systematic help to craftspeople in Bahrain (p70), notably via both a register and providing spaces to practice trades. Moldova’s Creative Square platform makes it easier to connect artists, enhance their visibility and increase their market access (p84). More broadly, Italy is working to ensure that its cultural institutions also become incubators and supports for creatives (p65).

There is high-level training available for artists in Saudi Arabia, with a range of university-level courses (p212), while Moldova has worked to increase salaries (p83), as well as to provide allowances to encourage take-up of opportunities, in particular in rural areas (p84). Tunisia offers tax breaks (p27), while Jamaica’s policy focuses on supporting uptake of AI and encouraging synergies (p147).

The UAE presents a comprehensive portfolio of measures, covering labour market regulation and worker protection, as well as other steps to support decent work and economic resilience (p92), as well additional steps that reflect conditions within each sector (p100). Similarly, Jamaica cites its green paper on a National Policy for Culture, Entertainment and Creative Economy, including formalization, investment, training, intellectual property protection, data collection, technology access and other steps like insurance (p147).

The need for resilience is also underlined by Estonia and Togo, both of which recall the impacts of COVID on the sector (p8, p17).

There are fewer references though to artistic freedoms, with Estonia the strongest with its citation of European laws around media freedom in its chapter on culture (p81),

Support for creators has become more structured and impact-oriented. Whether for individual creators or non-profit cultural organisations, and whether in theatre and performing arts, visual arts, film, design, music, literature, or other creative fields, the Ministry of Culture has launched a set of national enablement programmes that respond to different needs across the ecosystem.

UAE, p100

Target 6 – Cultural Mobility

The 6th target under the Culture Goal highlights the importance of mobility and exchange programmes in achieving wider cultural sustainable goals. Nine countries report on their activities in this space in some way.

Most common are references to international partnerships as a pillar of wider cultural policies. Bahrain (p74), Moldova (p84) and Saudi Arabia (p209) all do this, with the latter highlighting how this forms part of wider support to Yemen. Estonia highlights exchanges with Namibia (p81) and with Ukraine in the context of protecting culture against threats (p77). The UAE talks about work with book fairs (p102),

while Italy reports on cultural exchanges between education communities (p212).

There is particular reference in some Reviews to the potential of connections with national diaspora. Jamaica's VNR sees connections as representing a potential source of strength (p168), while Uruguay argues that this can promote participation in cultural, social and cooperation activities (p56). Tonga too looks to support such contacts (p56).

While a little further from artist exchange, there are regular references to aspects of international cultural policy. Reviews refer to the relevance of world expos (Saudi Arabia p165), while Tonga (p56) and Uruguay (p163) focus on wider engagement in intergovernmental organisations. The UAE also highlights engagement with UNESCO but also sets out how it is incorporated into wider global partnerships and efforts to promote dialogue and shared memory (p100).

Target 7 – Indigenous Governance

Target 7 of the Draft Culture Goal emphasises the need to ensure that Indigenous communities have the space and resources to safeguard, promote and govern their own cultures. Eight countries overall do so.

Concerning the basic preservation of Indigenous and traditional culture, the Marshall Islands (p8) cite this as a priority in broad terms. They also note the particular relevance of language as a basis for enabling the continuity of wider traditions (p36), in particular through integrating into curricula (p38). As mentioned earlier, Burkina Faso is taking a similar path, alongside efforts also to make better use of ICTs (p56).

Alongside loss of language, Brazil highlights concern about territorial insecurity as a factor weakening the cultural systems of Indigenous peoples (p119), while Norway notes that damage to ecosystems can have the same impact (p34).

The Munduruku SDGs project deserves special mention as a model of localization — the cultural translation of the 2030 Agenda into the language and traditions of the Munduruku people — bringing the SDGs into alignment with their own ways of organizing, science, forest stewardship, territorial defense, access to water, education, memory, and good living.

Brazil, p243

In response, Brazil has launched the Program for the Consolidation of Indigenous Land Tenure and Territorial Protection, as well as a programme on “Multi-ethnic Cultural and Social Rights for the Full Exercise of Citizenship and the Good Life of Indigenous Peoples”, which covers a range of sectors, including cultural policy (p54).

Norway also has initiatives to provide the space for minorities to develop their languages, cultures and social lives, as well as to be included meaningfully in decision-making processes (p32).

The relevance of supporting the flourishing of indigenous cultures is highlighted across a range of reviews. For example, Brazil notes that a vibrant Indigenous culture has made it possible

to localise the 2030 Agenda, and so ensure stronger and more effective uptake, including through applying traditional knowledge to achieve global goals (p243). Tonga too underlines the importance of taking an approach to implementing the SDGs that is ‘grounded in Tongan values, a people-centred approach, faith, culture and traditional aspirations’ (p13).

More specifically, various reviews highlight how Indigenous approaches to resource use and conservation can be beneficial, as well as community-led conservation practices. This is the case for Egypt (p157), Kiribati (p28), the Marshall Islands (p36), and Tonga (p55). The Marshall Islands note potential connections with healthier living (p129), and Jamaica with wider social and economic development (p184).

Target 8 – Regenerative Approach

The eighth target under the Draft Culture Goal focuses on the importance of a regenerative approach to urban and environmental planning, fully integrating the place and power of culture to lead to more positive outcomes. 21 countries refer to these themes in some way.

As already highlighted under Target 3 above, the main reference to cultural heritage in the 2030 Agenda comes alongside natural heritage, leading to a number of references to addressing these two priorities together, strategically. This is the case for Albania (p147), Italy (p98), Jamaica (p216, p243), Kiribati (p59), Norway (p98), Saudi Arabia (p200, p259), Tanzania (p23), and Uruguay (p63). Egypt has looked to integrate preservation efforts into hydropower projects (p156), while Estonia integrates culture into wider environmental impact assessments (p7).

More specifically (and again echoing the section on heritage above, there is wide recognition of the potential that culture has in ensuring that urban (re) development is sustainable. Albania's post-earthquake reconstruction has aimed to 'build back better' through stronger integration of culture and heritage (p154), while Bahrain sees a culture-based approach as leading to more liveable and vibrant cities (p65). Jamaica presents its heritage as a key asset for community development, noting in particular how World Heritage Sites can help create sustainable livelihoods (p184), and Tunisia has a dedicated programme for regenerating old city centres with a focus on creating jobs (p125).

Recognising the interdependence between culture and the biosphere means treating culture as an integral part of the commons, to be safeguarded and regenerated together.

Italy, p94

Uruguay sees building out cultural infrastructure as a means of making urban development more sustainable (p39), while Rwanda sees the incorporation of cultural elements as a factor behind the success of its Zaria Court initiative (p38). Saudi Arabia cites work to map different architectural styles from around the country, and to incorporate them into new buildings in order to make for more attractive developments (p147). It also celebrates its 'human-centered approach focused on art, culture, and green infrastructure', as a means of enhancing community wellbeing (p148).

Sámi values such as community, responsibility, moderation, and respect for nature must guide implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Sámi languages, culture, livelihoods, and traditional knowledge must have a natural place in strategy development.

Norway, p34

Closely linked to the wider positive impacts that culture can have on wider regeneration, the particular benefits for community-building also appear. Albania makes the connection between culture and heritage on the one hand, and resilience on the other (p155), as does Kiribati (p28). Brazil, citing work in Fortaleza state, notes how including culture in a wider range of regional policies

has supported the holistic development of children (p86). It is also strong in underlining the key connection between culture and meaningful localisation of wider initiatives (p94) – a point that Uruguay also picks up on (p43). Saudi Arabia also suggests that more access to culture and other recreational opportunities can help boost social cohesion (p228).

In turn, there is also evidence across reviews of the idea that urban development policies and projects should respect culture. Bahrain notes efforts to ensure that new plans safeguard the historic character of local areas (p66), while Jordan reports on its use of heritage impact assessments (p113). Saint Kitts and Nevis included a heritage pillar in its Urban Resilience Plan for Charlestown on Nevis (p115), while Uruguay has acted to make heritage part of the regeneration of Colonia, the Fray Bentos work, and Paysandú (p146).

As already highlighted in the previous section, traditional culture and knowledge is also recognised as contributing to better environmental outcomes, for example in the Marshall Islands (p36), including around agriculture and fisheries (p38). There is also reference to the potential of culture in building climate empowerment and activism for climate justice (p37). Similarly, Italy's review underlines at various points the importance of cultural change for promoting more sustainable behaviours (p10, p94), while Saudi Arabia's cites how the Konozi initiative looks to shape attitudes and actions around sustainable land and sea management (p219). The same goes for the UAE (p120), Burundi (notably around forest management – p137), and Norway (around farming and harvesting practices, p34).

There is nonetheless also a recognition that the culture sector itself needs to reduce its own environmental impacts. As part of work to receive the traditional pearling industry in Bahrain, the Review notes efforts to apply higher environmental standards (p6), while Estonia notes efforts to model green behaviours at cultural events (p81), and Italy notes that the cultural sector has taken up practices around energy monitoring and resource management (p67).

In turn, the need to ensure that environmental policies support culture goals also appears. For example, in Tonga's review, the Tonga Fish Pathway Project is given as a model of how to ensure that conservation initiatives are culturally appropriate and sensitive (p55).

Meanwhile, Norway's review argues that there is a need to invest in intact ecosystems in order to enable the exercise of Sámi culture (p34). The urgency of preserving environments to preserve culture also appears in Cameroon's review, in the context of the impacts of damage to the country's forests (p62). Jamaica reports on the impact of Hurricane Melissa on cultural assets (p138), as well as the need to safeguard marine resources in ways that protect culturally significant areas (p227).

Target A – Cultural Institutions

Target A of the Culture Goal sets out the importance of supporting a vibrant infrastructure of cultural heritage institutions as a means of implementation of the wider Goal. 11 VNRs this year do this.

Some simply highlight their investments in institutions, such as Bahrain's work to support cultural infrastructures, including theatres, cultural centres and community spaces (p65). Moldova notes increased funding for libraries (p84), as does Uruguay (p13), and Burundi talks more broadly about renovating cultural infrastructures (p136).

In terms of the roles of institutions cited in Reviews, the Marshall Islands notes the responsibility of the Alele Museum for a national register of cultural and historic places and knowledge holders (p37),

while Bahrain sees its major institutions as spaces for exchange (p71) and supporting community partnerships (p78). Italy echoes this focus for dialogue and learning (p365).

The specific role of institutions in enabling access (a point already covered under Target 1 above) is also prominent. Bahrain notes how the development of independent galleries and cultural houses has helped make culture more accessible (p71), while Estonia has focused on the digitisation of collections (p81). Its Cultural Backpack initiative has focused on building a culture of visiting cultural infrastructures from a young age (p81).

Cultural infrastructure plays an essential role in ensuring equitable access to culture across the territory of the Republic of Moldova and is managed by central and local public authorities. It encompasses theatres, performance halls, museums, art galleries, libraries and cultural centres, all of which contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, boosting of artistic creation and the improvement of the quality of life.

Moldova, p81

The Marshall Islands shares the example of the Alele Book Mobile, which brings learning to all communities, as well as supporting efforts to record and disseminate traditional songs (p38). Moldova also makes clear how the full range of institutions can contribute to equitable access to culture (p81). They are also seen in some places as breeding grounds for creativity, such as in Bahrain (p71) and the UAE (p100).

Looking beyond culture alone, other countries highlight the broader contributions that cultural institutions can make. Estonia highlights how libraries can be spaces for a wide range of community services (p81), while Italy stresses the role they can play in raising awareness of

sustainable development issues, and even act as 'territorial hubs' for the implementation of national plans (p365). This includes the dissemination of values, knowledge and practices, as well as promoting community engagement, and brings the possibility of reaching new parts of the country. Overall, it describes them as 'cultural hubs for sustainability (p65).

Jamaica talks about how sites can boost economic growth and improved livelihoods (p179), while Saudi Arabia sees the inclusion of art galleries in a new development as supporting tourism (p267). Tunisia, conversely, highlights how libraries and other cultural centres can complement schools by supporting pre-school education and literacy (p93).

Finally, Italy highlights the benefits of enabling institutions to partner across borders, both in order to enhance their own work, and in order to connect communities (p365).

Target B – Policy Integration

The final target of the Draft Culture Goal emphasises the need to integrate culture more systematically into policymaking across the board, recognising both the role of the culture sector in driving change, and the importance of cultural factors in determining the effectiveness of policy initiatives. 14 countries indicate such an approach, ranging from those which broadly cite culture as a cross-cutting factor in their development strategies to those which only see its impact in one or two areas. In addition to the examples here, those provided in particular under Target 8 may also be relevant.

At a general level, the UAE for example states that culture and identity are a pillar of human development (p10). This approach is then described as shaping the country's broader approach (p90). In Uruguay, culture is seen as a key element within citizenship, which is itself one of the four dimensions of development used by the country in its own planning (p41). Sometimes, culture is included in relevant cross-cutting committees, such as Egypt's on human development (p53) and Jamaica's on social protection (p41). Meanwhile, Estonia has incorporated cultural impact into its wider impact assessment process (p7), while the Italian Review argues that culture is key to a unified approach (p171).

Policy coherence cannot be guaranteed without a cultural foundation to sustain it over time

Italy, p171

A number of references to the integration of culture into SDG planning and delivery come in the context of efforts to localise the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Brazil gives the example of the Munduruku SDGs project, which represents a 'cultural translation of the 2030 Agenda into the language and traditions of the Munduruku people' (p243). This not only boosts ownership, but also ensures greater relevance within the relevant region, and the possibility to mobilise local knowledge and ideas. The Review goes on to argue that it is proximity, and in particular the inclusion of culture, that allow the SDGs to 'gain strength and meaning' (p263).

Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia notes its Atlas of Sustainable Development of Al Madinah Neighbourhoods, which aims to make it possible to reflect local conditions and culture in shaping SDG delivery (p201), in particular in culturally sensitive contexts (p206). Tonga also underlines that development 'must be grounded in its cultural foundations', noting that this intentional integration of culture is a growing trend (p16). Finally, Italy also notes that engaging with youth and local institutions makes it possible to develop activities which are better suited to needs and more likely to resonate with the intended audience (p67).

Linked to this, there is also the potential of culture to promote the SDGs themselves, and at least education for sustainable development, a point also touched on in the section on Target 2 above. Indeed, Brazil argues that 'culture and communication have become determining axes for the advancement of the SDGs across Brazil' (p251), and that with the work around the VNRs, work can now continue with a 'renewed cultural foundation' (p261). Saudi Arabia's Konozi initiative also works to build awareness of and interest in the Goals (p219),

The SDGs gain strength and meaning when they are brought closer to everyday life — to schools, health facilities, food systems, sanitation, housing, transportation, waste management, culture, care, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, urban peripheries, and territories exposed to the climate emergency.

Brazil, p263

Italy's review highlights the notion of 'Cultures for Sustainability' as a sixth pillar of the 2030 Agenda, alongside the '5 P's' (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships) (p10). Its treatment of this covers both the role of cultural actors in getting people to think about sustainability, but also the cultural change required in the wider population. It goes on to argue that 'culture and education must be recognised as enabling factors and as a structural component of public policies, on a par with material and energy infrastructures' (p85).

Elsewhere, Liberia is clear that a common thread across the SDGs is the need for cultural change (p71), while the UAE sees it as a 'national enabler that connects 'identity with education, heritage with sustainability, creativity with employment, cultural access with quality of life, and international presence with global partnerships' (p98). It also makes the same point as others about culture helping to make the SDGs both local and real, noting that 'culture strengthens the SDGs by turning identity, heritage, creativity, and knowledge into practical pathways for education, decent work, sustainable communities, and global partnership' (p102).

Other Reviews link the integration of culture with successes in different SDGs. The City of Children plan in Fortaleza, Brazil, includes culture in its work with a view to providing comprehensive opportunities for children to develop (p86). The UAE sees it as key to wider human development policies (p61), while both Estonia (p81) and the Marshall Islands (p20) recognise contributions to better health and wellbeing outcomes.

There are a few references to the integration of culture strengthening policies for equity and cohesion. These range from the opportunities created by culture for Black and peripheral youth groups to develop businesses in Brazil (p121), the promotion of peace (Italy, p62), and social cohesion and wellbeing (UEA, p98).

On the more negative side, the urgency of addressing cultural barriers is highlighted, for example to prevent gender discrimination (Egypt, p94, Somalia, p26 and p33, and Tonga p40) and to give young women confidence (Sant Kitts and Nevis, p73).

As already explored in Target 8 above, there are also efforts to integrate culture into climate, farming and marine management. Estonia's mobilisation of Tartu – the European Capital of culture – created opportunities to build awareness around environmental and science issues (p81). Making space for traditional knowledge to guide policy can also help, as in the Marhsall Islands (p36), while Italy looks broader in underlining how a shift to more efficient resource use will be a cultural one (p91).

Through this approach, the Ministry of Culture positions culture as both a source of national continuity and a driver of inclusive, sustainable development.

UAE, p102

Uruguay echoes many of these messages, noting how even on topics like energy efficiency, there was room for culture and discussions about behaviour (p105).

Overview

Before concluding, it is valuable to look across the VNR countries for 2026 in order to explore how far they are addressing different facets of culture in their SDG implementation. One way of doing this is by counting the number of Targets from the Culture2030Goal campaign Draft Culture Goal that are addressed in some way by each country.

While none have all 10, Estonia, Italy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE all touch on 9 different areas, while Bahrain, Jamaica, Tonga and Uruguay address 8, the Marshall Islands 7, and Brazil, Egypt, Kiribati, Moldova and Tunisia talk about 6. More about how many targets are referenced by each country is available in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Countries and Numbers of Targets Referenced

Countries	Number of Culture Goal Targets Referenced
Estonia, Italy, Saudi Arabia, UAE	9
Bahrain, Jamaica, Tonga, Uruguay	8
Marshall Islands	7
Brazil, Egypt, Kiribati, Moldova, Tunisia	6
Burkina Faso, Saint Kitts and Nevis	5
Albania, Algeria, Guinea-Bissau, Norway	4
Cabo Verde	3
Burundi, Cameroon, Jordan, Liberia, Rwanda	2
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Malawi, Senegal, Somalia, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo	1
Guinea, Mozambique	0

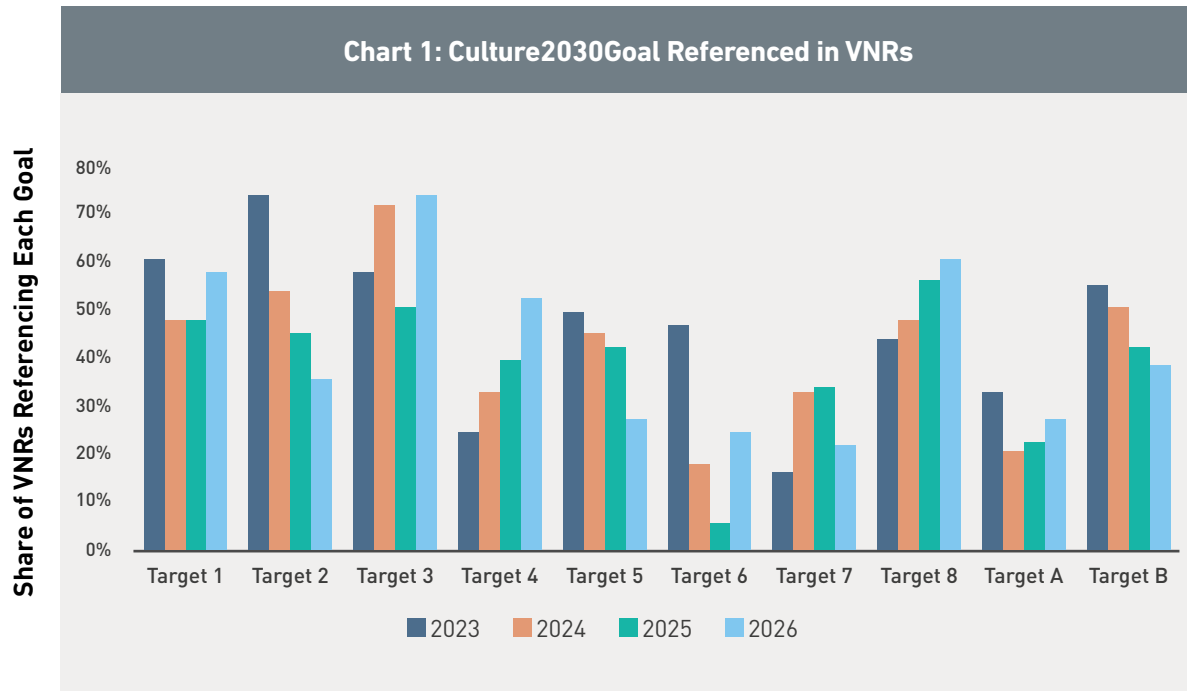
What stands out from this group is the high level of diversity of the countries concerned, from major industrial nations to small island developing states, from Europe to the Pacific. While the MENA region is particularly well represented, all of Europe, Asia-Oceania and Latin America and the Caribbean are all there, with similar average numbers of targets referenced.

However, there are concerns. There does appear to be a link between wealth and treatment of culture, with a direct correlation between income levels (high, upper-medium, lower-medium, and low) and the range of references made. Similarly, while all other regions have relatively similar averages in terms of how many targets they reference, Sub-Saharan African countries tend to discuss fewer different aspects of culture and development. This may be down to how their VNRs are prepared and structured, but it indicates an area where more work may be needed in future.

We can also compare trends over time, although a more detailed analysis here will follow. Nonetheless, Chart 1 below offers an overview of the data from 2023 until 2026.

Looking only at the data for 2026, Target 3 (Protect Heritage) stands out as the most frequently referenced by some way, although Targets 1 (Cultural Rights) and 8 (Regenerative Approach) also feature over half of the time. Slight fewer, but still just over half of VNRs also talk about promoting creativity (Target 4).

Over a third of VNRs highlight efforts related to Target 2 (Culture of Peace) and integrating culture into other policy areas (Target 8). Of the other Targets, none is referenced in fewer than 20% of reviews, with Indigenous Governance (Target 6) featuring relatively rarely (but of course prominently in countries with strong Indigenous populations), as well as Cultural Mobility (Target 6).



Looking over time, it is important to note that levels of focus on different targets vary according to whether related SDGs are in focus in a given year, and which countries are doing VNRs.

Nonetheless, from the data, it does appear that focus on support for creativity and local cultural production and economies (Target 4) tends to be growing, as does that for incorporating culture into urban and environmental policies (Target 8). There seems to be less attention to the idea of a culture of peace (Target 2), or of upholding creators' rights (Target 5), as well as integrating culture into development policies more broadly (Target B). Elsewhere, there is less of a clear trend.

PART 2: DIMENSIONS OF THE CULTURE-DEVELOPMENT RELATIONSHIP

This second part of the report turns to a different way of looking at how culture and development interact, breaking down this relationship into a number of different dimensions. This allows us to explore issues that may not be suitable to be considered as 'targets' in themselves but does allow us to understand how governments are thinking about culture in their approach to the SDGs.

The list of dimensions is the same as in previous years, and is as below, once again with shorthand at the end:

- Whether culture ministries themselves are identified as contributors. Where they are, this demonstrates that culture is formally recognised as a 'stakeholder' in discussions, and has the potential to shape action elsewhere (Culture Ministry Involved);
- Culture as a driver of identity. This reflects the understanding that culture can play a key structuring role in what makes a country a country, and so colour all other actions taken (Culture and Identity);
- Sustainability in cultural policy refers to efforts to apply sustainable development principles to the cultural sector itself, primarily through promoting equity within the sector, or through greening activities. Through this, cultural institutions and actors can also visibly model good behaviour (Sustainability in Cultural Policies);
- 'A culture of...' captures the frequent references to the idea that wider behaviours and attitudes in different areas are fundamentally a question of culture (Culture of...);
- Culture as a barrier collates cases where VNRs report that cultural factors are more problematic, leading to discrimination or the continuation of harmful practices. This relates closely to the previous section (Culture as a Barrier);
- Culture as a determinant brings together illustrations of where it is recognised that for policies to be effective, it is vital that they take account of cultural factors, or that culture can be a catalyst (Culture as a Determinant);
- Culture as a pillar of development looks at those countries which have effectively recognised the need to view culture on the same level as other key development policy areas or themes (Pillar of Development);
- Post-2030 References is a new item, looking at where VNRs talk about the post-2030 world, and in particular the notion of a culture goal (Post 2030 References);
- Cultural indicators refers to those VNRs which include hard data about culture, primarily spending on cultural and natural heritage (indicator 11.4.1 in the SDGs) (Cultural Indicators);
- Culture promoting sustainability rather than explores how culture – and in particular the cultural sector – can help raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals and the themes that underlie them (Culture Promoting Sustainability);
- Culture and tourism is a little more specific, picking up on the reference under SDG 8 to the importance of ensuring that tourism complements rather than harming culture (Culture and Tourism).

Culture Ministry Involved

Overall, almost half of the VNRs explicitly reported that their culture ministries had been involved in the preparation of their Review. These were Algeria (118), Brazil (1), Burkina Faso (117), Burundi (x), Estonia (83), Guinea (151), Italy (3), Jamaica (xvii), Kiribati (46), Malawi (137), Mozambique (14), Saudi Arabia (36), Somalia (10), Tunisia (163), the UAE (10), and Uruguay (176). Others may have involved their culture ministries, but this was not highlighted.

Culture and Identity

The next dimension of the relationship of culture to the achievement of the SDGs comes with those VNRs which highlight the role of identity, and of culture within this, as a relevant factor when exploring how to achieve sustainable development. 13 countries do this in some way.

At a basic level, Malawi highlights its democratic culture as part of its identity (p16), while others note how nature has shaped this: Jamaica cites its relationship to the land and sea as important (p223), Tonga the sea (p54), while Albania refers to its rivers (p181) and Norway to nature more broadly (p47). Jamaica also notes the cultural impact of its diaspora as a major influencing factor in the life of the country (p165). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia notes the value of ensuring a record of place names and wider information, and so is investing in an encyclopaedia of these as a means of safeguarding identity (p219).

The importance of identity comes through in a number of cases. Both Algeria (p12) and Egypt (p43) recall the provisions in the African Union 2063 Agenda about the role of identity, while Bahrain makes identity into a policy goal, seeing communities rooted in their heritage as a source of strength (p12). Guinea-Bissau, similarly, argues that its cultural capital can be a source of potential for development (p3). Jamaica (p21) and Kiribati (p59) both refer to the role of identity in helping to overcome challenges. In the case of Jamaica, it is the response to Hurricane Melissa, and in that of Kiribati, to wider environmental threats to livelihoods.

Tonga also relates its identity and values to its approach to development (p13), while the UAE underlines that its VNR is grounded in a rooted cultural identity, safeguarded heritage, and a competitive creative economy (p98). The importance of identity for the operation of other parts of national life also comes through in Burkina Faso's drive to secure cultural sovereignty (p56).

Finally, we can also draw conclusions from the use of visuals. Jamaica's VNR indeed places music right in the middle of the front cover of the review, while Tonga has an image of Indigenous Peoples. The Marshall Islands uses culture-related photos throughout its review, indicating a connection between culture and its wider perception of development.

Sustainability in Cultural Policies

A further dimension of the relationship between culture and sustainability are efforts to ensure that the activities of the cultural sector themselves are sustainable. In addition to the references to efforts to ensure more equitable access to culture highlighted under Target 1 above, it is also worth pointing to work in Estonia to ensure that festivals reduce their environmental impact (p81). This includes use of sustainable materials, nature conservation, and climate friendly approaches, working with a specialist sustainable event planning company.

In turn, Italy highlights extensive survey work to understand the state of play currently in the sector, with less than 40% of identified institutions and sites with relevant policies, programmes and tools that could help model and promote sustainability within communities (p67).

Culture Of...

The next dimension focuses on broader references to ‘cultures of’ a variety of activities and phenomena, seen either as a goal of policy efforts, or as key factors in shaping how successful they are.

Some relate to overall governance and citizenship issues, such as cultures of human rights (Algeria, p47), in particular among the judiciary (Democratic Republic of Congo, p117). Cabo Verde talks ore broadly about a culture of peace and security (p71).

In addition to Malawi’s reference to a democratic culture above, looking to build wider trust, Jamaica wants to promote a culture of transformation in government (p10), and others one of evaluation and monitoring (Brazil, p251, Tunisia, p79, and Uruguay, p2). Egypt (p172), Norway (p15) and Tonga (p44) all want a stronger culture of accountability in public institutions, and Saudi Arabia a culture of integrity (p226).

In a similar area, Uruguay is keen to build a stronger culture of inter-institutional cooperation (p9), and Mozambique and Somalia one of governance (p132 and p2). Jamaica and Norway want to work more on partnership and stakeholder engagement (p2 and p30), and Brazil on cultural transformation for policy delivery (p161).

Within societies, the role of cultures of solidarity (Saudi Arabia, p190), and volunteering (Bahrain, p49, Saudi Arabia, p145, and the UAE, p110) all feature. Some references are more focused on equity issues. Switzerland is looking to promote a culture of inclusion at work (p27), while others are looking at women’s engagement more broadly (Saudi Arabia, p192, and the UAE, p110), and gender quality (Burkina Faso, p62). Italy wants more broadly to build a culture of global solidarity (p156).

The role of different cultures in promoting more environmentally friendly models is also evident. Bahrain (p31), Brazil (p246), the Marshall Islands (p41), Tunisia (p96), the UAE (p14) and Uruguay (p66) all talk about the role of a culture of sustainability. Italy cites this in the context of government (p28), SMEs (p78) and third-sector organisations (p65). The UAE also talks about a culture of responsible resource consumption (p120), Jamaica of ocean stewardship (p230), and Burkina Faso of resilience and climate planning (p89). More broadly, Brazil is working to build a culture of incorporation of the 2030 Agenda (p248).

There is also a recognised place for culture in achieving more economic goals. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia both talk about the need for a culture of innovation (p38 and p176), and Saudi Arabia adds in the goal of a culture of entrepreneurship (p192). Jamaica (p138) and Saint Kitts and Nevis (p95) wants to build a culture of productivity consciousness, and Brazil one of exports (p52). Looking internationally, Brazil also hopes to change the culture of development financing (p260).

Concerning questions around education, both Jamaica (p160) and Moldova (p51) want to promote a culture of continuous reskilling, while Norway (p115) and the UAE (p105) look more at reading culture. Also linked with individual empowerment, Saint Kitts and Nevis is focused on an investment culture for financial literacy (p10), and Burundi on a culture of saving and community investment (p51).

Finally, Tunisia talks about the goal of building a culture of responsible AI (p30).

Culture as a Barrier

The inverse of having a ‘culture of’ a desirable outcome is when culture is seen as being a barrier. Guinea in particular notes that harmful practices can too often be seen as cultural obligations for many (p91).

In some cases, it is the absence of a desirable culture, such as Burkina Faso, which worries about a culture of non-engagement with government (p57). Algeria fears that the absence of a business angel culture is holding the country back (p98).

Elsewhere, cultures can be seen as slowing down change. For example, Brazil discusses cultural resistance to incorporating the SDG agenda (p110), while Italy states that ‘main barrier to transformation is neither technical nor economic: it is cultural’ (p85).

There are many references to the potential negative impact of cultural factors on health. Bahrain (p49) and Guinea (p79) note that it can reduce the likelihood of accessing sexual and reproductive health services, with Bahrain noting that this can also limit uptake of health in general (p50). Jamaica notes cultural barriers to men seeking mental health support (p99).

Many references refer to questions around gender equality. Culture is seen as limiting progress towards ending female genital mutilation in Burkina Faso (p60), Guinea (p88) and Somalia (p37). Guinea (p88) and Somalia (p33) note that culture can make it harder to stop early marriages, as well as to boost girls’ participation in school (p88 and p26). More positively, Guinea also shares data underlining that poor practices are not universal, and it is possible to learn from communities which either have abandoned or never took up harmful activities.

Beyond this, Burkina Faso also notes cultural blocks on the uptake of better sanitation practices (p64), while Liberia and Moldova note the need to work on culture to reduce violence against women and children (p73 and p148), and Guinea to reducing early pregnancies (p88).

It can also hold back women’s participation in politics (Burkina Faso, p60, the DRC, p65, and Tonga, p40), and in particular in decision-making roles (Somalia, p35). Egypt highlights barriers to gender equality more generally (p94), and to female labour market participation (Jamaica, p137).

More generally, Burundi (p77) and Guinea (p91) argue that culture can prevent people from exercising and enjoying rights, while Moldova suggests that it is holding people back from reporting violence (p144). Norway in turn fears that cultural factors can reduce youth participation (p7). Egypt talks more broadly about cultural hindrances to inclusive workplaces (p130), and Tunisia about discrimination against persons with disabilities (p27).

Finally, on a more economic front, Jamaica suggests that poor cultural practices may be reducing economic resilience, while Tunisia sees it preventing realising the potential of digital (p31). Jamaica also worries that culture gets in the way of recycling and responsible resource use (p346).

Culture as Determinant

Looking beyond briefer references to the cultural nature of certain activities and believes, 19 VNRs this year dig deeper into the idea that culture can determine whether policies in other areas achieve their goals.

In a number of cases, it can serve as a catalyst for positive change. Albania suggests that it was the inclusion of culture in plans for the recovery from the earthquake that the country experienced that helped deliver more inclusive, resilient and sustainable results (p105). Bahrain too sees positive impacts on job creation, economic diversification and social cohesion (p62), as does the UAE (p101) and Italy as a trigger for territorial activation (p221). Saint Kitts and Nevis, in presenting the Bloom Where You're Planted initiative, suggests that culture provided a uniquely powerful tool for supporting collaboration and inter-generational connection (p73).

However, beyond examples of playing a catalyst role, other VNRs look at where culture has made it possible for existing policies to have more impact than they might have otherwise. Moldova cites culture as a development accelerator (p9), and Italy as the 'intangible infrastructure of transformation' (p79). Brazil recognises that localising the SDGs relies on working through cultural networks and others (p243), notably Indigenous communities, which expect to feel ownership, but which can also bring significant knowledge and resources to bear. Italy too places a strong emphasis on the need for localisation in order to deliver results, with culture key to doing this successfully (p34).

The risk of rejection of SDG-related policies when culture is not considered comes across in Saudi Arabia's review, noting that cultural sensitivity needs to be managed and reflected (p206). Tonga too notes that development initiatives need to be aligned with values – a realisation that is only getting stronger (p16). Meanwhile, supportive cultures and values can be a major asset, as suggested by Egypt (p42), while Liberia underlines the need for cultural change broadly to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Going into more details, areas of development where integrating culture appears to be necessary for success, according to VNRs, include AI readiness (Bahrain, p101), reforestation (Burkina Faso, p137), as well as wider preservation of natural heritage (Egypt, p157) and community-led conservation (Egypt, p157). Jamaica hopes to integrate local cultures into efforts to promote 'sociobiodiversity' (p260), and Norway to go further in adopting traditional food systems and harvesting practices (p34). Tonga underlines how traditional knowledge and practices can make it much easier to promote sustainable fishing (p55), and Uruguay notes that respecting culture can drive energy efficiency (p105).

Culturally informed working can also support health goals. The Marshall Islands' 'Healthy Islands' project combines culture with health and environment, promoting more balanced lifestyles in a way that may not have been possible without taking account of local needs (p20). Saudi Arabia suggests making development projects more human-centred can enable suggest. Finally, and in addition to the intrinsic goal of promoting culture, the UAE also notes that for training to be effective, it needs to be adapted to cultural and linguistic contexts (p175).

Outside of the policy environment, a few reviews also note that culture can shape how far individuals and other actors can realise their own potential. Cabo Verde notes that people need cultural foundations to be able to pursue their studies (p37), while Tonga associates it with child wellbeing (p40). Culture can also drive migration, for example from villages to cities (Moldova, p81), but can also be a strength for those SMEs that understand it and make it a competitive strength (Italy, p84). Linked to this, Uruguay argues that social economy actors can also be more responsive to need and demand because of their implantation in communities (p68).

Pillar of Development

Going beyond references to culture as catalysing or otherwise facilitating progress in other policy areas, 14 VNRs in 2026 in some way present culture itself as a key objective, or even a pillar of development. The idea of a pillar of development relates to the traditional 'three-pillar' model of economic, social and environmental development which need to be balanced to ensure sustainable development.

It is noteworthy that the focus of NOs has expanded in TSDF 2035 due to the need for mainstreaming cultural values in Tonga's development and the growing security challenges. The TSDF 2035 reflects an important evolution in Tonga's development priorities by elevating culture and national security as integrated and explicit areas of focus.

Tonga, p16

First of all, there are a range of countries that present different aspects of culture as a goal. Algeria (p18) for example sees cultural promotion in this way, while Bahrain wants to place creative expression at the core of national life (p62), as does Cabo Verde (p35). Brazil also introduces the goal of strengthening the creative economy (p258), as does the United Arab Emirates (p10), and Estonia even includes a whole SDG18 on the vitality of the Estonian cultural space (p3). Tonga (p16) works to promote national culture, citing this alongside resilience, climate, and community empowerment, and Uruguay reports on culture as a distinct area of policy action (p29). Egypt places it alongside health and education as a goal in the context of human development (p53).

In other cases, it is heritage and its preservation that takes on the role of a goal. Bahrain emphasises the sustainability of culture as a key goal in order to achieve broader sustainability (p12), as well as placing preserving heritage and identity alongside climate protection and enabling innovation (p7). The Marshall Islands also make cultural protection a key goal (p4), as does Saint Kitts and Nevis (p115), Saudi Arabia (p32), Tonga (p16) and the UAE (p10).

Brazil stands out for its explicit focus on cultural rights as a goal, for example promoting the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples (p51). Others focus on promoting cultural diversity and relations, such as Cabo Verde which makes interculturalism a dimension of its overall vision (p35), and the UAE which seeks to achieve cultural cohesion (p10).

Elsewhere, rather than seeing culture as a goal, there are countries which rather (or also) portray it as more of an underlying principle. This is the case for Brazil, which sees it as a broad focus area alongside planning, management and science (p44). It also underlines that the next SDG implementation cycle should have a stronger cultural foundation (p261). Jamaica sees it as a key element of wider efforts to promote social protection (p41), and Uruguay as a key part of citizenship (p41), while the Marshall Islands has a social and culture working group as one of the five pillars of its plans (p10). Saudi Arabia has it as a dimension of regional growth next to urban, economic, developmental, social and environmental (p197), and the UAE sees it 'not [...] as a sector separate from development, but as a national enabler that connects identity with education, heritage with sustainability, creativity with employment, cultural access with quality of life, and international presence with global partnerships' (p98).

Italy's consideration of culture as a driver of development is particularly strong, with a whole chapter on culture as a 'powerful integrated policy field to drive change into collaborative arenas' (p13). It goes on to place the cultural and human alongside the traditional dimensions of sustainable development (p62) and ran a Cultures for Sustainability Working Group as one of the six in its Sustainable Development Forum (p74). Subsequently, culture is described as a structural infrastructure (p85), an integral part of the commons (p94), and a pillar alongside participation and coherence for achieving the SDGs (p171).

Post-2030 References

In particular with discussions intensifying around what will follow the 2030 Agenda, some Voluntary National Reviews have already started to explore what might come next, and in particular the place of culture within this.

In part, this is inevitable, as governments renew their own sustainable development plans with a horizon that stretches beyond 2030 itself. This is the case for Brazil, which sets out goals reaching into the 2030s, including ones for culture (strengthen the creative economy, memory and cultural diversity, valuing art and popular culture in all their forms of expression) (p258). More broadly, Brazil stresses that the new cycle of development will need to focus far more on the need for cultural change (p246).

Some countries already call for a dedicated culture goal in the post-2030 Agenda, such as Jamaica (p316), which also talks about culture as 'the missing SDG' (p147). Uruguay echoes the message of the MONDIACULT 2025 conference, arguing that culture should be seen as an 18th SDG (p15), and arguing that action is needed to correct the weakness of the current agenda by making culture a priority in the next (p65). This viewpoint is also echoed in the report from stakeholder consultations in the country (p63).

Others focus less on the future but treat culture already as a goal today. A very strong example is Estonia, which dedicates a whole chapter to an SDG 18 – Viability of the Estonian Cultural Space. This refers back to the country's Culture Development Plan, which, as the Review notes, makes a strong contribution to the achievement of the SDGs (p80). Strong connections with the EU's wider agenda on culture are also noted.

Culture 'the missing SDG' is no longer considered peripheral to economic development but recognised as a major economic driver, particularly in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and developing countries.

Jamaica, p147

Similarly (and as already highlighted in the section on Target B of the Draft Culture Goal), Italy has established 'Cultures for Sustainability' as a cross-cutting factor, part of a 6th dimension of the 2030 Agenda alongside the 5 P's (see above) (p62). Italy's National Forum on Sustainable Development also has a Working Group on Culture, which submitted a report to the overall VNR (p94). This sets out a philosophy around the role of culture, suggesting that 'cultural transformation is a structural condition of public policies', that should be funded. It also sees this as key to developing a sense of global citizenship needed to drive behaviour change and achieve policy coherence.

Cultural Indicators

15 countries in some way look to provide indicators relating to culture. In most cases, these are the same as those included in the official indicator framework concerning spending on the protection of cultural (and natural) heritage: Algeria (p71), Gabon (p46), Jordan (p44), Liberia (p61), Malawi (p93), Moldova (p830), Norway (p84), Saint Kitts and Nevis (p121), and Somalia (p51).

Others use different indicators. Bahrain experiments with measures of a sense of identity and belonging (p63), as does the UAE (p98), and Estonia has a set of metrics for all of its SDG18 on a vibrant cultural space (p80). Jordan uses the Culture | 2030 indicators from UNESCO (p144), and Tunisia counts the number of projects supported (p125). Finally, Italy calls for further work to collect data about culture (p94), as well as sharing locally relevant numbers from different projects (p126).

Culture Promoting Sustainability

The second-to-last dimension of the relationship between culture and sustainable development is the role of culture in building an understanding of the SDGs and wider sustainability issues, as a basis for wider change. Four countries do this.

Brazil for example recognises a particular role for cultural institutions in helping to explain the goals in ways that make sense locally (p94) as well as to minority groups (p101). Italy too sees them as potential cultural hubs for sustainability and dissemination, as well as mobilisation (p65). Saudi Arabia gives a specific role to the creative industries and has sought to mobilise them to complement wider transformation efforts (p218).

Italy meanwhile sees culture and education for sustainable development as intrinsically linked (p35), and the UAE shares how writing stories linked to the SDGs helps build awareness and engagement among young people, as well as wider skills (p99).

Culture and Tourism

Finally, 15 countries pick up on the reference in Target 8.9 of the SDGs to the connection between culture and tourism. This relationship goes in both directions.

In some cases, culture is seen as supporting the development of a successful tourist industry. Albania sees culture as diversifying the tourist offer (p57), and Burkina Faso sees doing more with cultural heritage as a means of development (p74). Cabo Verde (p12), Egypt (p157), Jordan (p19), Kiribati (p18), the Marshall Islands (p66), Saudi Arabia (p267), Senegal (p670), Tonga (p25) and Uruguay (p43) all note efforts to drive cultural tourism as a higher value part of their overall offer. Burkina Faso even combines the two, with a joint strategy on culture and tourism (p72), as does Algeria (p18).

Looking at things from the other side there is an awareness of the need to ensure that tourism development does not have a negative effect on culture and indeed can provide a boost for this. Bahrain notes the need to manage to tension between growth in visitor numbers and protection of sites (p65), and Jamaica the protection of traditional knowledge and ways of life (p184). Saint Kitts and Nevis also has a strong focus on cultural protection in the context of its drive to diversify the tourism industry (p93), as does Saudi Arabia (p259).

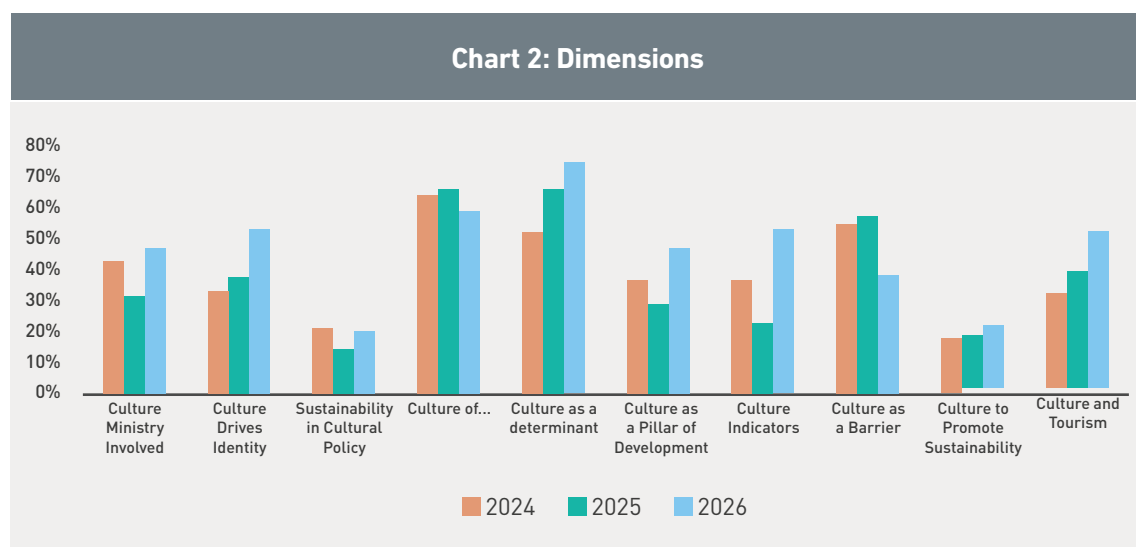
Overview

Looking across the numbers of countries recognising different dimensions of the relationship between culture and development, we can construct Chart 2, which again shows the share of VNRs which refer to each.

Starting with the figures for 2026 (the right-hand column in each group), we see that the most common connections between culture and development are when governments see culture as a catalyst or determinant of policy effectiveness or note how a 'culture of' something affects progress. Interestingly, this implies a definition of culture that goes beyond the narrower conception that is often associated with the word. Rather, it recalls the description given in the Italian VNR:

Culture – understood broadly as everyday practices, collective values, business and third-sector culture, as well as heritage and the arts – is formed through intergenerational transmission and cross-fertilisation between peoples, places, and forms of knowledge (p94).

These are nonetheless areas where there is, arguably, a role both for cultural actors in stimulating changes in attitudes and behaviour, and for specialists who can understand and bring cultural insights into decision-making.



Outside of these, over half of VNRs also include references to the relevance of cultural identity for their development planning, indicators related to culture, and discussion of culture and tourism. Almost 50% involve their culture ministry or broadly see culture as a goal or pillar of development. Slightly less common (although related to culture's place as a determinant of development) are references to cultural barriers.

Looking over time (since 2024), there appears to be a trend towards more common references to culture as a determinant of development, as well as to tourism and the role of cultural identity. Elsewhere, there is not such a clear trend, although it is worth noting that in seven of the ten dimensions studied, 2026 has seen the highest frequency of references.

Finally, echoing the analysis in the previous section, it is again the case that VNRs from Asia-Oceania, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East and North Africa all tend to have a similar average number of dimensions covered, but Sub-Saharan Africa Reviews have fewer. There is, furthermore, still a correlation between income levels and numbers of dimensions addressed.

PART 3: CULTURE AND THE EXISTING SDGS

The final major part of this report uses the existing SDG framework as a lens through which to explore how culture is being integrated into the goals. Once again, we are using a set of clusters of goals, as in previous years, to allow for comparability.

- Equality and Inclusion (SDGs 1, 5 and 10)
- Agriculture, Environment and Climate (SDGs 2, 12, 13, 14, and 15)
- Wellbeing (SDGs 3, 6 and 7)
- Education (SDG 4)
- Growth, Jobs and Innovation (SDGs 8 and 9)
- Community and Resilience (SDG 11)
- Peace and Governance (SDG 16)
- Partnerships (SDG 17)

Equality and Inclusion

The first cluster of SDGs in focus looks at issues that relate to equity – SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). 16 VNRs highlight the interaction between culture and achieving success here.

One major aspect of this connection is the drive to support equitable participation in culture. This can be read into the elements of SDG 1 that talk about access to basic services for example. In this context, Bahrain's focus on fostering participation in culture across culture is relevant (p78), as does Italy, which sees low literacy as a 'cultural fragility' that leaves people less able to participate (p94). Uruguay too has looked to incorporate universal accessibility principles into its work on culture and urban development, in order to overcome inequalities (p146).

In turn, culture is also seen as driving efforts to ensure broader participation and equity, as noted by Brazil, which includes a section on economic growth, labour, technology and culture in the service of equity (p120), as well as referencing its Viva Leitura award which aims to reduce inequalities (p51).

Among specific groups in focus, some highlight persons with disabilities. Albania has invested in boosting accessibility of culture and heritage through the EU4Culture programme (p105), while Estonia notes how the digitisation of library collections means better access (p81). Tunisia similarly notes plans to promote inclusion in culture (p27).

The needs of Indigenous peoples feature strongly in Brazil's review, with specific programming to support cultural and social rights (p66), and action to address risks to cultural continuity from territorial insecurity (p119). Norway too notes deliberate efforts to ensure that national minorities can develop their languages and cultures, are involved fully, and enjoy equal treatment. This is supported through targeted grants and structured dialogues (p32).

Older persons feature in Egypt's review, which cites the need to uphold their cultural rights (p67), as does Tunisia (p57). The Marshall Islands in turn argues that changing cultures to enhance respect for older persons is a valuable success (p34). At the other end of life, Norway focuses strongly on access to culture for children as supporting efforts to reduce inequality (p49), as well as reducing cultural barriers to youth participation (p113).

Gender equality features in a range of VNRs as also highlighted in the sections on 'Cultures of...' and Culture as a Barrier above. In addition to the references there Egypt underlines that gender quality has a cultural dimension and seeks to address these through the National Women's Strategy 2030 (p94). Saudi Arabia's Konozi initiative seeks to use cultural representations and actions to advance SDG 5 (p219), and Saint Kitts and Nevis' Island Girls Rule This Caribbean works through culture to enable dialogue and confidence (p73).

Finally, the role of culture in supporting migrants and displaced persons appears in Estonia's review, which works on promoting cultural integration (p49). The same goes for Moldova (p78).

Agriculture, Environment and Climate

The second cluster of goals focuses on issues related to environment and climate, covering SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) SDG 12 (Sustainable Production and Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). To note, there are already many relevant references in the sections above addressing sustainability in cultural policies, tourism, and regenerative approaches (Target 8).

That cultural and environmental goals are closely linked is – as has already been noted in this report – clear. Algeria notes that particular landscapes fulfil both ecological and cultural functions (p87), as does Jamaica (p215, p219), while Egypt sees biodiversity as a cultural asset (p157). The same goes for Jamaica (p260). Cameroon notes that often, protecting nature is also a way of protecting culture (p62). Kiribati's work to strengthen environmental management integrates cultural heritage protection (p48), noting that there are costs to not taking this into account (p58).

Estonia also integrates cultural impacts into its environmental impact assessments (p7), while Norway underlines that the fight against climate change is also the fight against negative implications for cultural sustainability (p33). Brazil too links culture and climate justice (p51), while the UAE has driven forwards efforts to integrate culture into the wider climate action agenda (p101), and Jamaica features culture in its overall climate strategy (p204).

There are a number of references to how culture and tradition can support achieving progress in these areas. Bahrain notes how traditional food cultures are supporting better agricultural outcomes (p92), while Saudi Arabia's Konozi initiative draws broadly on heritage to achieve Goals 14 and 15 (p219). Meanwhile Cabo Verde calculates the contribution of culture to a sustainable Blue Economy (p79). Both the Marshall Islands (p36) and Tonga (p55) stress how traditional knowledge supports more sustainable marine conservation. The Marshall Islands also note how cultural groups have mobilised communities to support ocean clean-ups (p41). Tunisia's review also notes that traditional fishing practices offer a better way of maintaining stocks (p134).

With behaviour change playing a major role in achieving wider climate goals, there are active efforts to shape attitudes through cultural efforts, such as in the context of environmental education in Brazil (p90), and the engagement of cultural institutes in promoting better forest management in Burundi (p137). The Marshall Islands' review gives the example of Ji-jikum, a youth-led NGO that is developing displaced to promote climate activism (p38). Elsewhere, a culture of resilience is seen as essential for Burkina Faso (p89), while Italy's Working Group on Planet highlights the role of culture as a structural condition of the transition to more sustainable models.

Linked to this, culture is also seen as having a role in changing consumption patterns, both when it comes to physical things like waste and recycling (Jamaica, p346, Uruguay, p150), and on energy efficiency (Egypt, p143).

Wellbeing

The third cluster of goals looked at address questions around health, wellbeing, and basic utilities. It therefore covers SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 7 (Affordable and Sustainable Energy). Eight VNRs do this in some way.

Most common is the recognition of culture as a driver of wellbeing and quality of life. This shows up in the reviews of Estonia (p81), Moldova (p9), and Saudi Arabia (p228) in particular. Uruguay explicitly links culture to SDG 3 in reporting on progress on development in the town of San José (p45).

The survey showed that people in Estonia consider cultural heritage important and recognise its contribution to both spiritual and material well-being.

Estonia, p81

Culture can also affect whether people access health services and adopt healthy lifestyles. Burkina Faso worries that cultural factors can be a barrier to this (p50), while the Marshall Islands have invested in education to boost healthy living drawing on culture (p29). Saudi Arabia also has invested in programmes to enable art and culture to improve health and wellbeing (p123). Jamaica, more broadly, sees organisational culture as a determinant of employee's health (p333).

As already mentioned above in the context of sustainable consumption, culture can also shape the impact of energy and sanitation policies. Uruguay includes a strong cultural pillar in efforts to boost energy efficient behaviours (p105), while the UAE notes that this is necessary to ensure water security (p120). Bridging water and health, Burkina Faso stresses the need to act on cultural practices to boost sanitation (p64).

Education

The next area of focus is on a single goal – SDG 4 (Quality Education). 16 VNRs make a connection here, with exploration both of how culture can shape education and vice-versa, as well as review that address how culture interacts with youth policy.

While the current version of the Draft Culture Goal does not include an explicit segment on cultural education, the theme does appear in work under UNESCO's MONDIACULT process, as in 19 Reviews.

Bahrain notes how its philharmonic orchestra helps encourage creativity among school students (p72), while the UAE has built out its National Register of cultural materials in order to support stronger education (p98). The country has also developed a framework for national cultural activities in schools in the context of its wider efforts to strengthen identity. Elsewhere, culture is strongly integrated into the development of education in San José in Uruguay (p45). At post-secondary level, Saudi Arabia has invested in developing courses in culture (p212).

Linked to this, a better incorporation of national languages into education features in Burkina Faso (p56), and in the Marshall Islands, where there are efforts to develop and distribute relevant teaching resources, as well as the Alele Book Mobile which ensures that these reach all communities (p38).

Outside of schools, others promote youth participation in wider life. Albania highlights the need to address concerns about a lack of access to cultural activities (p50), as does Moldova concerning rural youth (p83) and Estonia more generally with its Cultural Backpack (p81). The latter has launched the Cultural Voucher programme to help address this. Bahrain also notes the work of an association that supports youth and families to engage in culture (p39), and Estonia has dedicated programmes for large families (p10). Italy's review also notes efforts to promote cultural activities designed 'by and for' young people to support their engagement in sustainable development processes (p67).

Some reviews make clear an understanding that engagement in culture – through schools and elsewhere – makes a major contribution to youth development. Brazil cites the City of Children in the Inclusive Fortaleza Plan, which makes culture part of efforts to promote the holistic development of children (p86), and Cabo Verde is emphasising the need to build the cultural foundations for young people to succeed (p37). The Marshall Islands gives the example of Waan Aelōñ in Majel's Life Skills Training, which uses cultural practices to help 'at risk' youth to gain essential life skills (p29).

The role of cultural institutions is recognised. In Norway, the National Library Association is involved in work to address broader concerns about declining literacy (p65), while in Tunisia, public libraries and others are seen as key players in delivering pre-school education in the communities where mothers and families are (p93).

There is also a recognition of the place of education in supporting wider cultural change. Italy's review makes a lot of this, suggesting that this is crucial for environmentally friendly behaviour change (P67). It cites how green schools can help in this respect (p69), as well as stressing how it is not just about adding knowledge to a curriculum, but also focusing on deeper skills and attitudes (p85). Saudi Arabia sees education as supporting cultural understanding (p76), while Tonga has updated its Education Strategic Policy Framework to help deliver skills and viewpoints that support sustainability (p38).

Last of all, there is a call for a culture of respect for quality education in Saudi Arabia's review (p138), recognising that culture can also shape the attitudes of actors within the system. Liberia highlights the need to change culture to eliminate violence against children (p63).

Growth, Jobs, and Innovation

Another cluster of goals focuses on those which relate to wider prosperity, incorporating SDG8 (Decent Work and Growth) and SDG9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). In addition to the references shared here, it is worth also looking at those concerning culture in the section dedicated to that topic. 16 VNRs do so.

Some VNRs argue that culture and heritage themselves can be valuable economic drivers. Bahrain sees traditional crafts as bringing jobs (p70), and Cabo Verde measures how far culture supports strong Blue Economy (p79). Jamaica provides data about the contribution of the creative economy to overall GDP, with strong growth, but more possible (p147). The Marshall Islands also sees culture as supporting economic growth (p36).

As already highlighted in the section on Target 4 of the Draft Culture Goal above, various countries highlight their work to invest in their creative industries. Bahrain references both direct supports to small and emerging companies, as well as wider efforts to expand market access and ensure fair competition (p78). Moldova reports on its Creative Moldova national programme, including a platform for connecting actors and opening up new opportunities (p83). Estonia (p80) and Rwanda (p8) both also note efforts in this space.

Saudi Arabia's Konoza initiative has created rich opportunities for many across the sector (p219), alongside a programme of festivals and fairs (p228), while the UAE's National Strategy for Cultural and Creative Industries has seen strong expansion in the sector in both GDP and employment terms (p92). Meanwhile, and recognising the vulnerability of the creative industries to shocks, Estonia notes the impact of COVID on employment (p8), as does Togo (p17).

Looking outside of the creative sector, there is an understanding that culture can also shape how other types of business work. Switzerland highlights the role of inclusive work cultures in helping everyone to realise their potential (p51), while Uruguay suggests that social economy actors can often be more effective because they have cultural objectives alongside economic ones, and better understand the cultures of their customers (p68).

In particular, the need for cultural change to seize new opportunities is highlighted in Saudi Arabia's review, which seeks to promote a culture of innovation (p178), as well as Tunisia's ambition to build a digital culture (p62). Finally, Egypt sees potential in bringing digital technology into cultural institutions in order to enhance effectiveness and reach (p120).

Community and Resilience

SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is already a particularly important Goal for the culture sector given that it includes the Target (11.4) that urges the safeguarding of cultural and national heritage. However, the connection between culture and community goes broader than this and is highlighted in 21 VNRs. Relevant examples are cited below, but the reader is also encouraged to refer to the sections on Targets 3, 8 and A of the Draft Culture Goal above.

In addition to a general recognition of how cultural infrastructure helps deliver on SDG11 in Uruguay's review (p39), a number of countries make the link with community resilience. Albania does this (in the conditions of recovery from earthquake, p150), and Estonia and Italy (in the face of war (p80, p62). Kiribati (p9) and the Marshall Islands (p36) similarly connect preserving heritage to wider efforts to maintain community continuity in the face of climate change, and Norway from wider evolutions in land use (p98). Jamaica shares its experience from Hurricane Melissa and more, noting both how culture has helped in the recovery, but also that it needs to benefit from support in order to survive and thrive (p147).

More positively, culture is seen as a key way of making communities more attractive. Estonia celebrates what has been achieved in Tartu as the European Capital of Culture (p81), and Rwanda with the Zaria Court development (p38). Saudi Arabia's Riyadh Arts initiative is seen as having positive effects both for the wellbeing of existing residents and in bringing new ones in (p262). Italy sees culture as animating and stimulating regions and places in general (p221). Estonia also notes how its investment in rural libraries serves to give more remote communities effective spaces to come and be together (p81).

Closely linked to the question of attractiveness is that of culture in wider regeneration efforts. Bahrain (p65) and Saudi Arabia (p147) both discuss this, as do Tunisia and Uruguay in highlighting their work to make urban centres more liveable (p125, p146).

The other side of the coin is that a lack of culture can make places and regions less attractive. Moldova highlights this, seeing investment in culture across the country as a way of countering internal migration to the capital (p81, p83), while Norway has set the goal of providing regionally equitable access to culture (p115).

Another angle related to SDG11 is the importance of giving cities and communities a strong say in the design and implementation of cultural policies. This is the case in Brazil (p82), as well as in Moldova, where culture is part of a wider decentralisation programme (p83). Egypt too is looking to mobilise communities and give local leaders a stronger role around heritage (p157).

Peace and Governance

The penultimate section relates to SDG16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which covers a variety of themes related both to the operation of governments and justice systems, as well as individual rights and safety. There is therefore some overlap with the examples shared in the Section focused on Target 2 of the Draft Culture Goal above 14 VNRs refer to this goal in some way

A first set of examples relate to how people engage with each other, and in particular the need for a culture of tolerance. Bahrain celebrates this in its own identity, suggesting that it is well placed to support coexistence and mutual respect (p75), as does Burkina Faso (p93). Italy's Working Group of Peace argues that a goal must be the creation of a culture that advances 'social justice, sustainability, and durable peace' (p90). Cabo Verde more broadly talks about a culture of peace and security (p71), while Estonia argues that the possibility of access to cultural infrastructures and services helps people to feel part of a community (p80). Norway sees access to culture as contributing to efforts to reduce experiences of inequality, violence and crime (p49).

Culture is also seen as linked to democracy and political engagement. Burkina Faso sees the need to build a culture of engaging with government (p57), while Burundi argues that cultures can get in the way of reporting issues to the authorities (p77). Malawi talks about the value of a democratic culture (p77), while Norway worries about one that leads to particular groups not being heard (p113). Italy sees cultural institutions as having a role in overcoming challenges here, creating a sense of agency within communities (p65), while both Egypt and Estonia stress the need for institutions themselves to have the necessary culture to listen (p172, p75).

Finally, concerning rights, it is only Estonia that hints at the rights of the artist, referring to protections now in place for journalists and newspapers via the European Media Freedom Act (p88).

Partnerships

The last section looks at the final SDG – SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals). 11 Reviews talk about partnerships, as well as issues related, for example, to development cooperation and resource mobilisation covered within here. To note, there is some overlap between this and the section on Target 6 of the Draft Culture Goal.

Starting with domestic partnerships, Algeria notes efforts to support cooperation between cultural actors and other stakeholders in order to get to better outcomes (p71), while Bahrain notes how public-private partnerships are helping to invest in culture. Italy is strong here, noting not just cooperation between institutions, but also work with local communities, administrations and NGOs. It notes that 'through these partnerships, they reinforce inclusive, participatory and place-based approaches to sustainable development' (p65).

There are also international partnerships. Albania notes these within Europe, focused on supporting heritage and creative industries (p41), while Saudi Arabia talks about its international work to restore and connect heritage sites elsewhere (p209). Italy highlights initiatives to connect museums and other institutions to build stronger networks for exchange (p67), and Uruguay references work to build cultural connections across the Latin America and the Caribbean region (p163). Finally, Bahrain stresses its openness to exchange and influence in culture more broadly (p71, p78).

The relevance of intergovernmental spaces is recognised. Estonia highlights what has been possible through links between UNESCO National Commissions, notably in Namibia (p81), while the UAE underlines its own commitment to UNESCO, through the naming of a goodwill ambassador (p100), and investment in the Spirit of Mosul initiative (p101). Tonga broadly refers to the value of engagement with international organisations as a place to advocate for its interests and make links (p56).

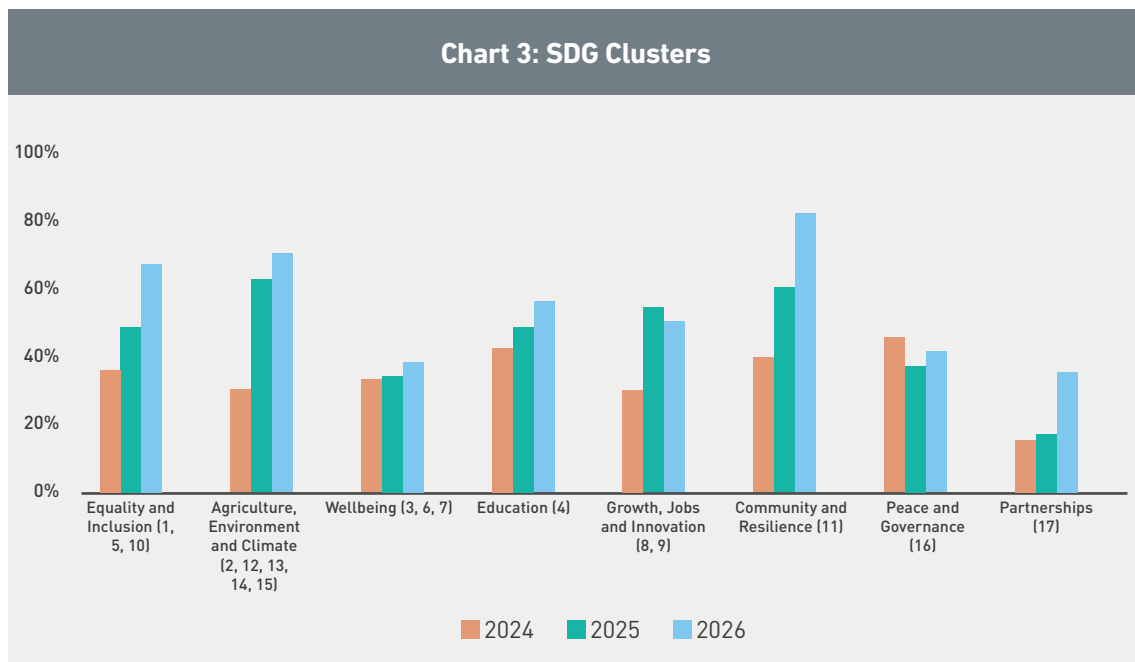
There is specific reference to the relevance of relationships with diasporas for culture. Jamaica works actively to support links (p171), while Tonga notes that social institutions have enhanced cooperation to enable exchange, as well as remittances and knowledge transfer (p56). Finally, Uruguay also sees links to the diaspora as supporting wider development (p56).

Lastly, some countries note the place of culture in their wider development policies. For Norway, funding for the World Heritage Leadership Programme provides a good way of achieving cultural goals globally (p85). Jamaica notes that South-South cooperation can be preferable though, offering a better space to pursue culturally relevant solutions (p285).

Overview

Finally, we can look across the clusters of SDGs used in this part of the report in order to get an overview of where connections with culture appear most regularly. Starting with the figures for 2026 (the right-hand columns), it is already clear that each cluster is referred to in at least a third of all Reviews.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given that SDG 11 was in focus in 2026, a high share of reviews talk about culture in the context of community and resilience. Many of these of course discuss heritage (which is referenced explicitly in the goal), but as underlined above, many also go further. Next come references to the links between culture and goals relating to equality and inclusion (67%) and agriculture, environment and climate (71%). A little further back, but still referenced in half of VNRs or more are education and growth, jobs and innovation.



Turning to evolutions over time, it is noteworthy that in six of the eight clusters used here, 2026 has seen the highest shares of VNRs making references. The only exceptions are growth, jobs and innovation (higher in 2025), and peace and governance (higher in 2024). At least on this data, there has been steady growth over the period when it comes to referring to equality and inclusion, agriculture, environment, and climate, wellbeing, education, community and resilience, and partnerships.

Lastly, the same trends as have been seen in the other sections around regional averages and connections to income levels also hold here. All regions have similar average numbers of clusters referred to, with the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa, which is lower, and there is again a trend towards higher income countries seeing a wider range of links between culture and development goals.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2026 edition of the Culture2030Goal campaign's review of the place of culture in Voluntary National Reviews in some ways simply repeats the message of previous years: that despite the lack of significant presence of culture in the 2030 Agenda, governments are indeed making it part of both how they think about sustainable development, and how they do it.

Taking Voluntary National Reviews as a snapshot of this, all countries make at least one reference, and some dedicate entire chapters to the subject. With the post-2030 Agenda now on the horizon, there are explicit calls for the world to do better around recognising the place of culture in development in the future.

There are also a number of countries that clearly stand out for the depth and breadth of their treatment of culture. In terms of the number of targets in the Culture2030Goal Campaign Draft Culture Goal referenced, Bahrain, Estonia, Italy, Jamaica, Saudi Arabia, Tonga, the UAE and Uruguay all cover at least eight of the ten. Italy, Jamaica, Moldova, the UAE and Uruguay all refer to seven of the nine different dimensions of the relationship between culture and the SDGs. And Bahrain, Estonia, Italy, Jamaica, the Marshall Islands, Saudi Arabia, Tonga, the UAE and Uruguay all link culture to at least seven of the eight clusters of SDGs used for this report.

There is diversity in the emphasis placed by each of these countries. Those in the Gulf region in particular are very strongly focused on building cultural industries and drawing on heritage to strengthen identity. Those in the Pacific emphasise the presence of traditional knowledge and culture in shaping their overall approaches, and the strength this offers. Latin American VNRs, as well as the Italian, have taken to heart the idea of a culture pillar or goal, turning this into an important part of the process around delivering on the 2030 Agenda.

Nonetheless, the geographical diversity of these groups is a welcome and powerful sign that culture's deep and broad role in development is recognised across very diverse geographies, from large to small. It cannot be claimed that culture is only seen as a core development issue in the Global North, or more specifically in Europe.

However, as the conclusions to each part of this report have indicated, there is evidence that there is more to do. Table 2 sets out the data here, sharing the average number of culture goal targets (Part 1), dimensions of the relationship between culture and development (Part 2), and clusters of SDGs (Part 3) referenced in VNRs, by region and then by income levels.

As previously underlined, it is noticeable that Sub-Saharan Africa consistently has significantly lower averages, referring to just 1.7 Culture Goal targets, 2.4 dimensions of the culture-development relationship, and 2.6 clusters of SDGs. There is also a broad correlation between income levels and numbers of targets, dimensions or clusters referred to.

Table 2: Average References by Region and Income Level

	Culture Goal Targets (average)	Dimensions of Culture-Development Interactions (average)	Clusters of SDGs (average)
Asia-Oceania	7.0	4.7	6.3
Europe	5.5	5.0	5.0
Latin America and the Caribbean	6.8	6.4	6.2
MENA	6.3	4.9	4.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.7	2.4	2.6
High Income	6.9	5.4	6.1
Upper-Middle Income	5.5	5.1	5.3
Lower-Middle Income	3.0	2.7	2.9
Low Income	1.9	2.7	2.7

It must be underlined that these figures say nothing about the broader strength of the cultural sector and policy in relevant countries, and rather much more about how sustainable development is being thought about and implemented. They point to a need to do more to ensure that when the relevant ministry or agency sits down to plan SDG delivery, or to write the VNR, culture is at the table.

There are also interesting potential conclusions to be drawn about how different regions approach culture. There is little variation across targets, dimensions, clusters for European and Latin American and Caribbean VNRs, although it should be noted that the average for Latin America and the Caribbean is higher across the board.

Asia-Oceania scores top for the average number of Culture Goal targets referenced, but relatively fewer dimensions of the culture-development relationship. The region does score highly on number of SDG clusters, implying strong awareness of how culture affects the delivery of other policy goals. MENA is also interesting here, with a high average number of targets, but lower scores elsewhere. This points, perhaps, to a stronger focus on culture policy goals, but a little less emphasis on wider connections.

While Sub-Saharan Africa does tend to score low across the board, focusing only on those targets or dimensions which explore how culture can support the achievement of other goals, or at least determine their success, the region scores second highest, only behind Latin America and the Caribbean. This does imply that there is an understanding of the need to act on culture, and the main question now therefore is about how to act on this.



Looking more broadly, the evidence not only points to the feasibility of giving culture a much stronger role in overall development frameworks but also underlines the potential that there is for further learning and reflection on different approaches to doing this. Processes such as MONDIACULT certainly help in this respect, but as highlighted above, these discussions need to involve those who have oversight of sustainable development policy planning.

A key barrier to this remains the weakness of the 2030 Agenda's treatment of culture, which, through its failure to include a culture goal, implies that culture is somehow less important as a driver and determinant of success than those policy areas which have their own goals. As the MONDIACULT conclusions indicated last year – as well as the VNRs of Jamaica and Uruguay explicitly this year – culture is very much the 'missing goal'.

The Culture2030Goal campaign will continue to push for the correction of this in the post-2030 Agenda, while also aiming to support governments and others in taking the initiative to embrace culture-based development today.

Annex 1: VNR Countries 2026, Culture Goal Targets Referred to in each VNR and Links

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Country	Landing Page	Number of VNRs	1. Cultural Rights	2. Culture of Peace	3. Protect Heritage	4. Promote Creativity	5. Artists' Rights	6. Cultural Mobility	7. Indigenous Governance	8. Regenerative Approach	A. Cultural Institutions	B. Policy Integration
Tanzania	Link	3								X		
Togo	Link	6					X					
Tonga	Link	2	XX	XX	XX	X		X	XX	X		XX
Tunisia	Link	3	X	X	XX		X			XX	X	
UAE	Link	3	X	X	XX	XX	X	X		XX	X	XX
Uruguay	Link	5	X	X	XX	XX		X		XX	X	XX

