



# The challenges of monitoring and evaluating culture

Key Learnings by the Culture Next SDGs Lab (2023-2024)

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Co-funded by  
the European Union

## Context and Rationale

This Culture Next Network paper explores the challenges of monitoring and evaluating culture within the broader context of social and economic development issues in cities. While culture is recognised as a vital component of wellbeing, social cohesion, and economic growth, its intangible nature poses significant difficulties for standardised measurement and evaluation.

The **Culture Next Network** has frequently discussed key challenges, including the lack of universally accepted definitions of culture and its associated terms, diverse cultural expressions that resist quantitative metrics, and the limitations of existing tools in capturing the dynamic and contextual aspects of cultural value. The Network has also highlighted the tension between global frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), and the localised, context-specific nature of cultural practices (more on this topic is explored in the associated [SDG paper](#)).

To address these issues, the network formed the Culture Next SDG Lab as a working group of cities, who met regularly from September 2023 to December 2024 to establish metrics and definitions for measuring culture, developing a Culture Next Evaluation Framework and developing and testing digital and AI tools for enhanced monitoring and evaluation.

## Culture Next Action

From September 2023 to December 2024, the SDG Lab met in person and online 5 times to discuss the above challenges (See Appendix). As well as this, individual sessions were held on multiple occasions between the authors of this paper and the participating cities.

This resulted in the development of the Culture Next Evaluation Framework, a unified Glossary of Terms, a set of unifying indicators, and a digital AI tool, the Culture Next Polyloop tool that was piloted by 13 cities from 10 countries ([see appendix and resource materials](#)).

## Key Challenges

### 1. Measuring culture is notoriously difficult

Measuring culture presents significant challenges, stemming from *systemic issues in data collection, processing, and application*. Cultural data often exists in silos, fragmented across institutions, regions, and disciplines, which inhibits collaboration and the creation of a comprehensive understanding of culture's impact. This fragmentation is compounded by the prevalence of 'bad' data—datasets that are incomplete, inconsistent, or outdated - making it difficult to draw meaningful insights.

Additionally, much of the work in *cultural monitoring remains highly manual*, relying on labour-intensive processes that limit scalability and efficiency. The *absence of standardised metrics and methodologies* further complicates evaluation efforts, as stakeholders struggle to compare results across different units, contexts or align with global frameworks like the UN SDGs. There is also a lack of standardisation in benchmarking, which impedes collaborative working and evaluation, with a common discrepancy being whether to measure in percentage terms or absolute numbers, making comparisons difficult.

Finally, a *lack of mechanisms for shared learning* perpetuates these issues, as knowledge from successful cultural evaluations is rarely disseminated or incorporated into broader practices, leaving the sector unable to evolve and adapt to new challenges effectively.

In our sample of cities we had:

- 3077 indicators across 13 cities, with only 10% of indicators having any live data against them.
- A selection of cities using digital tools and surveys across their local sector, whilst others were still using pen and paper, and some nothing at all.
- A complete variation in timeframes of data collection, with some cities and some metrics measured monthly, quarterly or yearly. Benchmark data such as national census data was in some cases outdated - being 10 years old.

### 2. The Complexity of Defining Culture

Culture is a multifaceted and dynamic concept, encompassing everything from heritage and traditions to contemporary arts and creative practices. Its definitions vary widely across contexts, reflecting the diversity of values, identities, and expressions within societies. It was also notable across our cities to have conflicting 'horizontal' and 'vertical' themes, for example, 'sustainability' was a common development theme, however all projects would have sustainable elements to them, making it difficult to categorise specific projects or the

accompanying metrics. This inherent variability makes it challenging to pin down standardised metrics that adequately capture its scope.

Cultural practices and expressions are often deeply rooted in local contexts, evolving in response to social, economic, and environmental factors, which resists quantification through rigid, one-size-fits-all frameworks. This tension becomes particularly pronounced when applying global evaluation systems, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim for universality but often fail to account for localised cultural specificities. Current quantitative metrics, focused on tangible outputs like economic value or participation rates, struggle to measure intangible qualities such as community cohesion, identity formation, or intergenerational knowledge transfer—core dimensions of cultural impact which vary immensely between one local context and the next.

As one example, across our sample we had cities that were measuring participants, visitors, attendees, customers, residents and citizens as units of cultural participation. The prioritising of certain terms over others as indicators of ‘participation’ made sense in their local context, but it made any international benchmarking or comparison extremely difficult. An issue that is further compounded when attempting to measure nuisance or subjective topics such as wellbeing or inclusion which are handled very differently across the countries, with multiple recognised frameworks being utilised.

## Key outcomes

### 1. Evolving Approaches to Cultural Monitoring and Evaluation

The Culture Next Network has developed innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluating culture, focusing on frameworks that are adaptable, inclusive, and capable of capturing the multifaceted impacts of cultural initiatives. At the heart of this effort is the development of the **Culture Next Evaluation Framework**, which draws inspiration from Dr. Beatriz Garcia’s [factors for cultural evaluation](#). This comprehensive framework integrates six key dimensions—Economic Impacts, Cultural Vibrancy, Images and Perception, Social Sustainability, Governance, and Physical Infrastructure—each underpinned by standardised indicators designed to ensure consistency and comparability across projects and contexts.

1. **Economic** - Ensuring that financial impact and investments in culture provide long-term economic benefits and sustainable growth.
2. **Social** - Prioritising the well-being of communities and fostering cultural participation that benefits people from all walks of life.

3. **Governance** - Ensuring effective management so that cultural initiatives are delivered efficiently and aligned with strategic goals.
4. **Infrastructure** - Supporting cultural spaces and venues through the development of physical infrastructure to create environments where culture can thrive.
5. **Vibrancy** - Reflecting the dynamic and diverse cultural expressions within a community, contributing to its overall vitality and richness.
6. **Images** - Shaping positive perceptions through media ensures that cultural activities are widely recognised and valued, enhancing the image of the community or city.

## **2. The Culture Next Polyloop AI tool, Glossary of Standard Terms and Indicators**

To further strengthen the evaluation process, the Culture Next Network has developed a **glossary of standardised terms and indicators**. This glossary defines key concepts such as "cultural participation," "creative industries," and "social cohesion," ensuring a shared understanding among stakeholders. It also provides clear methodologies for measuring each indicator, offering templates for data collection, reporting, and analysis.

The Culture Next Network has also taken a pioneering role in leveraging cutting-edge technology to enhance cultural measurement by influencing, co-designing, and adopting the **state-of-the-art AI tool Polyloop**. This innovative platform was specifically tailored to implement the Culture Next Framework across participating cities, streamlining the monitoring and evaluation process with efficiency. Polyloop integrates data from diverse sources, including surveys, bidbooks, and economic reports, to generate dynamic insights across key dimensions such as Economic Impacts, Cultural Vibrancy, and Social Sustainability. Its AI-driven capabilities enable real-time data visualisation, predictive modeling, and cross-city benchmarking, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of cultural impacts. The Polyloop ECoC Bidbook explorer allows, for the first time, a database of all the participating bidbooks that can be explored and benchmarked through a powerful chat interface.

By facilitating seamless collaboration among stakeholders and automating labour-intensive tasks, Polyloop ensures a consistent application of standardised indicators while remaining adaptable to local contexts. This tool not only enhances the accuracy and scalability of cultural evaluation exercises but also establishes the Culture Next Network as a global leader in technology-driven cultural innovation.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The Culture Next Evaluation Framework and its innovative approaches, such as the integration of AI tools like Polyloop, represent a significant step forward in the monitoring and evaluation of culture. By addressing the challenges of fragmentation, lack of standardisation, and the complexity of cultural impacts, this framework enables a more nuanced, scalable, and inclusive understanding of culture's contributions to society. To maximise its potential, specific recommendations are provided for key stakeholders:

### **For European Policy Creators and Decision Makers**

- Embed culture more prominently in EU policy frameworks, ensuring its role as a driver of sustainable development is recognised.
- Support the standardisation of cultural evaluation metrics across member states to enhance comparability and integration into broader policy agendas. The Culture Next Framework is a good start.
- Invest in technological tools and cross-border collaborations to improve cultural data infrastructure. Polyloop can help here.

### **For National Governments**

- Adopt the Culture Next Framework as a model for national cultural monitoring and align it with national development goals.
- Increase funding for cultural evaluation initiatives, particularly for the deployment of innovative technologies like Polyloop.
- Facilitate training and capacity-building programs for cultural stakeholders to effectively implement and leverage new evaluation methodologies.

### **For European Cities (including Culture Next Members)**

- Use the Culture Next Framework to align local cultural initiatives with broader European objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Share best practices and case studies within the network to foster mutual learning and collective progress.
- Continue to co-design and develop the Polyloop tool for more enhanced evaluation.

### **For Cultural Operators**

- Engage actively in participatory evaluation processes and contribute qualitative insights to enrich the cultural data landscape.
- Leverage tools like Polyloop to track and showcase the impacts of their initiatives, ensuring alignment with global and local objectives.
- Embrace capacity-building opportunities to adapt to evolving evaluation standards and methodologies.

**By working collaboratively across these stakeholder groups, the Culture Next Network can drive meaningful progress in cultural evaluation, ensuring that culture is recognised and valued as a cornerstone of European development.**

## **References**

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- [Culture Next Framework](#)
- [Culture Next Standardised Glossary](#)
- [Impacts 08 | European Capital of Culture Research Programme | Key Factors for Cultural Evaluation](#)
- [Polyloop AI Cultural Tool](#)

## **Contact**

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## **About Culture Next**

*The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is one of the most recognized action programmes of the European Union. The dynamics and dimension of the process makes it attractive to cities that seek cultural, social, economic and infrastructural transformation. The hundreds of cities participating in this process bring together a vast set of learnings, good practice and knowledge that it's important to share and by doing so, to be an agent of positive action for Europe.*

*Culture Next's mission is to contribute to having more European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programmes implemented in European cities and regions and to define a long-term European vision on local development through culture and creativity.*

*Building on the experiences, processes and collaborations established during the ECoC bid, we support all cities, being them awarded or not, to implement culture-led local development programmes and policies. We are committed to deliver a sustainable impact and meaningful legacy of the ECoC programme.*

*Whether being ECoC labelled or not, all cities need support and inspiration in order to carry on with the implementation of their programmes. The partnerships, talents and resources mobilised through ECoC bidding make a strong base for culture-led sustainable development in these cities.*

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