



Culture: The Hidden Catalyst for Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Is there a need for a dedicated 18th SDG on Culture?

Contributors

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Context and Rationale

This paper explores the role of culture in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and introduces innovative approaches to measuring its impact. It demonstrates the work conducted by the SDG Lab working group of 13 cities from the Culture Next Network during 2023-2024. While culture is often underrepresented in mainstream development metrics, this paper argues that it is a fundamental enabler of social cohesion, economic growth, and environmental sustainability.

Key insights in this paper include a framework linking cultural activities to specific SDGs, such as quality education (SDG 4), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and sustainable cities (SDG 11). To address the challenge of quantifying cultural impact, the paper proposes a multi-dimensional assessment model together with AI tool Polyloop, integrating qualitative narratives with quantitative data, such as cultural participation rates, economic contributions, and environmental conservation efforts. This model underscores the need for cross-sector collaboration and inclusive policymaking to fully harness culture's potential as a driver of sustainable development.

The paper concludes with a debate from across the working group on the arguments for and against an 18 Sustainable Development Goal for Culture, before giving recommendations for policymakers, cultural practitioners, and stakeholders to prioritise culture in national development agendas, ensure equitable funding, and foster global partnerships for knowledge sharing and innovation.

Overview

This paper explores how culture serves as a fundamental yet underutilised enabler of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While culture often remains outside mainstream development metrics, it has a transformative role in fostering social cohesion, economic growth, and environmental sustainability.

A pilot study by 13 cities within the **Culture Next Network** has demonstrated the difficult landscape of existing methods to align to the SDGs and the innovative approaches piloted to standardise the measurement of cultural investments. These efforts aim to map local-level impacts while also assessing the collective contribution of cultural investments across the EU towards achieving the SDGs.

Key Questions:

- How can we demonstrate local and collective impact against the SDGs?
- How does culture directly align with specific SDGs?
- What innovative methodologies are there for quantifying cultural impact?
- Is there a need for a dedicated 18th SDG on culture?

Background

The **Culture Next Network** pilot study aimed to work with 13 cities across Europe to explore how they were aligning to the Sustainable Development Goals through their European Capital of Culture (ECoC) Bidbooks and the cultural strategies being advanced in the aftermath of their bidding processes, regardless of whether they secured the ECoC title.

Within the network, aligning the goals and ambitions of each city with the 17 established Sustainable Development Goals had challenges, the most notable of which was the lack of any standardisation of measures and evaluation practices to capture the value and impact of cultural interventions across the cities.

Culture is a broad term that, within the bidbooks and cultural strategies reviewed, encompasses heritage preservation, creative industries, and community-driven initiatives. Despite the broad influence of cultural interventions, their impact and value is often underrepresented in development policies and funding frameworks. Cultural investments can drive transformational change by enhancing social connections, stimulating economic activities, and promoting environmentally sustainable practices. However, a lack of

standardised measurement tools has hindered its recognition and integration into global development agendas.

Within the pilot cities, we had cultural departments who recognised their ECoC bidding or cultural strategy programmes would have aligned to nearly all of the 17 SDGs; whilst other cities felt their projects and programmes were not aligned to any of the SDGs because they couldn't see any specific reference to culture across the 17 goals.



Furthermore, the nature of cultural projects tends to be so broad that it became difficult for cities to discern which SDGs were most relevant. One example involved building a cultural hub on the banks of their city river with an accompanying educational cultural programme dedicated to discussing the importance of reducing river pollution and biodiversity. Such a project could impact any number of SDGs, so determining how it should officially align (ie. SDG 15, 14, 13, 6, 4, 3, 11, 17) became a subjective task.

Similarly, the individual targets and goals under each SDG are difficult to align to specific cultural activities. As a result, putting an alignment score on most cultural activities became a subjective matter of choosing which coloured SDG box to associate with which project.

In order to assist cities with the identification of alignments, the UNESCO proposal of 'Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 agenda' and their linkage to SDGs, was used as a founding referent point.



Culture Next Action

Across the 13 cities that were part of the SDG Lab, we conducted a number of trials and pilots to see how we might best answer the premise of the original questions set out at the top of this paper.

1. Developing the Polyloop tool, phase I; Uploading key documents to identify indicators:

Polyloop is an AI tool from Whitelabel AI, that has been specifically developed as part of this SDG Lab working group. It enabled cities to upload all relevant documents and data (strategies, bidbooks, surveys etc), to then search, prioritise, align, benchmark and generate content. Firstly, we ingested all of the relevant bid books and documentation identified by our pilot cities into the Polyloop tool. Once all documents were uploaded, we scanned them with AI technology to identify which indicators our cities were using. This process resulted in the identification of over 3000 different indicators.

From this set of total indicators, we distilled the list down removing duplicates, similar indicators and any indicators that were not supported by any data. After a thorough process of troubleshooting and standardisation, we still had a list of more than 1000 indicators – and very few indicators being used consistently across all cities.

Realising that it would be too difficult to come up with a coherent approach to relate this wide range of indicators with the 17 SDGs, the Culture Next Framework was developed.

2. Developing the Culture Next Framework: Standardising and prioritising indicators

The Culture Next Framework is a standardised proposal to organize and prioritise relevant indicators that can subsequently be aligned with SDGs. The Framework built on Dr Beatriz Garcia’s earlier work on evaluation models for culture and standardised indicators to capture the multiple impacts of cultural interventions (See Impacts 08 Research Programme). This resulted in the identification of 6 *thematic areas* that are explored further in the appendices and the related policy paper on evaluation and monitoring.



These 6 thematic areas gave us a platform to organise each individual city’s indicators. We developed a series of hypotheses for each thematic area to help identify what indicators offered the most relevant data to prove respective impacts – and agreed with all cities how these themes may result in strongest SDG alignments. See two examples below:



Finally we worked with the group to come up with a smaller list of *Priority indicators* under each of the thematic areas. The main requirement behind establishing priority indicators was the agreement by the largest majority of cities that they could commit to populate them with reliable data. This resulted in a list of 32 indicators and offered an opportunity for all pilot cities to have some level of standardised and comparable indicators from across the original – and widely diverse – list of 3000. This exercise also gave cities the chance to propose, building on their own specific experience and data available, how each indicator may relate to individual or multiple SDGs. See some examples below, across three thematic areas, linking our identified hypothesis with the chosen indicators and associated SDGs:

Economic
Value / investment

Our Working Hypothesis #1:
Cultural investment improves our city's economy, specifically through increased visitor income, job creation and amplifying the cultural and creative industries.

Social
Sustainable / people

Our Working Hypothesis #1:
Participating in culture contributes to personal and collective wellbeing.

Vibrancy
Cultural Vibrancy

Our Working Hypothesis #1:
Promoting more cultural activity in a city will make it more attractive to both residents and visitors.

Indicators

The indicators you have prioritised to prove / disprove this

Economic Indicators - Priority 1	Overlaps	SDGS
Budget Spent (€)	Governance	17
- Administration / Marketing / Programming / Capital / Evaluation / Total	Governance	17
Value of investment on culture (€)	Governance	17
- Local/regional government / National Government / EU / Other / Private sector / Revenue	Vibrancy	17
Total funding (€) to Cultural & Creative Industries in city	Vibrancy	17
Funding for cultural sector per capita	Vibrancy	17
Economic Indicators - Priority 2	Overlaps	SDGS
Number of overnight stays		8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Number of hotel rooms available		8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Funding given to artists from specific groups: (€)	Social	10, 17
Employment rate (citywide)		8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

Indicators

The indicators you have prioritised to prove / disprove this

SOCIAL PRIORITY 1	Overlaps	SDGS
Average participant satisfaction levels (1 is very unsatisfied 5 is very satisfied)	Image	3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Number of social media followers		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Number of attendees	Depends on projects	3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Number of participants		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
SOCIAL PRIORITY 2	Overlaps	SDGS
Total number of apprenticeships or internships		8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Total number of volunteers		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Total number of hours given by all volunteers		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Residents report an increased belonging to a common European culture		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Percentage of residents report they feel more aware and engaged in their city / their culture		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Funding given to artists from specific groups: (€)	Economic	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

Indicators

The indicators you have prioritised to prove / disprove this

CULTURAL VIBRANCY PRIORITY 1	Overlaps	SDGS
Number of businesses working in the cultural sector	Economic	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Number of activities - cultural projects / cultural programmes		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Number of cultural actors		3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
Funding for cultural sector per capita	Economic	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
CULTURAL VIBRANCY PRIORITY 2	Overlaps	SDGS
Number of students registering to local university/universities		4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

All six thematic areas can be explored further in [Appendix Session 4: Online](#).

3. Applying the Polyloop Tool, Phase II: Aligning Indicators against SDGs:

As a final development, we used the aforementioned Polyloop AI tool to cross-reference the long list of 3,000 indicators and interrogate more closely the list of 32 priority indicators against the 17 SDGs.

Polyloop integrated extensive research from Deakin University in Australia to create a Culture Next SDG alignment tool. Deakin researchers used the [OSDG](#) Community Dataset (an open source community seeking to make the SDGs more transparent), involving 32,120 text excerpts (approx 90 words each) and a total of 172,769 assigned labels, which were the direct result of the work of more than a thousand volunteers from over 100 countries. To ensure quality, each text excerpt was validated by a minimum of 3 and up to 9 different volunteers.

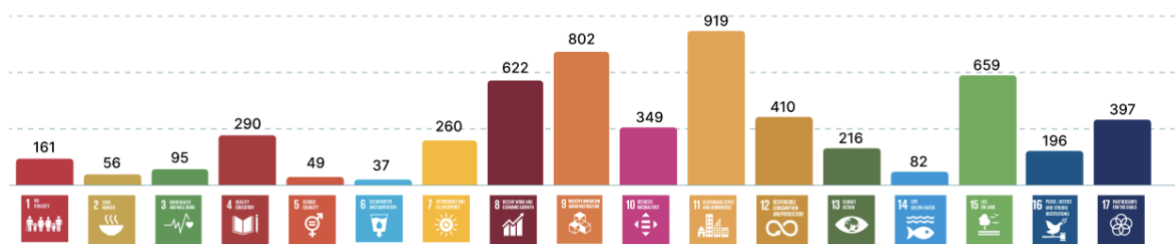
The model developed by the Deakin University has been utilised within the tool; taking this research and applying it to the indicators used by the different cities to map their SDG coverage. Integrating this academically informed model into Polyloop gave us a

standardised AI driven alignment score for all of the indicators across our participating cities. It removed the challenge previously identified of subjective SDG alignment and helped us understand potential biases or limitations inherent to the cities-led Culture Next Framework.

Indicator Inbox		Unsorted	Sorted
Unsorted		Search Indicators	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Indicator	Live Value	Origin
<input type="checkbox"/>	Property area for cultural incubator	12000	ECOC_2025_Chem... SDG5 88%
<input type="checkbox"/>	Financial support for plan B	10000000	ECOC_2025_Chem... SDG13 49% SDG9 85% SDG11 13%
<input type="checkbox"/>	Financial support for cultural experience	20000000	ECOC_2025_Chem... SDG4 48% SDG10 28% SDG8 11%
<input type="checkbox"/>	Child Poverty Rate	20	ECOC_2025_Chem... SDG1 99%
<input type="checkbox"/>	Social Media Engagement	79132218	ECOC_2025_Chem... SDG16 100%

The above image shows how one specific set of city indicators aligned to individual SDGs, whilst the below graph shows a summary count of how all of our 13 pilot city indicators combined aligned against the 17 UN SDGS.

Count of alignments



The table indicates that SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) are two of the SDGs against which most cultural strategy and ECoC bidbook indicators align, whilst SDG 5 (gender equality), or SDG 3 (health and wellbeing) are poorly represented across 3,000 indicators.

This result is consistent with exercises by other organisations, such as United Cities and Local Governments, which assessed how key cultural indicators aligned to the SDGs, as identified by representatives of their Culture 21 programme and a variety of international networks and culture

stakeholders. This work has evolved over the last ten years and much material has been published as part of the Culture 2015 Goal (see references).

	(b) Cultural participation as a key element for	(c) Traditional and heritage food and agriculture systems	(c) Culture and artistic practices to boost health and	(c) Cultural programmes as enablers of lifelong	(a) Promotion of women's access, participation and	(b) Interlinkages between cultural landscapes or	(b) Creative actors to design educational and	(a) Promotion of local cultural diversity for vibrant	(d) Existence of quality, reliable, sustainable and	(d) Cultural facilities mainstreaming the protection and	(c) Relevance of cultural landscapes to strengthen the	(d) Contribution of culture and creative industries towards	(b) Culture and heritage institutions as platforms for	(c) Protection and recognition of the importance of	(c) Initiatives to foster preservation and transfer of	(a) Cultural rights placed at the center of policies to	(b) Cultural rights-based programmes as a														
1	(g) Libraries as basic services fostering inclusive	(a) Job creation within the cultural sector for people	(c) Integration of cultural aspects, preservation of	(a) Cultural resources and facilities as basic	(e) Museums and heritage interpretation	(g) Regular membership of the relationship between	(a) Consideration of cultural landscapes to enhance	(k) Cultural programmes in schools, universities	(d) An appropriate and sustainable use and management of	(c) Integration of the connection between culture and	(a) Cultural values to recognize, celebrate and	(d) Evaluation of the impact of cultural	(a) Potential of cultural actors and industries as a key driver of	(f) Cultural investments, such as microinvest,	(k) Cultural, social, and economic implications of	(j) Job creation within the cultural sector for the youth,	(a) Cultural programmes to promote jobs for	(k) Cultural indicators to monitor and make visible	(g) Cultural policies with a systemic approach on	(f) Grassroots culture projects promoting	(j) Involvement of artists and creative professionals in the	(g) Sustainable reuse of buildings and regeneration of	(d) Integration of culture and artistic practices in urban	(a) Recognition of traditional buildings in terms of energy	(f) Cultural values to enhance the sustainability and	(f) Cultural events to raise awareness among citizens	(b) Explicit consideration of the notion of landscape	(g) Explicit consideration of the notion of landscape	(a) Integrated management, protection and use	(j) Relevance of a "cultural policy charter" and a	(d) National and international cooperation
0	1 people	2 clean water	3 healthy life	4 decent work	5 gender equality	6 clean water	7 decent work	8 decent work	9 decent work	10 decent work	11 decent work	12 decent work	13 decent work	14 decent work	15 decent work	16 decent work	17 decent work														
-1	(b) Cultural aspects related to poverty that perpetuate	(f) Medical research narrowed by cultural, social and	(f) Socio-cultural biases impeding inclusion in	(d) Misuse and water contamination due to certain	(c) Existence of cultural narratives by some social	(b) Relevance of cultural events (festivals, concerts, etc.) with	(b) Cultural events and infrastructure not fully accessible	(j) Existence of some cultural programmes, which	(j) Discrimination against LGBTQ+ collective and other	(c) Repercussion strategies in historic and artistic	(c) Cultural and natural heritage management lost	(c) Potential negative impact of cultural tourism in	(e) Existence of cultural narratives by some social	(g) Inter-cultural differences (including language)	(j) Threats to Academic Freedom, including	(e) Fake news against vulnerable groups internationally	(b) Cultural factors as a source of conflicts and war,														
-2	(c) Cultural narratives that tend and contrast,	(f) Medical research narrowed by cultural, social and	(f) Socio-cultural biases impeding inclusion in	(d) Misuse and water contamination due to certain	(c) Existence of cultural narratives by some social	(b) Relevance of cultural events (festivals, concerts, etc.) with	(b) Cultural events and infrastructure not fully accessible	(j) Existence of some cultural programmes, which	(j) Discrimination against LGBTQ+ collective and other	(c) Repercussion strategies in historic and artistic	(c) Cultural and natural heritage management lost	(c) Potential negative impact of cultural tourism in	(e) Existence of cultural narratives by some social	(g) Inter-cultural differences (including language)	(j) Threats to Academic Freedom, including	(e) Fake news against vulnerable groups internationally	(b) Cultural factors as a source of conflicts and war,														
-3	(c) Cultural narratives that tend and contrast,	(f) Medical research narrowed by cultural, social and	(f) Socio-cultural biases impeding inclusion in	(d) Misuse and water contamination due to certain	(c) Existence of cultural narratives by some social	(b) Relevance of cultural events (festivals, concerts, etc.) with	(b) Cultural events and infrastructure not fully accessible	(j) Existence of some cultural programmes, which	(j) Discrimination against LGBTQ+ collective and other	(c) Repercussion strategies in historic and artistic	(c) Cultural and natural heritage management lost	(c) Potential negative impact of cultural tourism in	(e) Existence of cultural narratives by some social	(g) Inter-cultural differences (including language)	(j) Threats to Academic Freedom, including	(e) Fake news against vulnerable groups internationally	(b) Cultural factors as a source of conflicts and war,														

Source: United Cities and Local Governments, Culture 21

The debate for an 18th SDG on Culture?

Given the challenges securing standardisation in the use of indicators for all participant cities, and the challenge to determine a clear alignment of impact against the SDGs explored in the SDG Lab working process, the group debated whether there is a need for an 18th SDG dedicated to culture specifically.

Other bodies, such as Culture Action Europe and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) have been arguing for years the importance of establishing an 18th SDG - this has taken place since the first discussions to establish the original 17 SDGs back in 2015.

In the case of the Culture Next SDG Lab, this conversation emerged organically as a result of testing evaluation frameworks, developing the Culture Next Framework and applying the Polyloop AI tool.

The following outlines the main arguments that the SDG Lab pilot cities presented for and against establishing a dedicated SDG for culture as a key for sustainable development.

For:

1. Recognition of Culture's Role in Sustainable Development:

- Establishing a dedicated SDG would explicitly acknowledge culture as a driver of economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

- It would highlight culture's integral role in achieving existing SDGs, such as quality education (SDG 4), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11).

2. Standardisation and Measurement:

- An 18th SDG would encourage the development of standardised frameworks to measure cultural contributions to development, addressing the current gap in metrics.
- It would promote global cooperation in defining and tracking cultural investments and impacts.

3. Policy and Funding Prioritisation:

- Culture is often sidelined in development funding. A standalone SDG would make cultural initiatives a policy priority, unlocking greater investment.
- It would foster cross-sector partnerships to scale the impact of cultural programmes.

4. Cultural Identity and Global Challenges:

- A dedicated goal could protect and promote cultural diversity and heritage as fundamental to addressing globalization, migration, and inequality.

Against:

1. Integration Over Segmentation:

- Critics argued that culture is already interwoven across the existing SDGs and doesn't need a separate goal. For example, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities) and SDG 4 (Education) inherently include cultural aspects.
- Further, SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals, was seen by some as a 'culture' goal per se, or equivalent to what a new culture goal should prioritise.
- Creating a separate SDG might risk siloing culture, reducing its integration across other sectors. Instead, some argued in favour of more explicit references to culture / cultural actions within the existing goals. (at present, Culture is only mentioned explicitly in 5 instances).

2. Overextension of the SDG Framework:

- The current 17 SDGs are already broad and ambitious. Adding another goal could dilute focus and resources, making it harder to achieve the existing targets.
- It could lead to "goal fatigue" among policymakers and stakeholders, potentially reducing engagement.

3. **Challenges in Defining and Measuring Impact:**

- Unlike economic or environmental targets, cultural impacts can be subjective and context-dependent, making it difficult to create universally applicable indicators.

4. **Political Sensitivity and Universal Acceptance:**

- Culture is deeply tied to national identity and values, which could lead to contentious debates over what should be included under an 18th SDG.
- Achieving consensus among UN member states might prove challenging.

The above arguments and counterarguments are representative of the broader debate and issues identified by culture sector representatives across the world. A dedicated discussion within the Culture Next Forum in Cluj (October 2024) involving all SDG Lab pilot cities as well as representatives of international networks and experts dedicated to the Culture and SDGs debate, resulted in growing agreement and alignment with arguments in favour of establishing an 18th SDG, but with a few caveats:

- Firstly, the need to be more specific about what an 18th SDG would actually be about: the term ‘culture’ is too broad and it does not indicate any specific action or ambition. Instead, the SDG may be about ‘*Cultural Democracy*’ or ‘*Universal Cultural Rights*’ as the underlying ambition, as is the case with SDG 4 ‘*Quality Education*’ or SDG 11 ‘*Sustainable Cities and Communities*’
- Secondly, ensuring that references to culture are incorporated across all other SDGs – as it needs to be a transversal action; and ensuring that all other SDGs are referred to in some way within the 18th Goal.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Integrate Culture into SDG Strategies:**

Ensure culture is embedded in national and EU-level SDG action plans. References to the role of culture must be more explicit within policy frameworks.

2. **Develop Standardised Metrics:**

Build on the Culture Next Framework and Polyloop tool to establish robust, comparable and consistent tools for measuring cultural impact. This is essential so that other sectors can understand better the impact of culture and refer to it within their action plans (as per Policy Recommendation 1).

3. Encourage Cross-Sector Collaboration:

Partner with governments, private sectors, and civil society to fund cultural initiatives. Culture should not operate in isolation – its impact and value cuts across all other sectors.

4. Develop more awareness of the SDG agenda and metrics within the culture sector

In the same way that (point 1) there should be greater integration of cultural references within other sustainability programmes, cultural strategies and culture sector actions must also be more mindful – and build more consistently on – the valuable work done by other sectors when it comes to the sustainability agenda.

5. Argue for an 18th SDG, highlighting the need for ‘Cultural Democracy’

Work towards recognition and greater visibility of a dedicated Culture Goal, building on the advancements made as a result of implementing the previous four Policy Recommendations.

References

- United Cities and Local Governments: Culture in the SDGs - <https://www.agenda21culture.net/advocacy/culture-in-SDGs>
- Culture in the sustainable development goals: A guide for local action https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/culture_in_the_sdgs.pdf
- Open SDG community: <https://osdg.ai/about>
- Deakin University Dataset: <https://huggingface.co/sadickam/sdgBERT>
- Impacts 08 research programme – www.liv.ac.uk/Impacts08
- The Culture Next Evaluation Framework, Glossary, Indicator lists, hypotheses statements and all recordings, presentations and reports: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1leVvp6w0AzbT-QSkSOKCaFORy73LOt8F>
- The Polyloop AI Tool: <https://whitelabel.ai/>

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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. We can all contribute to the success and legacy of the ECoC project.

Cities are where democracy, inclusiveness and innovation are produced, and culture is a facilitator of this entire ecosystem. More cities with cultural programmes mean more power to address European challenges and opportunities.

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