

Culture Counts

What the European Capital of Culture Cities Reveal
About Culture and the Sustainable Development
Goals

*A Culture Next Advocacy Theme
Report on Culture and the SDGs*

Draft for consultation

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A Culture Next project facilitated by Whitelabel, with the pilot cities of the Culture Next SDG Lab.

Co-designed from 2025 to 2026 with Bielsko-Biała · Brno · Cáceres · Cluj-Napoca · Debrecen · Jerez de la Frontera · Larnaka · Leuven · Lublin · Novi Sad · Oulu, and from 2023 to 2024 with Bielsko-Biała · Brno · České Budějovice · Chemnitz · Cluj-Napoca · Elefsina · Faro · Katowice · Larnaka · Leeuwarden-Friesland · Lublin · Oulu.

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Co-designed with the pilot cities of the Culture Next SDG Lab



Bielsko-Biała



Brno



Cáceres



České Budějovice



Chemnitz



Cluj-Napoca



Debrecen



Elefsina



Faro



Jerez de la Frontera



Katowice



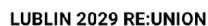
Larnaka



Leeuwarden-Friesland



Leuven



Lublin



Novi Sad



Oulu

A Culture Next project



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Executive Summary

European cities have spent four decades using culture to transform themselves. The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is among the most recognised instruments the EU possesses for culture-led development, and the cities that pursue it, awarded or not, make substantial claims about what culture will deliver: cohesion, regeneration, participation, wellbeing, international standing. Yet when those claims meet the world's dominant framework for measuring progress, the Sustainable Development Goals, culture all but disappears. None of the 17 goals directly names culture and few of the 169 targets touch it. The consequence is a structural blindness: the contribution culture makes to sustainable development is not planned for, not measured, and not funded in proportion to what it delivers.

Culture Counts is a Culture Next Policy Report codesigned with the pilot cities of the Culture Next SDG Lab and facilitated by Whitelabel: Bielsko-Biała, Brno, Cáceres, Cluj-Napoca, České Budějovice, Debrecen, Jerez de la Frontera, Larnaka, Leuven, Lublin, Novi Sad and Oulu. Over three years and two phases, involving 17 cities in all, the Lab set out to measure culture's impact on the SDGs. In the attempt, it discovered why such measurement so rarely works. The cities' contribution runs through every section of this report, and each city's own findings are set out in brief in the paper below. The report will be presented to European decision-makers at the Culture Next summit in Brussels in December 2026.

The report also arrives at a moment when the global question has moved on since the inception of the SDG Lab more than 3 years ago. In September 2025 the #culture2030goal campaign published a proposed Culture Goal, with ten targets, for the framework that will follow the 2030 Agenda. In September 2026 the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2027 to 2036 the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development. The campaign's work is designed for national governments and the UN, whilst this report adds the city layer: what culture achieves where it is delivered, how cities can evidence it, and how that evidence can feed up to national reporting.

Using AI tools built with and for the network, the Lab analysed 173 ECoC bid books from winning and unsuccessful cities, spanning 1985 to 2030, alongside 46 evaluation and monitoring reports. From these it extracted more than 58,000 mentions of measurable indicators and grouped them into 2,639 concepts, 810 of which recur in three or more documents. Expert review suggests these come down to around 350 distinct measures. For the first time, it is possible to say what candidate cities propose to measure, how often, and

how often any data follows. The Lab also mapped the evaluation practice of its cities, produced qualitative SDG profiles, and built tools now in use across the network. 26 cities use Encore, the Lab's evidence and intelligence engine. Cities have run around 100 analyses of their own strategies against the archive, and member cities have contributed 87 documents to the shared evidence base.

The report focuses on two core findings. The first is that culture's contribution to sustainable development is concentrated, not diffuse. Of the cities the Lab profiled in depth, at every stage of the title cycle, culture's impact clustered on three goals: reduced inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). The strongest of these signals, SDG 16 (trust, cohesion and institutional legitimacy), is also the one existing policy instruments measure least. Albeit, this comes from a small sample size and therefore this is presented as a pattern to test across more cities, not a settled result.

The second finding is that the measurement apparatus, not culture, is what fails. In the Lab's first phase, only one in ten of the 3,077 indicators its cities had written into strategies and bid books had any live data behind it. No two cities evaluated in the same way, and dedicated evaluation capacity ranged from half a post to fifteen fte. The problem is not a lack of commitment, or even of data. Cities hold data, but in different units and on different cycles, often managed by one officer alongside several other roles. Where evaluation has a budget and a named owner, as in Liverpool, Aarhus and Bodø, cities have populated realistic indicator sets. Most cities have neither, and existing frameworks assume they do, resulting in culture being undervalued.

From these findings the report supports the case for a culture goal in the framework that follows the 2030 Agenda, as proposed by #culture2030goal. It frames that goal as the correction of a measurement error, not special treatment for a sector. Culture is already delivering against the existing goals, and a dedicated goal would make that delivery visible, fundable and accountable. To give the goal something to measure where culture is actually delivered, the report recommends:

- a common qualitative evaluation framework for ECoC cities
- a shared set of core indicators and a glossary
- a shared maturity model for evaluation practice
- Making use of new technologies such as the AI tools the Lab has developed and tested with cities to make demonstrating culture more visible.

A shared theory of change is in development.

The recommendations focus on immediate European decisions that the SDG Lab and the findings outlined here, could influence. Between 2026 and 2028, the AgoraEU programme (successor to Creative Europe) passes through Parliament and Council; the Commission prepares the new legal basis for the European Capital of Culture after 2033, with public consultation already open; the Culture Compass for Europe moves into implementation, including an EU Cultural Data Hub and a first State of Culture Report; and, following the MONDIACULT 2025 declaration, the UN General Assembly has proclaimed 2027–2036 the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development, with UNESCO now drafting its Action Plan in consultation with member states and other stakeholders. This report is offered as a contribution to that Action Plan and to the European decisions that will shape it.

Context and Rationale

The topic

The SDG Lab was initially conceived as an experimental space to explore culture's contribution to wider global goals. Since those early conversations in 2022, and subsequent formalisation of the lab and inaugural session in 2023, it has not been easy to keep that question in view. War in Europe and the Middle East, a US administration that has withdrawn from multilateral commitments, budgets squeezed by inflation and defence, and a generational leap in AI technology has pushed the 2030 Agenda further down the list of things a city cultural team is asked to think about. For officers whose working week is programme delivery, funding rounds and a municipality that wants attendance figures, the SDGs became something to reference in a bid rather than something to build into their daily work. The Lab's own experience reflects that; cities engaged with what helped them make their case locally, and left the rest.



Fig 1: The first full SDG Lab session in Leeuwarden, November 2023

However, there is a concerted effort to highlight culture's contribution to global goals, and this has now been recognised at the highest level. On the 4th of September 2026 the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2027 to 2036 the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development. UNESCO will now develop an Action Plan for the Decade in consultation with member states, UN entities and other stakeholders, and describes the Decade as "*a strategic bridge between today's commitments and tomorrow's global priorities*", spanning the final four years of the 2030 Agenda and the opening years of its successor.

This settles a question on whether culture is recognised in the framework that succeeds the SDGs. Ministers at MONDIACULT 2025 had already committed to anchoring culture as an independent goal in its own right in a future UN development framework. This report uses "a culture goal" accordingly, and treats "SDG 18" as the advocacy shorthand it has become.

It has also significantly impacted the shape of this report and the body of three years of work that it builds from. The argument that culture belongs in the sustainable development conversation has now been substantially won at the declaratory level. What remains unsettled, and what this report addresses, is whether the Decade will be able to demonstrate anything by 2036. The international Decade will fail if we are still talking about what counts as progress in 2033. Determining what success looks like, and how it materialises in practice are what this paper reflects on.

Culture Next and the Culture Goal

The Sustainable Development Goals are the world's shared language of progress, yet culture is absent from all 17 goals and almost all 169 targets. Since 2013 the *#culture2030goal* campaign has worked to change that. It began as *#culture2015goal* and is carried by eight

global networks: UCLG/Culture 21, Culture Action Europe, ICOM, ICOMOS, IFLA, IFCCD, IMC and Arterial Network. Its zero draft, *A Culture Goal is Essential for Our Common Future*, appeared in 2022 and MONDIACULT 2022 then declared culture a "global public good".



In September 2025 the campaign published its proposed Culture Goal, "*Ensure cultural sustainability for the wellbeing of all*", in Barcelona at the UCLG Culture Summit during MONDIACULT 2025. The goal has ten targets: eight substantive and two cross-cutting. The indicators under each target are organised in tiers:

- universal indicators for national reporting
- additional indicators any institution can adopt
- priority areas for future indicator development
- priority areas for qualitative reporting, named on every target

A few days later the MONDIACULT 2025 declaration, agreed by culture ministers from more than 160 delegations, called for culture to become "an independent Goal in its own right" in the UN's post-2030 agenda.

Culture Next is a member of the campaign, contributing to the consultation and research with the Lab bringing the campaign's work to its cities directly. At its opening session of the current phase in Leeuwarden in July 2025, cities mapped their own strategies against the draft targets and asked whether those targets work at city level. This was subsequently addressed in the following Lab in Bielsko Biala (Oct 2025). The two strands of work share a goal but operate at different scales.

The campaign's universal indicators are designed for national governments reporting to the UN. Most ask whether a policy, plan or budget line exists. This is reflected upon in the campaign's own report, noting that indicators kept strictly to what can be measured in practice "*largely fail to assess attainment of the Targets they relate to*". City material was

gathered during the consultation, but it sits in an appendix because it did not bear directly on indicators with global application. The report also names adoption by cities and territories as a particularly valuable outcome. It asks how such voluntary adoption should be monitored, consolidated and fed back.

That is where the SDG Lab and this report contribute. National indicators can show that a policy exists, but they cannot show whether a cultural programme changed anything in a neighbourhood, which is what a city cultural team has to prove to its municipality, funders and residents. The Lab uses the ECoC record of 173 bid books and 46 evaluations across four decades, the evaluation practice of its cities, and a qualitative framework that fits the campaign's own tier for qualitative reporting. The national goal and the city evidence need each other: the first sets the ambition, and the second shows whether it is being met where culture is actually delivered.

The timing gives this new weight. On 4 September 2026 the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2027 to 2036 the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development. UNESCO will draft the Action Plan for the Decade with member states and other stakeholders. In 2027 the SDG Summit will review progress on the 2030 Agenda and open the discussion on what follows it. A culture goal now has a roadmap, what it still lacks is an agreed way to show progress in the places where culture is delivered, and that is the question the rest of this report takes up.

Why cities struggle to link culture to the SDGs

Our previous policy paper, *The challenges of monitoring and evaluating culture (2025)*, found that of the 12 cities in the 2023–24 cohort, evaluation practice ranged from digital survey systems to pen and paper to nothing at all; collection cycles ran monthly, quarterly or yearly depending on the city and the metric; and some of the benchmark data cities were expected to report against, including national census figures, was a decade old. Of 3,077 indicators those cities had written into their strategies and bid books, only one in ten had any live data behind it. In the twelve cities whose evaluation function the Lab later mapped in detail, dedicated capacity ranged from half a post to fifteen, and no two cities were organised the same way. In most, the person responsible for evidence is also responsible for international relations, funding applications and multiple other functions. Political pressure from fluctuating administrations and time poverty are standard working conditions, not the exceptions.

The SDGs arrived as a national reporting framework that filtered down to city cultural teams who were left to work out for themselves where culture fitted. The first-phase paper recorded the challenges; cities could not agree what a unit of participation was, counting variously participants, visitors, attendees, customers, residents and citizens, which made comparison across borders close to impossible. Some cities concluded their programme touched nearly all seventeen goals whilst others declared it touched none, because nothing in the goals named culture. Deeper problems came through scale and purpose. The SDG indicators were built for states to report to the UN. They measure whether policies exist and whether budgets are allocated. A city cultural team is trying to show a municipality, a funder and its own residents that a programme changed something in a neighbourhood. National metrics do not answer that question and do not particularly help with a city cultural team fighting for a cultural budget locally.

Culture Next's position

Culture Next understands culture as one of the key delivery mechanisms for sustainable development and that the failure to recognise this in the SDG framework is a measurement problem with policy consequences, not a reflection of culture's actual contribution. That contribution is at a local level, by city cultural operators, and at this level it can be seen and evidenced. The Indian Ocean Commission summarised the consequences neatly at a recent UNESCO Dialogue "*If culture is not in the room, it will not be in the budget*" (UNESCO: [Advancing the financing of culture](#), 2026).

The network's position, grounded in three years of Lab practice with its member cities, implies a series of shifts in how culture's relationship to the SDGs is planned, evaluated and funded:

- *from culture as absent from the goals to culture as a recognised goal in its own right,*
- *from national targets handed down to cities to place-based evidence that builds up to national and global objectives;*
- *from counting what is easy to evidencing what matters; pathways, stories and context over empty indicator sets,*
- *from ranking cities against each other to enabling cities to see themselves alongside each other,*
- *from asking cities to come to the data to bringing the intelligence to cities.*

Culture Next Action

The SDG Innovation Lab and the SDG Thing (2023–2026)

Origin

The Lab started as 'TheSDG Thing', a pilot with 12 CN member cities in 2023 following informal discussions with cities about how the SDGs are relevant to them in their everyday work. The 'Thing' perfectly defined the unconstrained nature of the early conversations with cities entering into a fluid process with undefined outcomes. The 'SDG Thing' later transitioned to 'The SDG lab' when it became clearer that the Lab was 'a playground for cities to try, fail and succeed together in exploration of cultural evaluation and alignment to wider goals for cities at different stages of cultural development'.

Phase one (2023 to 2024), twelve pilot cities: Bielsko-Biała (Poland), Brno (Czech Republic), České Budějovice (Czech Republic), Chemnitz (Germany), Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Elefsina (Greece), Faro (Portugal), Katowice (Poland), Larnaka (Cyprus), Leeuwarden-Friesland (Netherlands), Lublin (Poland), Oulu (Finland).

Phase two (2025 to 2026), eleven pilot cities: Bielsko-Biała (Poland), Brno (Czech Republic), Cáceres (Spain), Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Debrecen (Hungary), Jerez de la Frontera (Spain), Larnaka (Cyprus), Leuven (Belgium), Lublin (Poland), Novi Sad (Serbia), Oulu (Finland).

Six cities took part in both phases: Bielsko-Biała, Brno, Cluj-Napoca, Larnaka, Lublin and Oulu. Across the two phases, 17 pilot cities from 13 countries have shaped the Lab. Observer and guest cities joined sessions along the way: Molenbeek (Brussels, Belgium), Aufbruch Salzkammergut (Austria), Nikšić (Montenegro), Victoria (Gozo, Malta), Zalaegerszeg (Hungary), Leeds (UK) Matera (Italy), and Burgas (Bulgaria). Together they made up 25 cities from 19 countries.

Between them, the cities cover every stage of the title cycle: candidates preparing bids, title-holders delivering their year, legacy cities living with what it left, and cities that bid and lost.

Since the initial discussion of the SDG Lab in Belfast in September 2023, there has been an SDG Lab presence across 7 Culture next conferences:

- Leeuwarden, 22–24 November 2023
- Oulu, 28 February – 1 March 2024
- Cluj-Napoca, 16–18 October 2024
- Leeuwarden, 8–10 July 2025
- Bielsko-Biała, 15–17 October 2025
- Larnaka, 6–8 May 2026
- Oulu, 7–9 October 2026

Objectives

The Lab has set out to navigate three guiding questions:

- How can culture be recognised for sustainable development?
- Can we develop effective tools and methods to measure our local and collective impact?
- How do we bring citizens into that conversation, so their voices shape what we measure and why?

The Lab sessions took the form of facilitated co-design workshops with each session embarking on a key theme, from quantitative measurement, qualitative frameworks, understanding each cities evaluation practice, digital tools to enhance alignment and comparison and so on. The process involved individual activities to reflect on an individual's city data, with group discussion to compare and contrast with the rest of the group.

The Lab worked in dialogue with the international campaign: #culture2030goal materials were put before member cities in workshops, and UNESCO's Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda served as the founding reference point for the indicator work. The Lab's role in that wider ecosystem was specific: the campaign argued the case at UN level; the Lab supplied the systematic city-level evidence and working tools that case had lacked.

The pilot cities

Each pilot city invested in the Lab, giving staff time, travel and expertise across the sessions. They tested tools that did not always work and helped shape new iterations. The pages that follow set out what each city brought, and what the Lab learned from it. Every city has its own report, that can be accessed through the Encore tool.



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Miasto
Bielsko-Biała

LEGACY AFTER A BID FOR 2029 · PILOT IN BOTH PHASES

Bielsko-Biała, Poland

City of Bielsko-Biała

Bielsko-Biała has been part of the Lab since its first session. It hosted the SDG Lab in October 2025, when Culture Next met in the city. It brings the view of a mid-sized industrial city that used a bid to rethink its cultural offer.

90

distinct measures named in its 2029 bid book
bid book (intent)

What we learned Most of what its bid book set out to measure (80 of 90 measures) is measured by other ECoC cities too. The network already shares much of a common vocabulary.

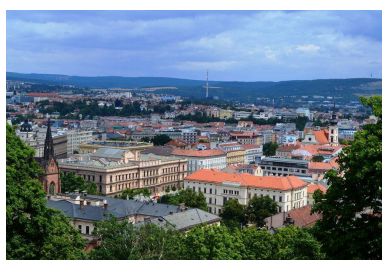


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LEGACY AFTER A SHORTLISTED BID FOR 2028 · PILOT IN BOTH PHASES

Brno, Czech Republic

Statutory City of Brno, Culture Department

Brno was shortlisted for 2028 and did not win. It carried the bid's thinking into a new culture strategy for 2026 to 2035, approved in May 2026. Its 2026 to 2027 action plan includes work with the SDG Lab, and uses the frequency of chatbot queries as one of its indicators.

18 of 32

bid commitments still in current plans
bid book vs later plans

12 of 14

commitments already in the 2018 strategy that persisted
bid book vs later plans

6 of 18

commitments introduced by the bid that persisted
bid book vs later plans

What we learned Of the commitments its bid shared with its 2018 strategy, 12 of 14 survived into current plans. Of those the bid introduced, 6 of 18 did.

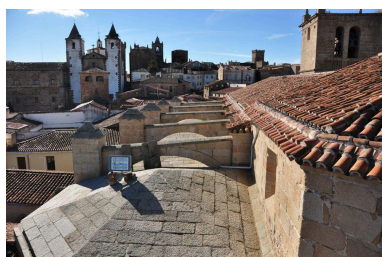


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CANDIDATE, ECOC 2031 · PILOT IN PHASE TWO

Cáceres, Spain

Cáceres 2031 office, Ayuntamiento de Cáceres

Cáceres runs a dedicated cultural activation office, and its region is large and dispersed. It has been one of the most active contributors to the shared evidence base. Its 2031 open call drew 141 projects from 41 countries.

141

projects submitted to its 2031 open call
city report

41

countries the proposals came from, 14 outside Europe
city report

274

registrations across seven thematic areas
city report

What we learned Its first open call reached well beyond Europe: of the 41 countries that sent proposals, 14 were outside Europe.



Photo: Todor Bozhinov, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



LEGACY AFTER A BID FOR 2021 · PILOT IN BOTH PHASES

Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Cluj Cultural Centre (Centrul Cultural Clujean)

Culture as long-term stewardship

Cluj-Napoca hosted the Culture Next forum in October 2024. There, the Lab's cities agreed two conditions for backing a culture goal, which this report still holds to. The goal must name a clear aim, such as cultural rights for everyone, not just "culture". And it must connect both ways: culture built into the other goals, and they into it.

€10.5m

from European and other sources over the decade
organisation records

317

activities in 2025, with 2,262 artists taking part
organisation annual report

143

member organisations
organisation records

What we learned A city that did not win can keep building. Since the bid, its cultural centre has drawn €10.5m from European and other sources, against €2.33m of local public funding.



Photo: Joergsam, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Debrecen

LEGACY AFTER A BID FOR 2023 · PILOT IN PHASE TWO

Debrecen, Hungary

Főnix Rendezvényszervező Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft.

Debrecen joined the Lab in its second phase, keen to learn from cities at other stages of the title cycle.

150

distinct measures named in its 2023 bid book
bid book (intent)

What we learned Most of what its bid book set out to measure (138 of 150 measures) is measured by other ECoC cities too. The network already shares much of a common vocabulary.



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CANDIDATE FOR ECOC 2031 · PILOT IN PHASE TWO

Jerez de la Frontera, Spain

Ayuntamiento de Jerez de la Frontera, Mission Team

Jerez joined the Lab in the middle of its bid for 2031, working to a tight timetable between bid books. It showed the Lab what evaluation looks like from inside a live competition. The bid was not selected, and Jerez's part in the Lab ended there. Its contribution shaped the tools the other cities now use.

What we learned Cities in a live competition need evidence that is quick to produce and ready for the bid. Tools that ask for extra time don't get used.



Photo: Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



ECOC 2030 · PILOT IN BOTH PHASES

Larnaka, Cyprus

Larnaka 2030 (Organisation for the European Capital of Culture)

Culture as democratic transformation and social healing

Larnaka's programme replaces top-down programming with co-creation. Its 'Common Ground' concept brings Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities together, and at one event they met 'for the first time in fifty years'.

72

distinct measures named in its 2030 bid book
bid book (intent)

8 to 10 months

planned baseline mapping study, from mid-2026
plan (intent)

What we learned A city can be advanced in vision and still be starting its evaluation from scratch.

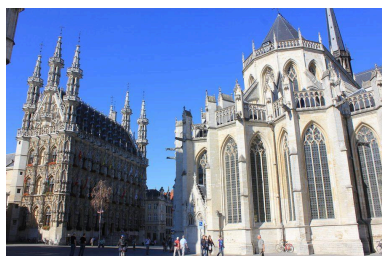


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ECOC 2030 · PILOT IN PHASE TWO

Leuven, Belgium

LOV2030 vzw

Culture as radical connection

Leuven is opening up the closed networks of a university city, and taking culture into neighbourhoods, garages and hospitals. Its most distinctive pathway uses culture to fill the 'inspiration gap' in the city's technical climate programme.

€72.5m

LOV2030 operating budget, 2025 to 2033
budget (planned)

€21.7m

city cultural budget in 2024, 8.4% of the city budget
public budget

€10m

city commitment to the title, approved unanimously in June 2024
council decision

What we learned Culture can do work that a climate plan's technical measures cannot, and a city can evidence that before its title year begins.

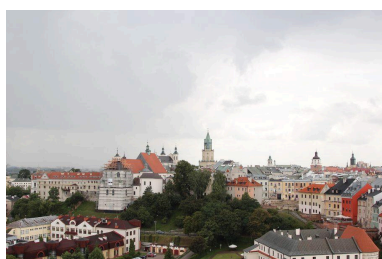


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LUBLIN 2029 RE:UNION

ECOC 2029 · PILOT IN BOTH PHASES

Lublin, Poland

The Centre for Culture in Lublin

Lublin has been part of the Lab since its first phase. It holds the European Capital of Culture title for 2029, and brought the realism of a city moving from bid to delivery.

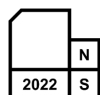
145

distinct measures named in its 2029 bid book
bid book (intent)

What we learned Most of what its bid book set out to measure (125 of 145 measures) is measured by other ECoC cities too. The network already shares much of a common vocabulary.



Photo: Alexkom000, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



LEGACY, ECOC 2022 · PILOT IN PHASE TWO

Novi Sad, Serbia

Foundation 'Novi Sad, European Capital of Culture'

Culture as participation, continuity and quiet influence

Novi Sad's title year organised more than 4,000 events and reached 1.5 million participants. Since then culture has moved out of the centre and into neighbourhoods.

4,000+

events organised in the
title year
evaluation (outcome)

1.5 million

participants across all
programmes in 2022
evaluation (outcome)

4.9 out of 5

attendees' rating of
programme quality as a
reason to attend
evaluation (outcome)

What we learned After the title year, steady programming can hold a city together in difficult times, and a foundation without formal power can still shape policy.

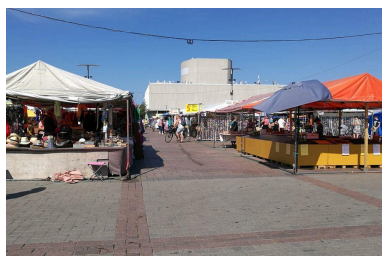


Photo: Estormiz, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



ECOC 2026 · PILOT IN BOTH PHASES

Oulu, Finland

Oulu Culture Foundation (Oulu2026)

Culture as identity transformation

Oulu's title year is recasting a post-industrial northern city as a confident subarctic European one. The programme includes 720 external projects across 40 municipalities. Oulu hosts Culture Next and the Lab in October 2026.

720

external projects across
40 municipalities
*programme data shared in
conversation*

106

distinct measures named
in its 2026 bid book
bid book (intent)

50/50

funding split between the
national ministry and the
City of Oulu
profile (conversation)

What we learned A city's view of itself can be the outcome that matters most, and it is hard to count. The Lab's pathways give a way to evidence it.

The indicator analysis: counting what cities count

The Lab began with the indicators cities had already committed to measure. In its first phase it gathered the strategies, bid books and monitoring documents of its pilot cities and extracted every indicator they contained. The result was 3,077 indicators with only one in ten with any live data behind it. The most common were participation numbers, population and average cultural spend.

No two cities measured the same way. Participation alone was counted in six different units: participants, visitors, attendees, customers, residents and citizens. Some cities collected data digitally, some on paper, and some not at all. Collection ran monthly, quarterly or yearly depending on the city and the measure, and some benchmark data, including national census figures, was a decade old. Dedicated evaluation capacity ranged from half a post to a team of fifteen. Some cities aligned every objective to an SDG; others aligned none.

Working with the cities, the Lab reduced the 3,077 indicators to more than a thousand shared measures, and then to 26 priority indicators, 18 of them rated top priority by the cities. These sit under the six themes of the Culture Next Evaluation Framework: Economic, Social, Governance, Infrastructure, Vibrancy and Images. The framework builds on Beatriz Garcia's Impacts 08 factors for cultural evaluation. The Lab also produced a shared glossary, so that cities using the same word mean the same thing.

In hindsight, the problem was never a lack of data; cities hold plenty. They record it in different units and on different cycles, and often one officer manages it alongside international relations and two other jobs. Where evaluation has a budget and a named owner, as in Liverpool, Aarhus and Bodø, cities have filled realistic indicator sets. What proved almost impossible was finding comparable data, in a shared language and from the same period, across any two cities.

In 2026 the Lab repeated the analysis across the whole ECoC archive, using newer models. It covered 208 documents: 167 bid books, 32 evaluation reports and 9 monitoring reports. It found 58,775 mentions of measurable indicators and grouped them into 2,639 concepts, 810 of which appear in three or more documents. For each concept the analysis shows how often it is promised in bid books, and how often an evaluation or monitoring report later reports against it. Visitor numbers, for example, appear 524 times, and data exists in 78% of cases. The pattern is clear: cities promise many measures but report on few, and the ones they report on are mostly the ones that are easiest to count.

What we tried, and what cities actually used

In attempting to align cities around the core set of indicators, the Lab created a quantitative dashboard that asked cities to populate their priority indicators. The premise was simple; one living dashboard for each city where members from their cultural team could add in data to each indicator and others that they might be working on. This would help cities locally as 'one source of truth' across their cultural programmes and help add numbers to the objectives they set out in their individual strategies, whilst collectively we could evaluate the group as a whole, and where culture was making a combined impact across the cohort.

In practice, the dashboard acted like many dashboards that have gone before it; confusing, time consuming and inaccurate. Key challenges included asking cultural teams to input data where they had none, trying to link or align data that wasn't equal and generally adding more work on an already overstretched team.

One common recurrent theme in the Lab was the need for more qualitative assessment - where culture really makes the difference. Stop asking cities how much culture they produce and start asking how culture changes their city. The qualitative framework developed makes *pathways* the unit of analysis: an evidenced account of how a cultural programme makes a difference in a particular city. Each city profile sets out the city's context and typically three pathways, then maps those pathways to the SDGs they touch. Quantitative data sits alongside as context, and cities are compared by their stage in the ECoC cycle. A maturity model rates how developed each city's evaluation practice is across five dimensions: Vision, Partnerships, Delivery, Quantitative Data and Qualitative Evaluation. Each dimension is rated Emerging, Developing, Established or Advanced. The Lab developed the framework with five cities (Brno, Novi Sad, Larnaka, Leuven and Oulu), using interviews and document review.

The framework was a better methodology, but it made the same demand of the quantitative dashboard - ultimately that cities had to feed directly into it. On top of that, takeup by city administrations is slow and bureaucratic, so it remains the Lab's own method of analysis, not a tool cities run themselves.

By the Larnaka session in May 2026, the Lab had drawn four lessons:

- Comparing quantitative data across cities of unequal capacity produces noise rather than insight.
- Qualitative evidence says more about what culture does.
- Cities want to compare, not compete.
- AI extends what a small team can do, but only validation turns its output into evidence.

What cities did use are tools that ask nothing extra of them, but help them connect what is happening on the ground, with more strategic priorities.

What the Lab Developed

The Lab developed two things with its cities: a framework for evidencing what culture does, and an evidence engine that puts four decades of European Capital of Culture experience at the service of any city. Both follow the main lesson of the dashboard: bring the evidence to cities rather than asking cities to come to it. Both are in use today. Fuller technical detail will follow in a technical report and a process report after the Oulu conference.

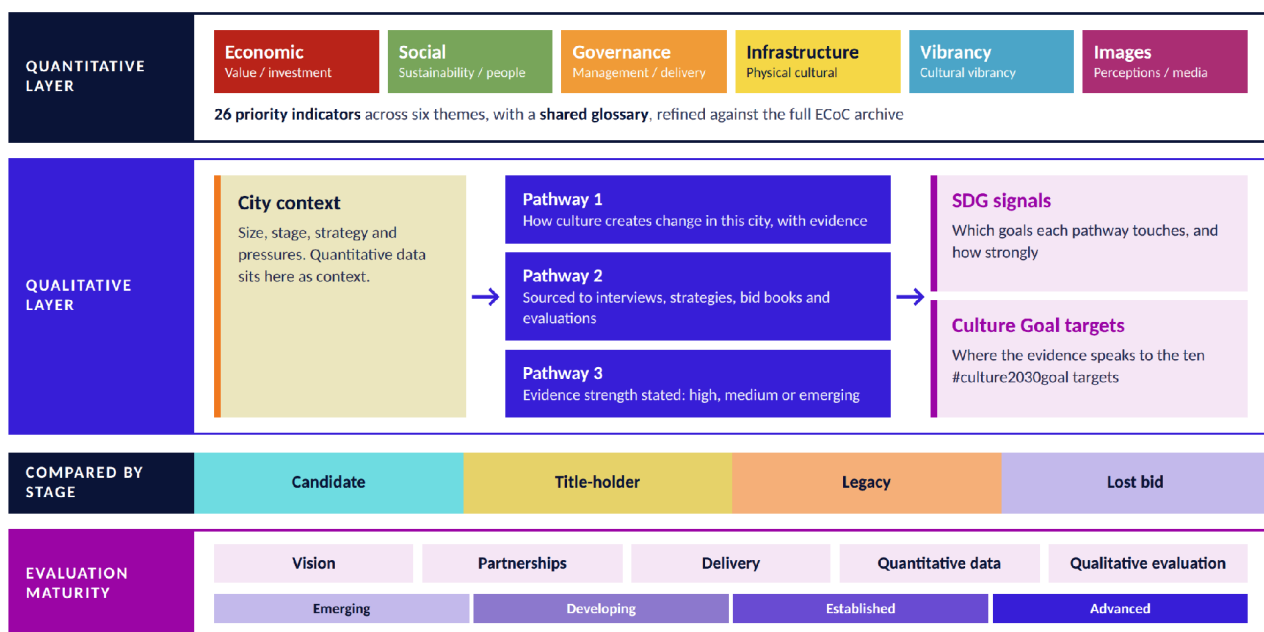
1. A framework that joins qualitative and quantitative evidence

The Culture Next framework uses both quantitative and qualitative approach to evidencing impact.

FIGURE 1

The Culture Next framework

Numbers where cities have them, evidence of change where they don't, both linked to global goals



Source: Culture Next SDG Lab, 2023 to 2026.

culturenext.eu

The quantitative layer is the Culture Next Evaluation Framework. It has six themes (Economic, Social, Governance, Infrastructure, Vibrancy and Images), 26 priority indicators and a shared glossary, and it is now being refined against the whole ECoC archive (see the indicator analysis above). A city can use this to see what data they should be counting, and what they should be calling it.

The qualitative layer captures what the numbers cannot. It reads a city's cultural work in three steps:

- It starts from the city's context: its size, its stage in the title cycle, its strategy and the pressures it faces.

- It then sets out typically three pathways: evidenced accounts of how a cultural programme creates change in that city.
- Finally, it shows which SDGs, and which of the ten Culture Goal targets, those pathways touch, as signals rather than scores.

A maturity model rates how developed the city's evaluation practice is across five dimensions, from Emerging to Advanced. Quantitative data informs the picture as context rather than as the headline.

Together, the two layers let a city report numbers where it has them and evidence of change where it does not. Both are expressed in terms that connect to the SDGs and the proposed Culture Goal. This is the city-level link that national frameworks lack.

2. *Encore: an AI evidence engine for European culture*

Encore is the first AI system built on the full record of the European Capital of Culture. It brings together what cities promised, what they planned and what their evaluations found, across forty years, and turns it into evidence a city can use immediately at any stage of their cultural journey.

It has four layers.

The archive. Encore holds 173 ECoC bid books, from winning and unsuccessful cities, and 46 evaluation and monitoring reports. These sit alongside documents submitted by member cities, policy frameworks and a live feed of culture-policy news. The archive is continually growing and is organised by what each document is for:

- **projection:** bid books, which state what a city intends to do
- **internal:** strategies, action plans and monitoring, which record what it went on to plan
- **evaluation:** reports on what actually happened

The indicator model. From the archive, Encore has extracted every measurable commitment ECoC cities have made: 58,775 mentions, grouped into 2,639 indicator concepts. For each concept, the model shows how often cities promise to measure it and how often anyone later reports against it. This is the first map of what European cultural policy says it will measure against what it actually measures. It is the evidence base from which the Lab's next core indicator set is being built, with expert review.

The tools. Several tools work on top of the archive:

- Anyone can question it in plain language, using advanced AI models.
- *Build your cultural case* lets a city analyse its own strategy or bid book against the whole record. It returns next steps, indicators worth tracking, comparable cities and what their evaluations found, and people across the network to talk to.
- A legacy analysis traces which commitments in a bid survive into a city's later plans, including after a lost bid.

In every case, each answer is cited to its source. Evaluation reports carry more weight than bid books, and anything drawn from a bid book is marked as a statement of intent, never as an outcome. Where an answer touches the SDGs or the Culture Goal targets, Encore shows it as a signal alongside the evidence.

Delivery. Encore is open to anyone as a simple snapshot, and offers a city cultural workspace for those who want to explore in depth. Learning from the dashboard, it takes the information to the cultural officer. It sends a weekly personalised digest of what is relevant to that officer in that city, based on their previous use of the tool. A recent edition, for example, led with Cáceres 2031's open call, which drew 141 projects from 41 countries.

In practice: Brno

Brno bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2028. It was shortlisted and did not win. In 2026 the city adopted a new cultural strategy for 2026 to 2035, and its team ran that strategy through Encore. The analysis returned three priorities:

- agree the indicators to start tracking before 2028
- set out who holds the legacy after 2028, through a dedicated body
- plan budgets across city, region and state

It also named comparable cities, including Pafos 2017 and Matera 2019, and people across the network with relevant experience.

Encore's legacy analysis of Brno's bid found that 12 of the 14 commitments carried over from the city's 2018 strategy survived into current plans, against 6 of the 18 the bid introduced. In June 2026 Brno City Council approved its cultural action plan for 2026 to 2027. The plan names the SDG Lab and its tools as an activity, and measures their use through the resident chatbot. Brno is the first city known to have written the Lab into municipal policy.

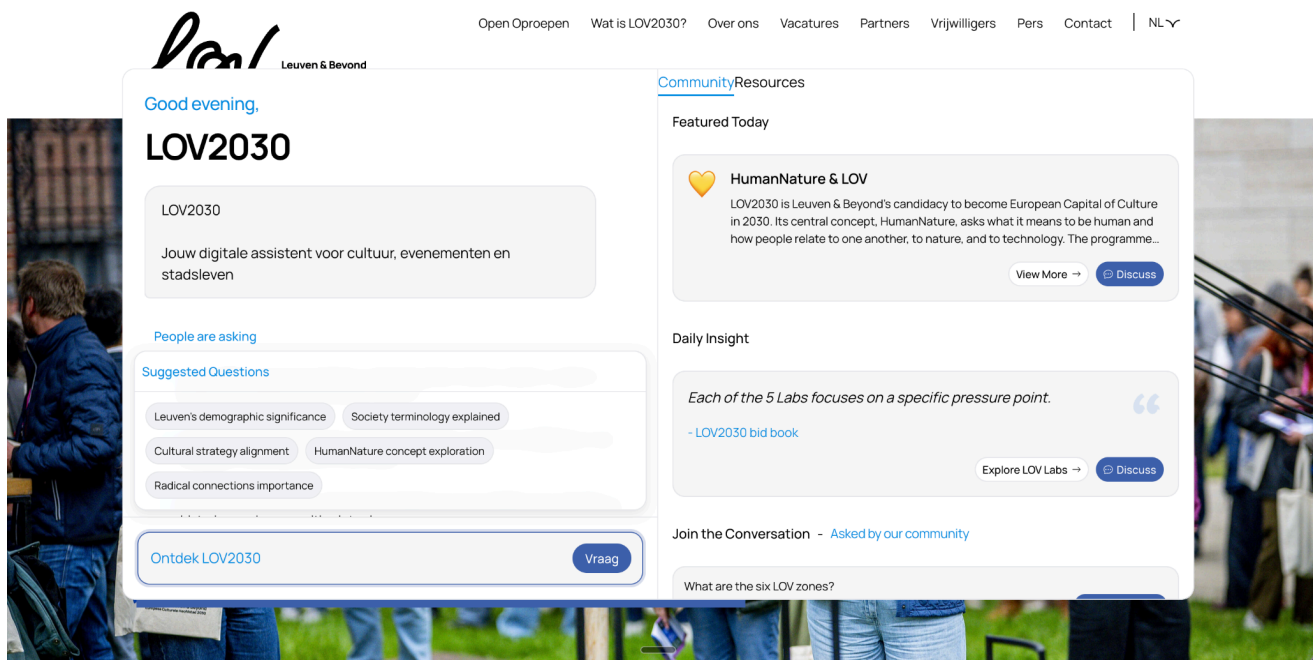
Encore as a network analysis engine

Encore started as a way to ask questions about a single city's documents but is becoming a way to see the whole network at once. The Brno example follows 32 structural commitments from the city's 2028 bid book into the strategies and action plans Brno adopted after losing the title. Eighteen of the 32 (56%) survived. Commitments already in Brno's 2018 cultural strategy carried through at 86% (12 of 14). Commitments the bid introduced survived at 33% (6 of 18).

Applied across the 173 bid books and 46 evaluation reports in the Encore evidence base, alongside the strategies cities publish afterwards, the same method shows connections the network has never been able to see. It can show which kinds of commitment outlast the title year, which disappear whether a city wins or loses, and which cities are building the same things and could build them together. Many of these connections lead directly to sustainable development. A new cultural governance body, a heritage building brought back into use and a participation programme that becomes routine all speak to SDG 11, SDG 16 and the targets of the Culture Goal. Persistence is also a test of sustainability: whether cultural investment is still producing change after the funding and the headlines have gone. The UN International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development begins in 2027, and this is exactly the evidence it will need. Encore can produce it from documents cities have already written, without asking them to collect anything new.

Bringing citizens into the conversation: Cultural Conversations

The third question the Lab set itself was how to bring citizens closer to shaping cultural policy. Cultural Conversations is an assistant that sits on a city's own website and answers residents' questions about its cultural strategy or ECoC bid. It answers in the resident's language, draws only on the city's own documents, and cites each one. The city receives a monthly summary of what residents asked, the common themes, and the questions its published information could not answer.



Residents ask practical questions:

- where to find work in the sector
- which venues are open, and to whom
- how local disputes will be resolved
- how to take part in programming across a border

These conversations are not a representative survey. They are best read as a signal of demand to set alongside other evidence. They also give a city something no bid book or evaluation contains: a record of what its residents want to know.

Limits

Neither the framework nor Encore creates new measurement, and neither resolves the difficulty of comparing cities whose evaluation capacity differs so widely. What they do makes the existing record legible, which any analysis depends on. The archive is uneven. Evaluation reports exist for only a minority of title years, so the collection leans towards documents of intent. The indicator model is a machine grouping still under expert review. AI-assisted answers are only as reliable as their sources, which is why every answer can be traced back to one.

What comes next

- A legacy section of the archive dedicated to what cities did next, including after a lost bid, requested by Brno.
- A city-level intelligence view bringing together a city's plans, peers, and SDG and Culture Goal signals.
- Connectors, so that cities can use the archive from inside the AI assistants they already work with.

The network in numbers

Between 2023 and 2026 the SDG Lab has grown from a pilot with a handful of cities into shared infrastructure for the whole network. The figures below show how far it has reached.

The Lab

- **17** pilot cities across two phases: 12 in 2023–24 and 11 in 2025–26, with 6 taking part in both
- Lab sessions at **8** Culture Next conferences, from Belfast in 2023 to Oulu in 2026, plus online sessions between them

The evidence base

- **173** ECoC bid books, including **35** from title winners, across **32** countries
- **46** evaluation reports
- **13** policy frameworks
- **87** documents contributed by member cities

The indicator analysis

- **3,077** indicators in the 2024 baseline across 13 cities, with around **10%** backed by data
- **208** documents re-analysed in 2026, yielding **58,775** indicator mentions and **2,639** distinct concepts
- **810** concepts recurring across three or more documents, reduced to about **350** after expert review
- **26** priority indicators across six themes

The tools in use

- 26 cities using Encore
- About 100 cultural case analyses run through the Culture Next website
- 700+ resident conversations through Cultural Conversations, in 6 cities
- 1 council-approved municipal action plan that names the Lab and its tools, with a usage indicator attached (Brno, Action Plan 2026–27, Activity 9)

Taken together, the numbers show a network that now holds most of the documentary record of the European Capitals of Culture in one searchable place, and cities that are using it. It keeps growing each time a member adds a document.

What should a culture goal contain?

In September 2025 the #culture2030goal campaign published its analytical report on a Culture Goal for the post-2030 agenda, with a single goal statement, "Ensure cultural sustainability for the wellbeing of all", and ten targets (1 to 8, a and b). Each target has universal indicators for national reporting, additional optional indicators, priority areas for future development and, on every target, priority areas for qualitative reporting.

The framework is candid about its limits. Almost every universal indicator asks whether a national government has written something down: whether status-of-the-artist legislation exists, whether the constitution refers to a culture of peace, whether national plans mention culture. Target a is measured by a single per capita budget line. None of the universal indicators asks whether anything changed. The report acknowledges this, noting that indicators built to strict SDG standards risk the same fate as SDG 16's governance targets, which "largely fail to assess attainment of the Targets they relate to". Its answer is the qualitative reporting tier, which appears on all ten targets but comes with no method, data source or worked example.

The table below shows where the SDG Lab can add useful evidence to the campaign:

Target	What the framework measures	What city evidence adds
2 Culture of peace and diversity	Two national yes/no indicators	Documented cohesion pathways in cities where it is a live political question (Novi Sad, Larnaka)
8 Cultural approach to environmental governance	Planning strategies that integrate culture, already sourced to cities	Culture inside municipal climate governance (Leuven, Oulu)

Target	What the framework measures	What city evidence adds
a Strengthen cultural institutions	One budget line	A maturity model built to assess the quality of cultural governance
b Culture across all development goals	References to culture in national plans	Evidence-linked mapping of city commitments to goals
4 Diversity of cultural expressions	National policies and heritage listings	Bid books as local cultural mapping, which the qualitative tier asks for by name
1 Cultural rights and participation	National budget and participation survey	Participation broken down by neighbourhood and region
3 Heritage, 7 Indigenous peoples	Mature convention machinery	Limited; one European instance for Target 7, usable only with consent

City evidence can reach national reporting in three ways. Firstly, cities can supply the disaggregation the framework asks for. Secondly, a structured panel of cities reporting on a common instrument costs less than recurrent national surveys. Thirdly, cities can carry voluntary adoption, which the campaign cites as a core strategy. The report says this needs agreement on "how to monitor and how information should be consolidated, analysed, and fed back". The Lab's cohort, its framework and its tools are an early version of it.

Our answer to the question in the title follows from this. A culture goal should measure change as well as policy existence. It should give its qualitative tier a method, and it should build in a city layer from the start rather than leaving cities in an appendix. The UN International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development begins in 2027, along with the SDG Summit that will decide whether the post-2030 agenda opens to new goals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key takeaways

The following takeaways draw together the main findings from three years of the SDG Lab: its indicator analysis, city profiles, workshops and tools, and the discussions of the Policy and Advocacy Task Force.

1. Culture's contribution to sustainable development is concentrated and consistent.

Culture touches many of the SDGs. In all five cities the Lab profiled in depth, its impact clustered on reduced inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). The pattern held across cities of

different size, geography and stage in the ECoC cycle. Five cities is a small sample, but the consistency suggests culture is one of the ways cities deliver sustainable development, and not a side effect of it.

2. **Culture's strongest signal is where policy least sees it.** The most consistent finding across the profiles is culture's contribution to SDG 16: trust, social cohesion, institutional legitimacy and democratic life. It is also the part of cultural work that is least measured and least recognised in funding instruments. Much of what culture does for democratic life currently goes unrecorded.
3. **Measurement fails, not culture.** In the Lab's 2024 baseline, 3,077 indicators across 13 cities yielded data for roughly one in ten. The 2026 re-analysis of 208 bid books and evaluations found 58,775 indicator mentions and 2,639 distinct concepts, of which only 810 appear in three or more documents. Cities write indicators to win a bid or satisfy a report, rarely to be collected, and they seldom share a vocabulary for doing so. Frameworks that rely on this material will undervalue culture, and at present they do.
4. **Qualitative evidence offers a route to comparison.** Evaluation teams across the network range from half a post to fifteen, so cities cannot be compared on data infrastructure they do not equally have. They can be compared on pathways, meaning how culture creates change in a given context, and on maturity across shared dimensions. The Lab's profiles show this can be done across cities of very different capacity. Making it routine is the next step, and it has not yet been proven at scale.
5. **Cities want to compare, not compete.** Member cities consistently asked for a mirror rather than a ranking: help us see ourselves alongside others. League tables of cities with very unequal capacity produce noise and disengagement. Cities that can see how others tackled similar problems learn, adapt and improve.
6. **Engagement follows usefulness.** The Lab's quantitative dashboard failed because it asked time-poor, politically pressured administrations to come to the data. Its successors bring the evidence to the city: a personalised digest, citizen-facing assistants and a cited evidence library. Twenty-six cities now use Encore, and Brno has written the Lab's tools into a council-approved action plan. Any future SDG instrument for cities should be built the same way.
7. **AI extends capacity; validation makes it evidence.** AI made it possible to profile cities, work across four decades of ECoC documentation and listen to residents at a scale no city team could manage alone. Some cities were wary of AI-generated analysis, and they were right to ask. The Lab's answer is that no profile is published until the city has

checked and corrected it. AI is a tool for building evidence and does not replace human judgement about it.

8. **A culture goal in the post-2030 framework is justified, and the Decade is the runway to it.** The #culture2030goal campaign published its Culture Goal and ten targets in September 2025. UNESCO member states at MONDIACULT 2025 called for culture as a goal in its own right. In September 2026 the UN General Assembly declared 2027 to 2036 the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development. What is still missing is a way to measure the goal where culture actually happens, in cities. The Lab's evidence is strongest on the targets the campaign's indicators serve least: peace and cohesion, environmental governance, cultural institutions, and culture across all goals. The network's position keeps the caveats its cities agreed at Cluj in 2024. The goal must name a specific ambition, such as cultural democracy or universal cultural rights, and not culture in the abstract. It must also be transversal, with culture referenced across the other goals and those goals reflected within it.

Where Culture Next extends or challenges existing approaches

1. **From indicator proliferation to indicator honesty.** Prevailing practice equips cultural strategies with ever-longer indicator lists. The Lab's evidence, one usable indicator in ten, argues for radically fewer, better-supported measures: 26 priority indicators across six themes, treated as contextual signals rather than headline claims.
2. **Against the dashboard reflex.** The default policy response to an evidence gap is a platform cities must feed. The Lab built one, but no-one used it. It challenges funders and networks to stop commissioning pull infrastructure and to fund push intelligence instead. Encore is an early iterated version of this.
3. **Against league tables of unequal cities.** Benchmarking frameworks that rank cities with incomparable capacity are not neutral: they punish honesty and reward reporting theatre. Comparison should build capability, not hierarchy.
4. **Bid books are promises, not outcomes.** Forty years of ECoC documentation is an extraordinary evidence resource, if intent and delivery are kept distinct.
5. **Qualitative rigour is rigour.** The Lab challenges the assumption that qualitative evidence is the soft option. Structured pathways, city validation and transparent

sourcing produce evidence that is more comparable across unequal cities than the quantitative alternative, and more honest about what is actually known.

Five windows for European action, 2026–2028

Advocacy fails when it asks decision-makers to 'recognise' and 'embed' without naming the decision in front of them. Five instruments are open right now; each carries a specific, dated opportunity to act on this report's findings.

- 1. The AgoraEU programme for 2028–2034: Parliament and Council, votes from autumn 2026.** The successor to Creative Europe is in negotiation as this report is published, with parliamentary committee and plenary votes on the substantive file scheduled for October–November 2026 and trilogues to follow. MEPs on the CULT and BUDG committees, and ministers in Council, can: support the proposed step-change in the Culture strand budget; write a common evaluation requirement into the programme so that EU-funded cultural projects evidence their contribution qualitatively as well as numerically; and fund evaluation capacity in small and medium cities.
- 2. The European Capital of Culture legal basis after 2033: Commission, consultation open now.** The Commission has opened the process for the ECoC's next legal basis, with a public consultation already live and a legislative proposal to follow. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to write evaluation right: embed a common qualitative framework, pathways, contextual indicators, a shared maturity model, in the Decision's monitoring and evaluation articles; require bid books and evaluation reports to be published to an open, searchable public record; and mandate the intent/outcome distinction this report's evidence standards demonstrate. Culture Next will submit this report's framework as its formal consultation response.
- 3. The Culture Compass for Europe: Commission, implementation from 2026.** The EU's new cultural strategy commits to an EU Cultural Data Hub with Eurostat and a first State of Culture Report (both Q3 2027), and a Structured Dialogue with the sector from late 2026. The Lab's findings are a direct design input: build the Data Hub push-first and qualitative-capable, adopt indicator-honesty standards (fewer measures, better supported) rather than reproducing the 3,077-indicator problem at continental scale, and count culture's SDG contribution, including SDG 16, in the State of Culture Report. Culture Next seeks a seat in the Structured Dialogue to carry city evidence into implementation.

4. **The post-2030 development agenda: Council and EEAS, position-setting now.** The MONDIACULT 2025 declaration put a stand-alone culture goal on the table; the Culture Compass commits the EU to advancing culture in the post-2030 agenda; and the #culture2030goal campaign, eight global cultural networks, working on this since 2013, has published the route map: a zero-draft goal proposal (2022) and a 'Roadmap 2025' for its adoption. What is missing is an explicit EU negotiating position. Council conclusions under an upcoming presidency should instruct the Commission and EEAS to champion a dedicated culture goal, specific in ambition (cultural democracy, universal cultural rights), transversal in design, consistent with the campaign's zero draft, carrying the evidence of ECoC cities into the UN process.
5. **A Parliament own-initiative report: CULT committee, any time.** An own-initiative report on culture's contribution to the SDGs, drawing on forty years of ECoC evidence, now searchable, would give Parliament its own voice in the post-2030 debate ahead of the programme votes, and give MEPs from ECoC cities and candidate cities a concrete way to represent them. The network's Brussels summit in December 2026 is the natural moment to seed it.

Recommendations

The following recommendations translate the key takeaways into actionable directions for the stakeholder groups involved in recognising, planning and evaluating culture's contribution to sustainable development.

For European policy creators and decision makers

1. **Act through the five windows.** The preceding section names the instruments and dates: AgoraEU, the post-2033 ECoC Decision, the Culture Compass implementation, the EU's post-2030 position, and a Parliament own-initiative report. These are the recommendations of this report in their actionable form.
2. **Bring culture into EU SDG monitoring.** Eurostat's annual SDG monitoring and the EU's voluntary review at the UN currently have no meaningful cultural dimension. The Cultural Data Hub cooperation with Eurostat is the vehicle to change that, with qualitative pathway evidence admitted where quantitative series do not exist.

For national governments

1. **Include culture in SDG reporting.** The #culture2030goal campaign's longitudinal analysis of Voluntary National Reviews ('Culture in VNRs 2022–2025: Trends over Time', IFLA, 2026) documents how thinly culture features in national SDG reporting. VNRs and national frameworks should report culture's contribution to goals 10, 11 and 16, using qualitative pathway evidence where quantitative data does not exist, rather than omitting culture because it does not fit the template.
2. **Resource city-level evaluation capacity.** Modest, targeted support for cultural evaluation capacity in small and medium cities would do more for the evidence base than any new indicator framework.

For European cities, including Culture Next members

1. **Adopt the framework; join the comparison.** Use the qualitative framework and maturity model in cultural strategy and ECoC processes; join the Culture Next Encore to see your city alongside peers and to strengthen the case for cultural budgets with comparable evidence.
2. **Evidence pathways as well as outputs.** Document how culture creates change in your context. Three pathways, honestly evidenced, outperform three hundred indicators without data.
3. **Listen to citizens as evidence.** Citizen questions are cultural strategy data. Tools like Cultural Conversations turn everyday curiosity into evaluative insight at negligible cost to the city.

For cultural networks and platforms

1. **Share evidence standards alongside practice.** Adopt common sourcing discipline (intent vs outcome; citation to source) so network knowledge accumulates rather than evaporates.
2. **Contribute to and use the shared evidence infrastructure.** The ECoC Encore Evidence Base is offered to the field; networks should feed it, interrogate it, and defend its standards.

For cultural operators

1. **Tell the pathway, cite the source.** Operators hold the ground truth of culture's SDG contribution. Document change as it happens, in context, with evidence, it is operators' stories that make the clustering finding real to policymakers.

For Culture Next and its Policy and Advocacy Task Force

1. **Formalise the alliance with #culture2030goal.** The campaign holds the UN-facing advocacy architecture; Culture Next holds the city-level evidence and tools. The network should establish a structured partnership, offering the Lab's framework, city profiles and Evidence Base as the campaign's city-evidence arm, contributing to its VNR/VLR analysis with ECoC material.
2. **Sustain the instruments beyond the grant.** Encore, the Evidence Base, Cultural Conversations and the qualitative framework are the network's evidence engine; secure their continuity, governance and city ownership.
3. **Open the framework outward.** Onboard all interested cities to the framework and Evidence Base through Y3–Y4, delivered push-first, as the Lab's evidence demands.

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TL;DR

What this report is about

Between 2023 and 2026, 17 European Capital of Culture cities worked with Culture Next to measure culture's contribution to sustainable development. This report sets out what they found: where culture's contribution lands, why the standard ways of measuring it fail, and what should change as the world prepares the agenda that follows the SDGs.

Why it matters

None of the 17 SDGs names culture, and few of the 169 targets touch it. What is not in the framework is not measured, and what is not measured is not funded. Cities that use culture to build cohesion, trust and better places are doing so invisibly in policy terms. That is starting to change. A Culture Goal with ten targets was published in 2025, and the UN has declared 2027 to 2036 the International Decade of Culture for Sustainable Development.

What the Lab found

- In all five cities profiled in depth, culture's impact clustered on three goals: reduced inequalities (10), sustainable cities (11), and peace, justice and strong institutions (16).
- The strongest signal, SDG 16, is also the least measured.
- In the 2024 baseline, 3,077 indicators across 13 cities produced data for only about one in ten. Measurement is what fails, not the cities.
- Comparing how culture creates change in each city, and how mature each city's evaluation is, works across cities of very different capacity, where comparing numbers does not.
- Cities engage when evidence comes to them. Twenty-six now use Encore, the Lab's evidence and analysis tool.

What needs to change

- Include a culture goal in the post-2030 framework, with a specific ambition, and reflect culture across the other goals.

- Make cities part of how that goal is measured, with qualitative evidence counted where numbers do not exist.
- Adopt a common framework for evaluating culture's impact across ECoC cities.
- Fund culture's contribution to trust and cohesion explicitly.
- Keep what bid books promise and what evaluations find distinct, and keep the ECoC record open and searchable.

Who this report is for

It is for European institutions shaping the post-2030 debate, national governments writing SDG reviews, and cities making the case for cultural budgets. It is also for the networks and cultural operators building the evidence, and for anyone who suspects that culture is doing more for sustainable development than the SDGs can currently see.

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.