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The EU's Disjointed Engagement with the Cultural Sustainability Agenda: Rhetoric versus Action¹

Introduction

Sustainable Development is a topic of growing interest in international fora and the European Union (henceforth known as EU) is widely recognised as one of the global leaders in efforts to promote it. However, some authors have argued that culture remains the missing pillar² of sustainable development. Testing this hypothesis, this chapter reviews the alignment of the Union's cultural, media, and cultural relations policies with the ethos and the underlying dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): environmental, social, and economic. The analysis demonstrates that the Union's support for the SDGs is unbalanced across these dimensions and policy fields, suggests that its policies are based on inconsistent understandings of the linkages between culture and development and, based on a general assessment of how these links are reflected (or not) in EU–South Africa relations, argues that a decolonial approach to Global North–Global South cultural sustainability cooperation is unlikely without dedicated action guided by a holistic framework.

The EU and the Sustainable Development Agenda

The connection between culture³ and sustainable development has been gradually recognised by EU actors and its Member States (henceforth known as MS) and the pace of this process increased dramatically in recent years. In September 2023, in an informal meeting led by the Spanish presidency of the Council, the 27 EU Ministers for Culture adapted the Cáceres Declaration, which makes “a commitment to working for culture to be recognised in and of itself as a new sustainable development goal”. Which this statement, the Council makes public its support for calls from multiple cultural actors and organisations to introduce a cultural goal in the revised SDGs post-2030. This echoes, notably,

¹ This research was *funded by the Horizon Europe* programme of the European Union and the call HORIZON-CL2-HERITAGE-01-06 under the Grant Agreement No 101094769 (REBOOT: Reviving, Boosting, Optimizing, and Transforming European Film Competitiveness project). It does not reflect the views of the European Union.

² British Council. *The Missing Pillar: Culture's Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals* (London, 2020).

³ For the sake of clarity, this term is used in the initial section of the chapter broadly, that is, it also encompasses media and cultural relations. A more detailed engagement with these three policy arenas takes place later in the chapter.

UNESCO's final MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration⁴ as well as the Izmir Declaration made in the 2021 Culture summit of the organisation United Cities and Local Governments, which calls on the “UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development [...] to engage in a dialogue with the global cultural actors so that a dedicated Goal on Culture becomes a reality as soon as possible, and certainly in the post-2030 Development Agenda.”⁵ Likewise, in September 2023, under the Presidency of India, the members of the G20 recognised the importance of culture as a transformative driver to accelerate progress on the SDGs, calling for “the full recognition and protection of culture with its intrinsic value as a transformative driver and an enabler for the achievement of the SDGs and [to] advance the inclusion of culture as a standalone goal in future discussions on a possible post-2030 development agenda”.⁶

To return to the Cáceres declaration, one statement thereof is particularly unique in these discussions. When they state that a “commitment to culture, to the *freedom of creators, to their rights, to their working conditions, to participation and access*, must always be among the objectives of any public authority, because culture defines us and is the path to freer, happier and more *tolerant, sustainable* and generous societies”,⁷ EU ministers establish a direct link between artistic freedom, human rights, pluralism, and sustainability, and reject the tendency to associate the latter exclusively with environmental issues. Rather, this statement is consistent with the holistic framework that currently structures the SDGs. This is easily explainable. All EU Member States were among the 193 members of the United Nations (UN) that adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁸ and its 17 SDGs in September 2015. The Agenda establishes a global commitment towards a new understanding of development and identifies ways to address climate change and socioeconomic inequities across three dimensions of action: environmental, economic, and social. Each goal is accompanied by a series of targets, allowing for the monitoring of progress. This resulted from a long process of consultations among stakeholders from governmental and non-governmental organisations, private-sector entities and local authorities.

The EU and its Member States played an active role in the development of the SDGs and continue to be active in their implementation. To give some examples, in 2016 the European

⁴ UNESCO. *UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022 Final Declaration*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-world-conference-cultural-policies-and-sustainable-development-mondiacult-2022> UNESCO, 2022 (2 October 2023).

⁵ Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Council. *Cáceres Declaration*. <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/caceres-declaration/> Cáceres, 2023 (2 October 2023), 5-6.

⁶ G20. *G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration*. https://www.g20.org/content/dam/gtwenty/gtwenty_new/document/G20-New-Delhi-Leaders-Declaration.pdf G20, 9-10 September 2023 (3 October 2023), 11.

⁷ Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Council. *Cáceres Declaration*, my emphasis.

⁸ United Nations General Assembly. *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>. United Nations, 2015 (6 October 2023).

Communication presented a communication mapping the contribution of European policies to the SDGs (in which no references were made to culture, however),⁹ and another focused on its renewed relations with the countries of Africa, Caribbean and Pacific that identified “the achievement of sustainable development in the EU and in the world” as a strategic EU interest.¹⁰ Moreover, “both the European Commission, in President Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines, and the Council of the EU, in its 22 June 2021 conclusions, have committed to making the SDGs a guiding principle in all EU policies. This 'holistic approach' for delivering on the SDGs is reflected in most European Commission proposals”¹¹ and is divided into three key policy areas, each framed by a number of documents: Planet and prosperity – The European Green Deal; People and prosperity – An economy that works for people and a Europe fit for the digital age, People and peace – promoting our European way of life and a new push for European democracy. Annual progress towards a number of SDGs and their targets is compiled by Eurostat.

However, as the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022¹² states, despite supporting explicitly the adoption of its SDGs and its implementation both via its MS and as a standalone member of the G7 and the G20, the EU is yet to align its policies with the SDGs in a holistic manner. For example, referencing a key document in the EU's external action, the report notes that the “Strategic Compass for Security and Defense, adopted in 2022, [...] makes no reference to the universal sustainable development agenda.”¹³ Moreover, progress towards the targets that compose the SDGs varies significantly between EU MS and, in some cases, with worsening trajectories. Moreover, despite the gradual integration of the SDGs into several EU work programmes, this process has not yet been institutionalised across “macroeconomic coordination, budget processes and other policy instruments.”¹⁴

The Relation between Culture and Sustainable Development: Complex and Untapped Pathways

The link between culture and development was initially made by UNESCO during the World Decade for Cultural Development in the 1980s. Since then, an ongoing "reconceptualisation of the

⁹ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Next steps for a sustainable European future: European action for sustainability {SWD(2016) 390 final}*. (European Commission, 2016).

¹⁰ European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: A renewed partnership with the countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific {SWD(2016) 380 final}*

{SWD(2016) 381 final} (European Commission, 2016).

¹¹ Pichon, Eric. *Briefing – Understanding SDGs: The UN's Sustainable Development Goals*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751403/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)751403_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751403/EPRS_BRI(2023)751403_EN.pdf) European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023 (4 October 2023), 5-6.

¹² SDG Transformation Center. *Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022*. <https://www.sdginde.org/reports/europe-sustainable-development-report-2022/> SDSN, 2022 (3 October 2023).

¹³ SDG Transformation Center. *Europe Sustainable*, vii.

¹⁴ SDG Transformation Center. *Europe Sustainable*, xiv.

culture-development nexus”¹⁵ has led to significant advancement in academic and policy thinking, to increased bottom-up experimentation, and to substantial disagreement regarding the position of culture in the cultural sustainability agenda.¹⁶ Some stakeholders understand it as a fourth pillar alongside the environmental, economic and social dimensions of the 2030 Agenda. Others see it as a mediator between these three dimensions. Finally, some see it as the overarching foundation for sustainable development that cuts across the dimensions of the SDGs. These frameworks have been named as the paradigms of culture *in*, *for*, and *as* Sustainable Development, respectfully.¹⁷ Either as a separate dimension, as a mediator, or holistically related to the other dimensions of the SDGs, culture is an enabler of change towards a more balanced relation between people and between the latter and the planet. This being said, problems may arise with each of these models: respectively, the commodification of culture; the instrumentalisation of culture for social change, which would be in tension with cultural malleability and other cultural imperatives; and, finally, tensions and competing assumptions regarding priorities such as environmental sustainability and social justice.¹⁸

Although there are indirect references to culture among the SDGs (e.g. focused on the protection of heritage), culture is not explicitly acknowledged among the 17 goals and remains an implicit pathway for development – an absence that is addressed, albeit unconvincingly, in the final declaration of the recent UN Summit of the Future, which gives equal relevance to culture and sport.¹⁹ This has led the British Council to refer to culture as The Missing Pillar²⁰ of the SDGs in a report that uses its own programmes as examples of cultural initiatives supporting the goals. Four targets in particular are identified as being supported by cultural activities:

Target 4.7 refers to the aim to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for global citizenship and the appreciation of cultural diversity, and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

¹⁵ Wiktor-Mach, Dobrosława. “What role for culture in the age of sustainable development? UNESCO’s advocacy in the 2030 Agenda negotiations.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 3 (2020): 312–327.

¹⁶ Duxbury, Nancy and Gillette, Eileen. Culture as a Key Dimension of Sustainability: Exploring Concepts, Themes, and Models. <https://cercles.diba.cat/documentsdigitals/pdf/E130054.pdf> Creative City Network of Canada, 2007 (27 September 2023).

¹⁷ Joost Dessein et al. *Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability*. <http://www.culturalsustainability.eu/conclusions.pdf> University of Jyväskylä, Finland, 2015 (2 September 2023).

¹⁸ Rayman-Bacchus, Lez and Radavoi, Ciprian. “Advancing culture’s role in sustainable development: social change through cultural policy”. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26 (5) (2020). Accessed 2 September 2023, 14.

¹⁹ United Nations. *Summit of the Future Outcome Documents: Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generation*. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf. United Nations, 2024 (28 November 2024).

²⁰ British Council, *The Missing Pillar: Culture’s Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals* (British Council, 2020).

Target 8.3 addresses the promotion of development-oriented policies that support productive activities as well as, among others, creativity and innovation.

Targets 8.9 and 12.b refer to the need to devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism, including through local culture and products, and to the need to develop suitable monitoring tools in this area.

Target 11.4 highlights the need to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.²¹

A more recent report commissioned by the same organisation²² continued this reflection, highlighting the role of culture in driving sustainable development not only in light of existing SDGs but also beyond this policy framework and its parameters. That is, the report stresses that some “cultural programmes do not always align perfectly with SDG targets and indicators. Instead, they establish conditions that enable meaningful contributions towards the SDGs”, “impacting on community development, intercultural dialogue, and cultural rights”.²³ Strengthening the links between the issues mentioned in the last quote requires engaging with decolonial theory, as has been argued elsewhere.²⁴ For the sake of clarity, the author joins Catherine Walsh's understanding of decoloniality as “the process and project of building, shaping, and *enabling* coloniality's otherwise, interculturality”.²⁵ Central in this quote is the focus on the process of enabling alternative models of development to those of Global North actors – creating space, thus, for Global South actors to question developmental assumptions, namely regarding the links between culture and development. Indeed, if the Agenda 2030 and its successor is to leave no one behind, its implementation requires a continuous negotiation between common top-down goals and diverse bottom-up needs, as is recognised in the Agenda's principles: “We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development”.²⁶ However, this principle has not always been upheld in practice. In an article that looks at the SDGs according to three non-western philosophies (the Buddhist understanding of Gross

²¹ British Council, *The Missing Pillar*, 11.

²² Kai Brennert et al., *The Missing Foundation: Culture's Place Within and Beyond the UN Sustainable Development Goals* https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_missing_foundation_report.pdf. British Council, 2023 (26 October 2023).

²³ Brennert et al., *The Missing Foundation*, 4.

²⁴ A detailed analysis of the links between decolonial thinking and the management of cultural diversity can be found in Dâmaso, Mafalda. “Imagining a new gender contract for cultural rights” In *Imagining a new gender equality contract: Feminism as a Progressive Glue*. Thissen, Leticia, Clavaud, A. and Petö, A. (Eds). Palgrave (2024).

²⁵ Catherine Walsh, “Political-Epistemic Insurgency: Social Movements and the Refounding of the State,” in *Rethinking Intellectuals in Latin America*, ed. Mabel Moraña (St. Louis: Washington State University, 2010). 199–211.

²⁶ United Nations General Assembly. “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. New York, 2015, 10.

National Happiness, the African philosophy of Ubuntu, and the Ecuadorian Buen Vivir²⁷) academic and former diplomat Dorine van Norren argues that

the SDGs [...] embody linear growth/results thinking which requires unlimited resource exploitation, and not cyclical thinking replacing growth with well-being (of all beings) [...]. They do not represent collective agency and sharing, implying that there is a need for ‘development as service’, to one another and to the Earth. Including these perspectives may lead to abolishing the word ‘development’ within the SDGs, replacing it by inter-relationship; replacing end-result-oriented ‘goals’ with process thinking; and thinking in cyclical nature, and earth governance, instead of static ‘sustainability’.²⁸

As the author details, the idea of Gross National Happiness sees culture as “central to identity, spiritual practices, society, economy, and sustainability”²⁹ while Ubuntu “embraces a cultural dimension in its respect for different value systems and diversity”³⁰ and Buen Vivir “strives at living in solidarity including with the earth, and people jointly formulating their goals of good living”.³¹

Van Norren’s approach reiterates the need to reflect critically on existing policy discussions regarding the SDGs.³² However, it is important to highlight that what is being suggested is not a rejection of the SDGs but, rather, to expand its paradigm of global governance by taking into account multiple value systems and unexplored pathways. This approach is increasingly echoed in global governance debates. To give an example, trade expert Thiago Kanashiro Uehara has affirmed that “economic relations and trade systems can only be deemed successful when regenerative, distributive, equitable and *plural*, thus respecting ecological and social boundaries, embodying equity in processes and outcomes.”³³ The work of these authors suggests that achieving a form of development that is sustainable for all requires recognising and creating space for untapped pathways, supporting a broader diversity of approaches.

²⁷ Dorine van Norren, “The Sustainable Development Goals viewed through Gross National Happiness, Ubuntu, and Buen Vivir,” *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 20 (2020):431–458 and van Norren, Dorine. *Development as service: A happiness, ubuntu and buen vivir interdisciplinary view of the sustainable development goals*. https://pure.uvt.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/19859816/Van_Norren_Development_18_12_2017.pdf Prisma Print, 2017 (2 October 2023).

²⁸ van Norren, “The Sustainable Development Goals,” 433.

²⁹ van Norren, “The Sustainable Development Goals,” 438.

³⁰ van Norren, “The Sustainable Development Goals,” 440.

³¹ van Norren, “The Sustainable Development Goals,” 443.

³² Due to the particularities of the available data, van Norren’s triple approach is not used as a framework to structure the analysis in the empirical part of this chapter. However, the author plans to apply it systematically in future research.

³³ Kanashiro Uehara, Thiago. *Trade system change: An interdisciplinary proposal for true sustainability and planetary health*. The Royal Institute of International Affairs/ Center for Open Science, 2023. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/osf/socarx/2f9da.html> (3 October 2023), 8, my emphasis.

Although this view of global sustainable development is consistent with the EU's internal position regarding cultural diversity,³⁴ not all actions currently taken by the EU echo these principles.

The SDGs in current EU cultural, media, and cultural relations policies: rhetoric versus practice

At the European level, research has confirmed that the SDGs are increasingly embedded in the definition of cultural and other strategies, policies, and programmes, albeit often implicitly. However, is their presence systematic – or is culture a missing pillar in EU policies that support cultural sustainability? A review of EU cultural policies argues that several of its goals, targets and indicators reflect “Cultural and Natural Heritage (SDG 11), Cultural Education (SDG 4), Cultural Diversity (SDG 4), Social Inclusion (SDG 10), Information Access (SDG 16), Cooperation with other institutions (SDG 17), Environment (SDG 13), Economic Growth (SDG 8) and Gender Equality (SDG 5).”³⁵ This being said, the authors note that several linkages remain “broadly theoretical and aspirational and have not put in practice yet”.³⁶ A report by Gijs de Vries echoes this point, arguing that there are several areas with “scope for greater alignment. Coordination and collaboration need to be further improved [...]. The present EU budget does not reflect culture's importance to society or the EU's ambitions.”³⁷ Indeed, there are multiple dimensions through which culture and the creative sectors can support the green transition by inspiring and implementing change, embedding sustainability in other industries, and by role-modelling sustainability.³⁸ However, they remain underutilised.

Recognising this gap and potential, a 2022 report from the European Commission on the cultural dimension of sustainable development echoes the call for “an EU policy approach on the cultural dimension of sustainable development that builds on a stronger and more consistent connection between cultural policies and SDGs' implementation across EU initiatives, programmes and actions”.³⁹ The report acknowledges the greening potential of cultural programmes and initiatives across a broad range of policy areas. Considering the focus of this chapter on the overlap between

³⁴ Nahtigal, Matjaz. and Dâmaso, Mafalda. “Active globalization and the EU as a strategic actor: toward more inclusive, decentralized and sustainable international development”. In *Progressivism after COVID: Experiences, Impulses, Ideas*, eds. Andreas Schieder, László Andor, Maria Maltschnig, Ania Skrzypek. Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Renner Institut (Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2023).

³⁵ Ferran Vila, Susanna, Miotto, Giorgia, Rodríguez, Josep Rom. “Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs: Strategies and Priorities in the European Union Countries”. *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 10 (2) (2021).

³⁶ Ferran Vila, Susanna, Miotto, Giorgia, Rodríguez, Josep Rom. *Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs*. p. 85.

³⁷ Vries, Gijs de. *Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: The Role of the European Union (2nd revised edition)*. https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/69719/ssoar-2020-vries-Culture_in_the_Sustainable_Development.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-2020-vries-Culture_in_the_Sustainable_Development.pdf. ifa Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2020 (2 October 2023), 6.

³⁸ Voices of Culture. *Culture & Creative Sectors & Industries driving Green Transition and facing the Energy Crisis: Brainstorming Report*. https://voicesofculture.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/VoC-Report_Greening-CCSI.pdf. Voices of Culture, 2023 (3 October 2023).

³⁹ European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the cultural dimension of sustainable development in EU actions* (Brussels, 2022), 2.

cultural policies and the EU's external action, the following paragraphs focus on four of such areas _ seen as particularly relevant in this context.

First, regarding the single market and industrial policies, the report mentions the European industrial strategy, which identifies the cultural and creative industries as one of 14 industrial ecosystems and has the goal of helping “cultural and creative industries recover and scale, while taking advantage of the green and digital transition”.⁴⁰ This focus on scalability is in tension with, second, the EU's international partnership and development policy, which is framed by the Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (discussed below). In the context of cultural relations actions, market considerations are secondary if relevant at all; rather, cooperation based on inclusive stakeholder engagement, addressing traditional power imbalances in this context (echoing the decolonial framework) is central. Such actions aim namely to provide “support to cultural policies and institutional environments [...]; support to cultural cooperation between Africa and Europe and to cultural heritage in Sub-Saharan Africa for sustainable development, peace, jobs and growth”.⁴¹ Third, this value-driven approach is echoed in the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement policy. The report highlights the fact how “the promotion of culture and intercultural dialogue should be used as drivers of cohesion and socio-economic development” and gives as an example of this approach the Eastern Partnership, whose “priority ‘Investing in people and knowledge’ identifies the following objectives: maximise the potential of the cultural and creative industries as engines for social economic development; strengthen cultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue”.⁴² Fourth, regarding environmental policy, the report notes that the “European Green Deal [...] aims to acknowledge the importance of bottom-up action, involving citizens from all generations and local communities in the transition to a resilient and climate-neutral society”.⁴³ The focus on bottom-up change is compatible with the culturally diverse approach to the SDGs discussed earlier.

As for the EU's cultural and media activities, they are framed by the Creative Europe (CE) Programme,⁴⁴ which is composed of three strands: Culture, Media, and Cross-Sectoral. CE's regulations allow for a selected number of non-EU participating countries to be involved: EFTA, acceding, candidate and potential candidate, and European Neighbourhood Policy countries.⁴⁵ In this

⁴⁰ European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament*, 20.

⁴¹ European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament*, 17.

⁴² European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament*, 17.

⁴³ European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament*, 23.

⁴⁴ The concepts of culture of the Culture Strand of Creative Europe and the EU's approach to Cultural Relations do not always overlap. This has been discussed in Dâmaso, Mafalda and Murray, Andrew. “The EU's Dualistic Regime of Cultural Diversity Management: The Concept of Culture in the Creative Europe program (2014–2019; 2021–2027) and in the Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2016–)”. *Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy* 1 (2023): 153–184.

⁴⁵ European Commission. List of non-EU Participating Countries in the Creative Europe Programme. https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/crea/guidance/list-3rd-country-participation_crea_en.pdf European Commission, 2024 (3 October 2024).

way, the programme is embedded into the EU's global action. Considering its budget – € 2.44 billion between 2021-2027 – its global importance is not to be discarded. The word *sustainable* is used frequently in its current (2021-2025) regulations; however, only those references in which the meaning of the term can be confidently connected to sustainable development and related to its global action are mentioned below.⁴⁶ The CE programme has two objectives: “to safeguard, develop and promote European cultural and linguistic diversity and heritage; to increase the competitiveness and the economic potential of the cultural and creative sectors, in particular the audiovisual sector.”⁴⁷ This is translated into three specific objectives, and sustainability is only mentioned explicitly in connection to the MEDIA strand, which is described as “promoting the competitiveness, scalability, cooperation, innovation, and *sustainability*, including through mobility in the European audiovisual sector”.⁴⁸

Specifically regarding the Culture Strand, and in light of its support for European Cooperation Projects, the document recognises that projects addressing “at least one of the following priorities: Audience, Social inclusion including health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, *Sustainability*, Digital, International dimension, Annual priority: Support to Ukrainian Cultural and Creative Sectors” will be given priority.⁴⁹ That is, these regulations recognise that the Culture Strand has the potential to contribute to the greening of the cultural sector and, more broadly, that culture can support sustainability. However, this is not translated into a goal or a condition.

Regarding the MEDIA strand, the grant Markets and Networking has the aim of supporting greening efforts. However, its focus is on markets for European audiovisual professionals and the promotional activities of European works, suggesting that the goal of expanding European markets is prioritised above the green transition of global audiovisual markets. This is evident in the results that are expected, namely: “to encourage the creation of networks of markets [...]; to promote sustainability and the greening process of the markets; to improve the competitiveness, circulation and promotion of European audiovisual works”.⁵⁰ Moreover, it is questionable to what extent growth-focused projects can pay equal attention to environmental sustainability and to social inclusion or even to cultural diversity and to culture's broader contribution to sustainable development – echoing the complexity of discussions regarding a new cultural goal or pillar. This reflects a broader imbalance in the priorities of the MEDIA strand – described as “promoting competitiveness, scalability, cooperation, innovation and *sustainability*”.⁵¹

⁴⁶ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023 amending Implementing Decision C(2021) 3563 on the financing of the Creative Europe Programme for 2021-2025 and the adoption of the work programmes for 2021, 2022, and 2023*. <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/document/2024-annual-work-programme-for-the-implementation-of-the-creative-europe-programme>. European Commission, 2023 (1 October 2023).

⁴⁷ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023*, 6.

⁴⁸ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023*, 6, my emphasis.

⁴⁹ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023*, 28, my emphasis.

⁵⁰ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023*, 51.

⁵¹ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023*, 51, my emphasis.

These findings are not surprising. A report examining the presence of greening projects in Creative Europe between 2014 and 2020 noted that such calls did not have any greening requirements in their legal basis, even though the green strategy was mentioned in the rationale behind some of them.⁵² There is a major gap between the EU's rhetoric around the SDGs and its implementation, as the Commission recognises: “in order for the Programme to contribute to the ambitious objectives of the European Green Deal, it is necessary to integrate this knowledge in the Programme [...] before embedding greening firmly as an objective”.⁵³ Rather, CE reflects “an incremental strategy on greening” which is evident in the fact that “since 2021 most MEDIA funding schemes attribute award criteria points for greening strategies” and in the requirement that projects financing entities such as markets and festivals adopt Greening Charters, as well as in funding for a carbon calculator for the audiovisual industry.⁵⁴

After reviewing the situation regarding the Culture and Media strands, it is important to briefly mention the EU's approach to cultural relations⁵⁵ – discussed in detail by Lamonica and Murray in this volume. The Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2016)⁵⁶ has several references to sustainability; notably, in relation to two of the five principles for action (“Promote cultural diversity and respect for human rights” and “Encourage a cross-cutting approach to culture”). Sustainable development is also mentioned in relation to two geographic frameworks (since replaced): the Development Cooperation Instrument, which had the goal of reducing poverty and fostering sustainable development, and the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, which framed the EU's cooperation with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. Moreover, the recognition of culture as “an engine for sustainable social and economic development” is one of the dimensions through which cultural cooperation is to be advanced. In practice, the EU proposes to support the development of cultural policies and to strengthen the cultural and creative industries, understood as “an important provider of quality jobs [that] often promote smart, sustainable and inclusive growth,” based on equal relations – echoing again the decolonial approach. That is, sustainability emerges in this document both as a form of impact of the cultural sector and as the justification for further cooperation, namely with countries in the Global South. The Commission supports cultural relations through grants provided to several networks and organisations (such as the European Union National Institutes for Culture), whose projects “aim to

⁵² European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Kruger, T., Mohamedaly, A., Muller, V. et al., *Greening the Creative Europe Programme – Final report* (publications Office of the European Union, 2023), 24.

⁵³ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023 amending Implementing Decision C(2021) 3563 on the financing of the Creative Europe Programme for 2021-2025 and the adoption of the work programmes for 2021, 2022, and 2023* (European Commission, 2023), 16.

⁵⁴ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023*, 18.

⁵⁵ For more, see European Commission, *International cultural relations*, n. d..

⁵⁶ European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations* (European Commission, 2016).

enhance the capacity of European cultural and creative sectors to nurture talents, to face common challenges, to innovate, to prosper and to generate jobs and growth”.⁵⁷ Sustainability is one of such challenges.

Although it not possible to list and analyse all relevant EU policies in this chapter, it is important to stress that the current Council Work Plan for Culture⁵⁸ identifies as a guiding principle the idea that “culture makes a significant contribution to sustainable development” and links it to three of its four priority areas: artists and cultural professionals: empowering the cultural and creative sectors; culture for the planet: unleashing the power of culture; culture for co-creative partnerships: strengthening the cultural dimension of EU external relations. However, sustainability is only explicitly connected to 2 of the 21 actions that are to be carried out: “stimulate the green transition of the cultural and creative sectors” and “climate action through culture, including the arts and cultural heritage”.⁵⁹ That is, while the Council acknowledges the broader linkages between culture and sustainable development, in practice the latter only emerges as a priority in programmes that are directly connected to the environmental dimension of the SDGs. The document reveals, yet again, a gap between official narratives and practice, and between the support of EU MS for the inclusion of culture in the post-SDGs on the one hand and their policies on the other hand. The underlying problem is the absence of a strategy to connect culture to the SDGs. As others have noted, “no solid strategic contributions have been made to determine how to implement the 2030 Agenda in the cultural dimension.”⁶⁰ The EU’s cultural strategy must be the object of a profound overhaul, “creating a holistic strategy where culture is a cross-cutting multidimensional aspect of sustainability”⁶¹ and thus, at least in the EU’s action, where it is perceived as having equal importance to the environmental, economic and social realms.

Complexity or confusion? Culture and media policies in EU-South Africa relations

Not only are the EU’s cultural, media, and cultural relations policies unbalanced across policy fields, supporting inconsistent understandings of the linkages between culture and development, but also, as this section suggests with a brief analysis of EU-South Africa (SA) relations,⁶² the translation

⁵⁷ European Commission, *Amending Implementing Decision of 14.9.2023 amending Implementing Decision C(2021) 3563 on the financing of the Creative Europe Programme for 2021-2025 and the adoption of the work programmes for 2021, 2022, and 2023* (European Commission, 2023), 31-32.

⁵⁸ European Union, *Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026* 2022/C 466/01 (European Union, 2023).

⁵⁹ The word *sustainable* also emerges in the context of the action “Stimulate the digital transformation of the cultural and creative sectors”. However, its meaning is ambiguous and not unequivocally connected to sustainable development.

⁶⁰ Ferran Vila, Susanna Miotto, Giorgia, Rodríguez, Josep Rom. “Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs: Strategies and Priorities in the European Union Countries”. *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 10 no. 2 (2021), 86.

⁶¹ Ferran Vila, Susanna Miotto, Giorgia, Rodríguez, Josep Rom. Cultural Sustainability and the SDGs, 86.

⁶² This analysis is the first step of a three-year analysis, which is taking place in the context of the aforementioned project REBOOT.

of such priorities in the relations between the EU and third countries can further reinforce this imbalance. Despite being the African continent's largest economy, the only African member of the BRICS group,⁶³ and an active member of the African Union, SA faces several challenges, including inequality and youth unemployment, a lack of skilled labour, and low foreign direct investment. Moreover, SA is the only African country with a Strategic Partnership with the EU. Considering its particularities and regional importance, as well as the EU's global priorities, it would make sense to embed cultural sustainability systematically in EU-SA relations. However, this is not yet the case.

Regarding Creative Europe, South Africa is not listed among the non-EU participating countries that can be involved as participants. Despite this constraint, CE activities have taken place in SA. However, unless project coordinators choose to give SA stakeholders a voice in decision-making, they are automatically placed in the position of recipients of projects to whose development they cannot systematically contribute as equals. This being said, SA can receive funding associated with International Cultural Relations, which is implemented through several EU funding streams (albeit, as mentioned, not as equal partners via CE). However, the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, mentioned before, which framed the EU's cooperation with ACP countries to address long-term needs and foster sustainable cultural industries, did not include South Africa. As for the post-Cotonou (known as Samoa) agreement, South Africa decided to leave the Organisation of African, Caribbean, Pacific States (OACPS) and is thus not covered by it.

The second framework through which the EU's approach to international cultural relations was originally implemented in ways that directly support sustainable development was the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). In 2021, it was replaced by the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), which is now the main instrument for the EU's external action with a budget of € 79,4 billion. Its objectives include "to support and foster dialogue and cooperation" and, at the global level, "to address [...] global challenges such as climate change".⁶⁴ Furthermore, the regulation establishing NDICI states that it supports the pursuit of the SDGs in several areas, namely human rights and democracy and civil society organisations, and stresses the need for inclusive, multi-stakeholder consultations throughout programming processes. Culture is mentioned as one of the areas of intervention to address global challenges; namely, by promoting initiatives for cultural diversity, supporting culture as an engine for social and economic development, reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage, supporting agreements for restitution, and supporting cultural cooperation. Although an evaluation of the implementation of these principles isn't possible yet, the inclusion of local stakeholders in the implementation of funded programmes,

⁶³ BRICS stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, a group that has since been expanded to include several other members.

⁶⁴ European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2021/947 Of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009* (European Union, 2021).

combined with the concern with cultural diversity and sustainable development, suggests that the NDICI may become an enabler of a holistic approach to the SDGs that includes culture, taps into under-explored pathways, and is inspired by a decolonial approach.

Alongside these programmes, trade is a crucial component of EU-South Africa relations; indeed, the former is the latter's main trading partner. A brief history thereof is warranted. Relations between SA and EU MS began to deepen in the post-Apartheid era, a process that has been described as a "slow strategic deepening".⁶⁵ Crucially, the Dialogue Facility (Technical Assistance for the EU-South Africa Dialogue Facility), which connects stakeholders from both sides to support policy dialogues and knowledge sharing, is developed in the framework of SA's Strategic Partnership with the EU. This initiative can be interpreted as reflecting an acknowledgement by the latter of the imbalance between its stated values and the limitations given to Global South countries by previous market-distorting trade agreements that limited their ability to strengthen their position in the global order. Indeed, the EU has gradually reviewed its protectionist stance towards African countries – albeit not without problems.⁶⁶ In any case, as mentioned earlier, the ACP agreement, which afforded preferential trade conditions, did not apply to SA. Rather, such policies were framed by the Trade, Development and Co-operation Agreement (TDCA), which established a free trade area covering 90% of bilateral trade, subsequently replaced by the EU–SADC Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) in 2016,⁶⁷ which applies to SA and five other countries and aims to eschew a "traditional donor-recipient relationship towards more equitable trade."⁶⁸ In this direction, the European Commission describes it as a "development-focused trade agreement, granting asymmetric access to the partners".⁶⁹ As article 13 states, the agreement focuses on "cooperation in supply-side competitiveness [which] includes [...] improvement of the trade and business environment" and several goods relevant to this discussion, such as video recording apparatuses, are included. Its aim is to support the economic development and global trade integration of its signatories through namely the provision of the most favourable regime of access to EU markets and the potential protection of sensitive products from full liberalisation. Although cultural and media services are not included, Article 73 states that an extension of the agreement's scope may be negotiated.

⁶⁵ Parshotam, Asmita, Helly, Damien. *South Africa, Europe and Africa: Building bridges across barriers?*. <https://ecdpm.org/work/south-africa-europe-and-africa-building-bridges-across-barriers>. ECDPM, 2016 (1 September 2023).

⁶⁶ Goodison, Paul. "EU Trade Policy & the Future of Africa's Trade Relationship with the EU." *Review of African Political Economy* 34, no.112 (2007): 247–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240701449646>.

⁶⁷ European Union, *Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the SADC EPA States, of the other part* (European Union, 2016).

⁶⁸ Parshotam, Asmita, Helly, Damien. *South Africa, Europe and Africa*, 6.

⁶⁹ European Commission. *European Commission. EPA SADC– Southern African Development Community*. European Commission, no date. <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/epa-sadc-southern-african-development-community> (5 November 2024).

This is important because audiovisual exchanges between the EU and SA take place in the context of its trade relations, which are regulated and supported at multiple levels and by different actors. A more extensive analysis of this relationship is currently in development; for now, one can note the existence of bilateral audiovisual treaties with several EU MS. Namely, the South Africa-France Co-production treaty, signed by the French National Center for Cinema and the South African National Film and Video Foundation in 2010, aims to support the mutual co-production of films that may harness cultural and economic exchanges between both countries. However, a study assessed its impact and discovered that, even though the development, co-production and marketing of feature films were supported by several financial schemes, SA remained “more a country of production services than feature films co-production in terms of international collaboration.”⁷⁰ More broadly, despite the aim to support a reversal of structural inequalities in executive production and co-production, “a pattern clearly emerges: films are of French initiative; all the shootings happened in South Africa; the post-production was done in Europe”.⁷¹ This example demonstrates that, without active policies guided by a holistic framework aimed at addressing structural inequities in the cultural and media relations between the EU and SA, power imbalances are prone to remaining unaddressed. This conclusion is likely to apply to other non-EU countries.

Conclusion

The European Union’s Green Deal (and its intended policy mainstreaming both within the EU’s borders and in its external action) recognises the global power afforded by the Single Market to shape regulations and norms globally. However, the EU’s embedding of the SDGs is unbalanced across policy fields and is yet to be connected systematically to its cultural and media policy action, both internally and externally. This reflects an emerging tension between the EU’s cultural policies on the one hand and the Union’s leading role in advocacy efforts supporting the inclusion of culture in the post-SDGs and, more broadly, in sustainable development discourse on the other hand. Moreover, while the EU’s policies increasingly reflect an agreement with the principles of partnership and fairness (as discussed by Joffe and Magkou in this volume), the practical application of this thinking to the EU’s global cultural sustainability agenda remains limited. The brief overview of EU-SA cultural relations included in this chapter also revealed an emerging concern with global structural imbalances that is yet, however, to be fully reflected in policy action.

To return to the chapter’s initial discussion, there is strong debate regarding the best approach to embed cultural sustainability in the post-SDGs. As mentioned before, the Pact for the Future was

⁷⁰ Rosant, Lucas. *Film South Africa – France Co-Productions Study in the Scope of the Co-Production Treaty*. <https://www.nfvf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/SA-France-Co-production-Review-2015.pdf> Melia Films, 2015 (3 September 2023), 12.

⁷¹ Rosant, Lucas. *Film South Africa*, 22.

adopted at the UN General Assembly (and thus, namely, by the EU MS) in 2024.⁷² This document will be the blueprint for the negotiation of the framework that will replace the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite intense lobbying, culture was not awarded a standalone reference. This makes the inclusion of an ambitious cultural goal in the post-SDGs unlikely – albeit not impossible. In any case, the EU will continue to act globally as a cultural actor through multiple policy fields and, therefore, with multiple and occasionally contradictory understandings of the relations between culture and sustainable development.

This being said, the coexistence of competing approaches to cultural sustainability in different policies and domains of action of the EU could also have positive consequences. By multiplying the theories of change that underlie those fields and policies, more space emerges for initiatives that reinforce trust and mutuality between equals – perhaps even based on non-western philosophies (as suggested by van Norren⁷³) –, fulfilling the aims of the EU’s approach to international cultural relations,⁷⁴ supporting a decolonial approach to Global North–Global South relations, and speeding up the green transition. In this view, the EU could develop a multilayered framework connecting cultural, media, international cultural relations, and trade policies to expand the timid linkages between culture and sustainability that are now likely to be established by the UN in the post-SDGs. That is, even if the current mismatch between rhetoric and action is a fundamental problem that should be addressed, the multidimensionality of the EU’s global action could allow the EU to acknowledge and support a variety of pathways linking culture and sustainable development and, in doing so, to support its partners in ways that are even more relevant to their own needs and aims. This holistic but differentiated strategy – echoing the “differentiated implementation”⁷⁵ of the EU’s approach to international cultural relations that others have called for – would accompany but also expand the policy pathways agreed by the signatories of the 2030 Agenda and its future replacement. However, nothing in the current situation suggests that the EU’s disjointed approach is the result of such a strategy.

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⁷² UN. Summit of the Future,

⁷³ van Norren, *The Sustainable Development Goals*.

⁷⁴ European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament*.

⁷⁵ Szucs, Tamas. *Beyond the Battle of Narratives: Global soft power dynamics and the EU’s strategic approach on international cultural relations in the context of the emerging new world order*. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/75787>. European University Institute, 2023 (14 February 2024).

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