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How do cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development? An interpretive review of the academic and practitioner literature

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Abstract

This paper explores how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development by combining insights from the academic and practitioner literature. Through an interpretive review of 81 academic articles and 33 practitioner documents, we identify two main findings: 1) three mechanisms – *connecting*, *caring*, and *empowering* – through

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which cultural institutions and festivals generate value across economic, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions; 2) four policy areas – *value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance* – across which policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue sustainability-oriented policies. By bridging scholarly and practitioner perspectives, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of culture in advancing sustainable development and offers relevant insights for researchers, policymakers, and cultural managers.

Questo studio esplora come le istituzioni culturali e i festival contribuiscono allo sviluppo sostenibile, integrando prospettive provenienti da studiosi e *practitioners*. Attraverso una review interpretativa di 81 articoli accademici e 33 documenti *practitioner*, abbiamo ottenuto due principali risultati: 1) tre meccanismi – *connecting*, *caring* ed *empowering* – attraverso cui le istituzioni culturali e i festival supportano le dimensioni di tipo economico, culturale, sociale e ambientale dello sviluppo sostenibile; 2) quattro aree di policy – *value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance* – rispetto alle quali i *policymaker* fanno leva su questi attori per promuovere interventi orientati alla sostenibilità. Collegando la prospettiva accademica a quella *practitioner*, lo studio approfondisce il ruolo complesso e multidimensionale della cultura nello sviluppo sostenibile, offrendo spunti utili per ricercatori, decisori politici e operatori culturali.

1. *Introduction*

Sustainable development is a multifaceted concept that encompasses four interconnected dimensions: economic, cultural, social, and environmental[1]. Over the past decade, it has gained increasing momentum, with both scholars and policymakers acknowledging the importance of balancing these four dimensions to promote development pathways that ensure the well-being of present and future generations[2].

This growing awareness has progressively shaped national and international policy agendas – most notably the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – resulting in the formulation of multiple strategies and frameworks aimed at addressing complex global challenges such as climate change, cultural heritage preservation, poverty in cities, and growing social and economic inequalities[3]. In parallel, a growing number of scholars have explored sustainable development through various theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches[4]. This body of research has investigated a wide

[1] Dessein *et al.* 2015; Duxbury *et al.* 2017; Purvis *et al.* 2019.

[2] Azmat *et al.* 2023; European Commission 2021, 2022a; Sakarya *et al.* 2012.

[3] The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that touch upon different realms deemed of foremost importance to promote sustainable development (see United Nations 2015).

[4] Berrone *et al.* 2023; Goralski, Tan 2020; Ike *et al.* 2019; Mio *et al.* 2020.

range of themes, from measurement frameworks and governance models to tools and policies supporting systemic change[5].

Within this broad and interdisciplinary field of inquiry, a substantial body of work has addressed the role of culture in advancing sustainable development[6]. More specifically, scholars have focused on how cultural actors (e.g., artists, institutions, and festivals) contribute to sustainable development through cultural production. Findings suggest that a diverse and inclusive cultural offer can generate multiple benefits for a given territory, laying the groundwork for more resilient local communities[7]. For instance, cultural engagement promotes participation across different demographic groups, including those from more fragile areas of society. Increased interaction with cultural institutions – such as museums, libraries, and theaters – enhances civic engagement, reinforces social cohesion, and supports both individual and collective well-being[8].

Other studies have emphasized how culture generates wide-ranging effects across all dimensions of sustainable development. For example, festivals not only generate positive economic outcomes by attracting tourists and creative talent and offering job opportunities[9] – particularly for young people – but also enhance a city's image and attractiveness, sustain collective pride, and contribute to the renewal of its perceived identity[10]. Similarly, cultural activities can promote environmentally sustainable behaviors, allow the regeneration of abandoned buildings, and promote the preservation of natural areas[11].

More recent studies highlight how cultural institutions and festivals have increasingly expanded their missions beyond traditional functions – such as heritage preservation or artistic production – to encompass educational, social, economic, and environmental functions. For instance, museums have complemented their traditional functions (i.e., preserving, exhibiting, and promoting cultural heritage) with services and activities that reinforce their image of accessible, inclusive, and research-oriented institutions[12]. Similarly, cultural

[5] Mio *et al.* 2020; Swain, Dobers 2025.

[6] Cerquetti, Montella 2021.

[7] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Hassanli *et al.* 2021.

[8] Chou *et al.* 2018; Wheatley, Bickerton 2017.

[9] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Black 2016; Hjalager, Kwiatkowski 2018; Leone, Montanari 2022.

[10] Getz 2009; Hassanli *et al.* 2021; Mair, Duffy 2018; Quinn *et al.* 2021.

[11] Aquilino *et al.* 2021; Ducros 2017; Ernst *et al.* 2016.

[12] Cerquetti, Montella 2021. The role of museums as cultural institutions that integrate a broad set of functions is reflected in ICOM's updated definition of museums approved in 2022 (see ICOM 2022). On the one side, ICOM's definition emphasizes the accessible and inclusive nature of museums; on the other, it captures the growing tendency of museums to be described – and describe themselves – as "research-oriented institutions" that define education, training, and knowledge sharing as integral to their core mission.

festivals have broadened the scope of activities by offering shared cultural experiences that explicitly pursue economic and social outcomes[13].

However, despite this growing recognition, cultural institutions and festivals continue to face significant challenges in sustaining their contribution to sustainable development. For instance, museums – especially smaller ones – may lack the capacity to design and implement education and outreach programs consistently across different territories[14]. Cultural festivals, in turn, can generate unintended negative effects, including pressure on local infrastructure, increases in the cost of living, or environmental degradation, especially in the absence of adequate governance and sustainability planning[15].

Furthermore, the specific mechanisms through which cultural initiatives contribute to sustainable development across economic, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions remain conceptually fragmented. While the role of culture as a driver of sustainable development is widely acknowledged, the mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals generate value across these dimensions are still difficult to define clearly.

To address this gap, we conducted an interpretive review aimed at offering an original framework that depicts how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development. An interpretive review is particularly well suited to this goal, as it combines induction and interpretation into general findings, thus going beyond mere cross-referencing[16]. This approach allows us to integrate diverse perspectives on the role of cultural institutions and festivals in advancing sustainable development, while providing a nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of this role.

From a methodological viewpoint, our review draws on a *corpus* of 81 academic articles (i.e., conceptual and empirical articles published in high-impact journals) and 33 practitioner documents (i.e., policy papers, research reports, and other institutional publications produced by international research institutions, intergovernmental bodies, and non-governmental organizations) that address the contribution of cultural institutions and festivals to sustainable development. Whereas academic articles enabled us to identify three mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development (*connecting*, *caring*, and *empowering*), practitioner documents allowed us to uncover four key policy areas across which policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue interventions aimed at sustainable development (*value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance*).

Our study makes three general contributions. First, it highlights how aca-

[13] For a review, see Wilson *et al.* 2017.
[14] For similar considerations, see McGhie 2020.
[15] Quinn 2006.
[16] Berrone *et al.* 2023; Seele *et al.* 2021.

demic articles and practitioner documents frame the contribution of cultural institutions and festivals to sustainable development and bridges both bodies of knowledge. Second, it shows that, although academic articles and practitioner documents address sustainable development's economic, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions, they tend to focus mainly on the social dimension, devoting less attention to the others (particularly the environmental one). Third, it offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted role of cultural institutions and festivals in advancing sustainable development, thus informing future research and guiding policy and practice aimed at enhancing this role.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we present our review methods. We then provide a descriptive overview of the academic articles and practitioner documents included in our review and illustrate our findings. Finally, we outline relevant future research avenues and our review's practical and policy implications.

2. *Review methods*

We conducted an interpretive review to explore how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development[17]. This type of review is particularly suited to our purpose for three main reasons. First, it helps synthesize heterogeneous and fragmented studies[18], as in the case of the extant literature on cultural institutions and festivals, which draws on multiple methods, concepts, and theoretical perspectives from different disciplines, such as organization studies, sociology, marketing, and urban and regional studies. Second, an interpretive approach is especially appropriate when the research goal goes beyond simple cross-referencing and seeks to provide clear and practical insights that «have an impact on audiences»[19] by integrating theoretical and empirical knowledge on a specific topic. Third, an interpretive approach makes it possible for accounts of «independent studies covering a phenomenon

[17] We deemed it important to distinguish between cultural institutions and festivals throughout the paper. Cultural institutions and festivals both strive to preserve and/or promote cultural heritage and favor artistic expression, but they do so according to a fundamentally different temporal logic. Cultural institutions are stable, place-based organizations operating all-year round – or, more generally, on a long-term basis – and emphasizing sustained cultural engagement and continuity in their activities (Ernst *et al.* 2016; Hedges 2021). In contrast, cultural festivals are temporary, time-bound events – often annual or otherwise recurring – designed to concentrate cultural experiences into a limited time window (Andersson *et al.* 2012; Arcodia, Whitford 2006).

[18] Berrone *et al.* 2023; Seele *et al.* 2021.

[19] Berrone *et al.* 2023, p. 321.

of interest by means of reviewers creating and associating their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the literature»[20]. Unlike systematic or integrative reviews, interpretive reviews synthesize knowledge by combining induction and interpretation into general findings[21].

Our review draws on both academic articles and practitioner documents. Regarding academic articles, we focused on peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual articles from high-impact journals to include validated knowledge that is more likely to be impactful for both theory and practice[22]. In doing so, we limited our database search to articles from journals ranked in the Academic Journal Guide (AJG)[23] published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools in 2021[24]. We adopted a multistep process to define our final review sample (see Fig. 1). As a first step, we searched for articles in the Scopus database using the following search string:

("cultural institution*" OR "cultural organization*" OR "performing art*" OR "ballet" OR "dance" OR "music*" OR "opera" OR "orchestra" OR "theat*" OR "museum*" OR "cultural heritage" OR "festival*" OR "archive*" OR "librar*") AND ("sustainability" OR "sustainable development" OR "SDG*" OR "public polic*" OR "sustainable polic*" OR "impact assessment" OR "social value*" OR "economic value*" OR "environmental value*" OR "cultural value*" OR "cultural impact*" OR "social impact*" OR "environmental impact*" OR "economic impact*" OR "societal challenge*" OR "grand challenge*" OR "wicked problem*" OR "CSR" OR "corporate social" OR "corporate responsibility" OR "corporate citizenship" OR "corporate accountability" OR "corporate philanthropy" OR "environmental disclosure*" OR "environmental accounting" OR "social accounting" OR "social screening").

We used Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) and wildcards (e.g., "museum*", "theat*", "librar*") to capture variations and synonyms across keywords. We selected keywords that had already been validated in previous reviews[25] and could help us account for the heterogeneity of cultural institutions and festivals (e.g., in terms of types of institutions and artistic fields[26]). We also considered a wide range of keywords to capture the multifaceted role of cultural institutions and festivals. For instance, we combined more general key-

[20] Kunisch *et al.* 2023, p. 17.

[21] Seele *et al.* 2021.

[22] Podsakoff *et al.* 2005; see also Berrone *et al.* 2023.

[23] The AJG combines peer review, expert judgments, and citation scores to rank journals based on their academic impact, differentiating across multiple fields (e.g., organization studies, marketing, urban and regional studies). The ranking is available at the following link: <https://charteredabs.org/academic-journal-guide>, 20.08.2025.

[24] For similar considerations, see Bembom, Schwens 2018; Komander, König 2024.

[25] See Azmat *et al.* 2023; Berrone *et al.* 2023; Komander, König 2024; Malik 2015.

[26] In defining the types of cultural institutions to be included in our review, we referred to performing arts organizations (theaters, opera houses, and dance organizations) and heritage organizations (museums, libraries, and archives) – see Castañer 2014; Dubini *et al.* 2020.

words related to sustainability, sustainable development, and public policies with more targeted keywords to explore how cultural institutions and festivals address sustainability-related challenges from different perspectives. These targeted keywords included terms relating to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate accountability, and corporate citizenship.

In this first step, we decided not to set any specific time frame for our database search to retrieve as many relevant articles as possible. This choice reflects the multifaceted role played by cultural institutions and festivals in advancing sustainable development, as well as the different types of institutions (and related academic debates) that could be potentially included in our review (e.g., museums, theaters, dance organizations, opera houses, libraries, and archives). We renewed the database search multiple times between February 2024 and March 2025 to ensure an updated review, retrieving an initial sample of 796 articles.

As a second step, we screened the retrieved articles for relevance. More specifically, we read titles and abstracts and excluded those articles that did not align with the focus of our review. We excluded articles that referred to culture, creativity, or the arts only in broader terms, without focusing on cultural institutions and festivals as a key part of their theoretical framework or empirical setting. As a result, we narrowed our sample to 211 articles.

We then conducted a full text screening of the retained articles, further narrowing our sample to 59 articles. In this step, we excluded any articles that did not explicitly address the contribution of cultural institutions and festivals to at least one of the four dimensions of sustainable development (i.e., economic, cultural, social, and environmental). Subsequently, we applied "snowballing techniques" by examining the reference lists of the 59 previously screened articles to identify additional high-impact studies that might have been missed in the initial database search. This combination of systematic database screening and snowballing (i.e., pursuing further studies through reference tracking) is recognized for maximizing the yield of relevant literature[27]. Through this process, we identified a final review sample of 81 articles[28] published in 29 academic journals (see Tab. 1). In defining our final sample, we followed a principle of "saturation", thus including articles that could offer adequate coverage and a good sense of how scholars address the local impacts of multiple types of cultural institutions and festivals as well as their contribution to sustainable development[29].

In parallel, we gathered policy papers, research reports, and other institutional documents that addressed the contribution of cultural institutions and

[27] Kunisch *et al.* 2023.
[28] Table 3 in the Appendix lists the academic articles included in the review.
[29] For similar considerations, see Kunisch *et al.* 2023.

festivals to socio-economic development at the urban, regional, or national level, as well as to the design of more sustainable policy interventions, urban regeneration initiatives, and social innovation processes. Between February 2024 and March 2025, we conducted multiple advanced searches on Google, using the same search string we deployed to gather academic articles. As with the academic articles, we chose not to set any specific time frame in this first step, aiming to retrieve as many relevant documents as possible. We initially retrieved 45 documents published by international research institutions, intergovernmental bodies, and non-governmental organizations such as UNESCO, ICOM, NEMO, OECD, the World Health Organization, and the European Commission. We then screened the retrieved documents for relevance, reaching a final sample of 33 documents[30]. We selected documents based on their sources' credibility and content, retaining only those that were centered on cultural institutions and festivals and were explicitly linked to sustainable development.

We analyzed the retained 81 academic articles and 33 practitioner documents to inductively explore how scholars and practitioners have addressed how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development. In doing so, we followed the iterative approach suggested by Corbin and Strauss[31]. Each author read the retained articles and documents autonomously and coded specific examples of activities devised by cultural institutions and festivals (e.g., live performances, exhibitions, community events, public talks, tourism- or welfare-oriented activities, educational and vocational training activities and programs), as well as how these activities could contribute to either economic, cultural, social, or environmental dimensions of sustainable development. We then shared and discussed our own codes in three sessions organized throughout the analytical process until we converged on a common interpretation of how academic articles and practitioner documents addressed our research topic. During this step, we also kept track of recurring patterns and connections across different articles and documents, highlighting complementarities or tensions among their findings[32].

Regarding academic articles, we identified six sub-mechanisms into which we could reconduct the previously coded activities: *nurturing social cohesion*, *mobilizing local identity*, *supporting health and well-being*, *fostering social inclusion*, *enhancing skills and capabilities*, and *raising awareness*. Then, we reconducted these different sub-mechanisms into three broader mechanisms that illustrate how cultural institutions and festivals effectively contribute to sustainable development: *connecting*, *caring*, and *empowering*. Regarding

[30] Table 4 in the Appendix lists the practitioner documents included in the review.
[31] Corbin, Strauss 1990.
[32] Denyer, Tranfield 2006.

practitioner documents, we identified four key policy areas where policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue interventions aimed at sustainable development: *value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance*. Finally, we analyzed the interplay between the mechanisms identified in the academic literature and the policy areas emerging from practitioner documents.

After providing a descriptive overview of the reviewed articles and documents, we illustrate the three mechanisms, four policy areas, and their interplay in the following section.

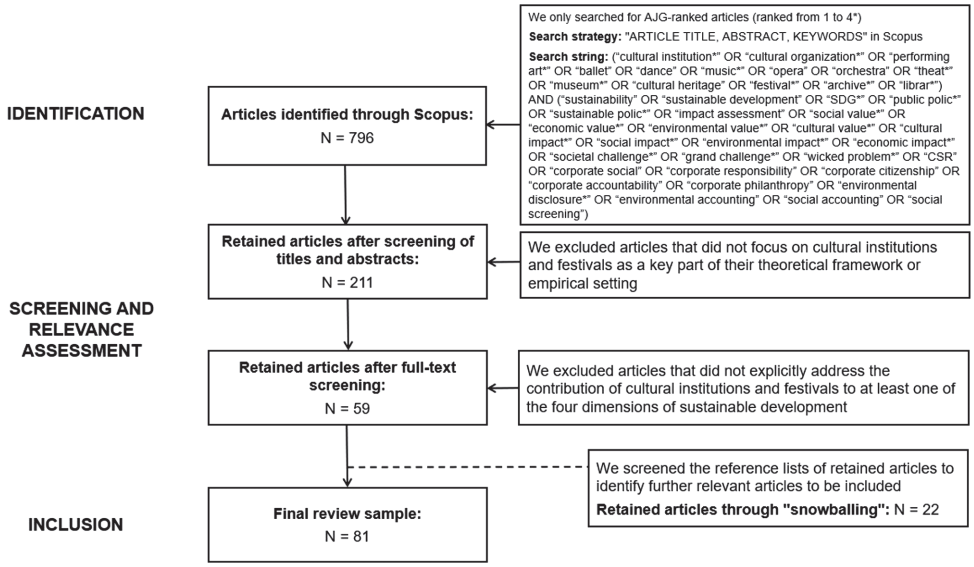

Fig. 1. PRISMA diagram illustrating the multistep process used to select the academic articles included in the review (Source: own elaboration)

Journal title	Number of articles
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	12
Event Management	7
International Journal of Heritage Studies	7
Journal of Rural Studies	7
Cities	5
International Journal of Cultural Policy	5
Museum Management and Curatorship	5
Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events	4

International Journal of Arts Management	3
International Journal of Event and Festival Management	3
Current Issues in Tourism	2
Journal of Cleaner Production	2
Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	2
Tourism Recreation Research	2
Culture and Organization	1
European Journal of Sustainable Development	1
European Planning Studies	1
Frontiers in Psychology	1
International Journal of Culture Tourism and Hospitality Research	1
Journal of Business Research	1
Journal of Convention & Event Tourism	1
Journal of Cultural Economics	1
Journal of Documentation	1
Local Economy	1
Poetics	1
The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society	1
Tourism Culture & Communication	1
Tourism Management	1
Tourism Management Perspectives	1

Tab. 1. Distribution of academic articles in the final review sample by journal (Source: own elaboration)

3. *Findings*

3.1. *Descriptive overview of academic articles and practitioner documents*

Tab. 2 and Fig. 2 illustrate the distribution of academic articles included in our final review sample, along with their annual citation counts and cumulative total citations per year. These articles were published between 2002 and 2025, with the number of articles increasing more significantly in the last decade; notably, nearly two thirds were published after 2015. This pattern reflects a growing scholarly interest, across multiple disciplines, in the contribution of cultural institutions and festivals to sustainable development.

From a methodological viewpoint, the academic literature is predominantly empirical (over 90%), primarily relying on qualitative methods. Approximately half of the articles focus on cultural festivals, while the remainder examine cultural institutions – either as a collective category or by analyzing specific types, primarily museums, and to a lesser extent, libraries, theaters, opera houses, and dance organizations. This distribution reflects broader developments within academic discourse. For instance, in disciplines such as organization studies, marketing, and urban and regional studies, articles examining the social impacts of cultural festivals and their contribution to sustainable development are well established, often alongside efforts to evaluate and monitor their economic impacts[33]. In contrast, scholarly attention to the contribution of cultural institutions to sustainable development has emerged more recently in such disciplines[34].

Regarding their geographical distribution, nearly 80% of the studies focus on specific national contexts, covering 30 countries. The United Kingdom (n = 20) and Australia (n = 12) are the most represented, followed by Canada (n = 5) and the United States (n = 4). Europe, North America, and Oceania dominate the sample, with comparatively limited representation from Africa, Asia, and South America, reflecting prevailing research trends that give more visibility to cultural actors operating in the Global North. Notably, no significant differences that could be attributed to specific national characteristics across the covered studies emerged.

The articles in the sample have collectively garnered approximately 4,300 citations, with citation rates increasing steadily over time (Tab. 2), further indicating a growing scholarly interest in the contribution of cultural institutions and festivals to sustainable development.

Year	Number of articles published per year (N = 81)	Cumulative total citations of articles per year (as in Scopus)	Citations per year (as in Scopus)
2002	2	555	555
2003	1	660	105
2004	1	782	122
2005	0	782	0
2006	2	1340	558
2007	2	1711	371
2008	1	1758	47

[33] Leone, Montanari 2022; Mair, Duffy 2018; Pasanen *et al.* 2009; Quinn *et al.* 2021.
[34] Azmat *et al.* 2018.

2009	4	1919	161
2010	3	2265	346
2011	1	2296	31
2012	3	2410	114
2013	3	2588	178
2014	1	2672	84
2015	4	2899	227
2016	5	3078	179
2017	6	3377	299
2018	9	3618	241
2019	5	3911	293
2020	3	3991	80
2021	8	4162	171
2022	9	4276	114
2023	1	4300	24
2024	5	4319	19
2025	2	4320	1

Tab. 2. Number of academic articles, cumulative total citations, and citations per year (Source: own elaboration)

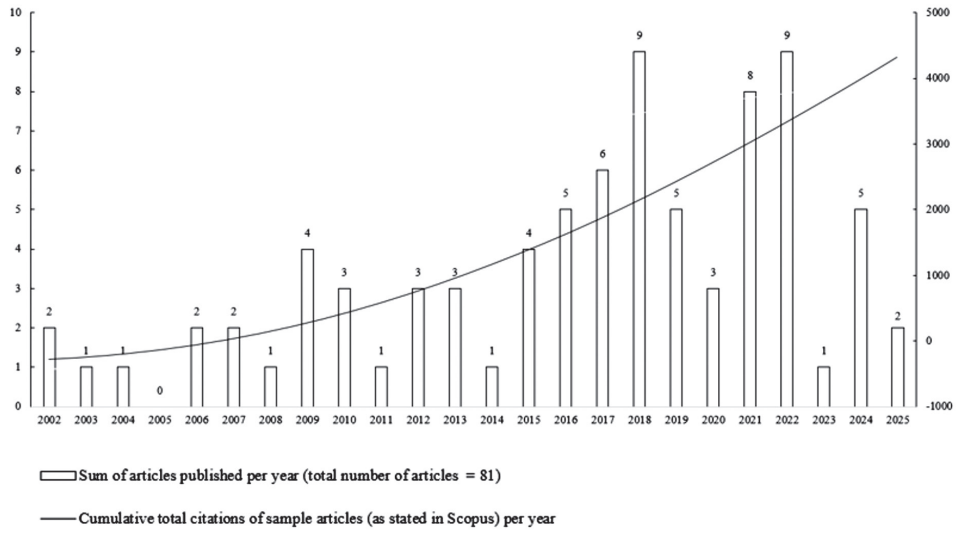

Fig. 2. Distribution and total cumulative citations of academic articles per year (Source: own elaboration)

Our analysis shows that practitioner documents primarily serve two purposes: (1) they report practical evidence of how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development at urban, regional, and national levels; (2) they provide recommendations and best practices to enhance the role of cultural institutions and festivals within policy interventions targeting sustainable development. Unlike the academic literature, which tends to focus more extensively on cultural festivals, practitioner documents place greater emphasis on cultural institutions, particularly in relation to urban planning and urban and regional development strategies and governance.

Both academic articles and practitioner documents reflect a growing recognition of the role of culture in sustainable development, offering complementary perspectives. Whereas academic articles elucidate the mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals directly contribute to sustainable development, practitioner documents shed light on how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue interventions aimed at sustainable development. Together, these two bodies of knowledge offer a comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development.

3.2. *Academic articles: how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development*

Our interpretive review explores how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development, combining insights from both academic articles and practitioner documents. Academic articles show the multifaceted nature of this contribution, which can be categorized into three distinct mechanisms: *connecting*, *caring*, and *empowering*.

The following paragraphs detail each of these mechanisms and their associated sub-mechanisms, illustrating the specific ways cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development.

3.2.1. *Connecting*

The *connecting* mechanism illustrates how cultural institutions and festivals strengthen interpersonal relationships, cultivate a sense of belonging, and enhance the attractiveness of cities and regions.

In line with this, the *connecting* mechanism includes two sub-mechanisms: *nurturing social cohesion* and *mobilizing local identity*.

3.2.1.1. Nurturing social cohesion

Cultural institutions and festivals nurture social cohesion by providing opportunities for community members to come together, share experiences, and

engage in both formal and informal interactions[35]. Cultural festivals, in particular, are often designed with the explicit purpose of fostering interaction across diverse population groups and overcoming barriers to cultural participation, thus leading to a greater sense of belonging and a more cohesive local community[36]. This can be achieved by staging exhibitions, live performances, and public talks in locally significant public spaces, which serve as "neutral environments" for social interaction and expose community members to diverse perspectives[37]. In doing so, such initiatives help build connections across social and cultural divides[38]. Similarly, many museums, theaters, and libraries have incorporated community-oriented events and programs to encourage interaction among people from varying age groups, ethnicities, or religious affiliations[39]. Participation in these initiatives can help individuals develop a sense of shared purpose and foster collaboration on creative projects that benefit their territories[40].

Cultural institutions and festivals also nurture social cohesion by directly involving residents in the design and organization of cultural activities. For instance, individuals who volunteer with cultural institutions often report a heightened sense of responsibility toward these institutions and the broader local community[41]. This sense of responsibility can, in turn, strengthen trust and cooperation, facilitating collective responses to local challenges[42]. However, while such strengthened ties can provide several benefits, they may also lead to the emergence of exclusionary dynamics by limiting engagement with those perceived as outsiders[43]. To mitigate this risk, cultural institutions and festivals should actively build connections within and beyond their immediate communities, avoiding the promotion of «strong internal bonds at the expense of inclusivity»[44]. As a result, they can play a dual role: reinforcing intra-community relationships (a "bonding" role) and connecting community members with external actors (a "bridging" role)[45].

3.2.1.2. Mobilizing local identity

Cultural institutions and festivals mobilize local identity by serving as key venues for celebrating and conveying shared traditions, meanings, and val-

[35] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Hassanli *et al.* 2021; Qu, Cheer 2021.
[36] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Black 2016; Mair, Duffy 2018.
[37] Leone, Montanari 2022.
[38] Dessein *et al.* 2015; Quinn *et al.* 2021.
[39] Hassanli *et al.* 2021; van der Hoeven, Hitters 2019.
[40] Lee 2013.
[41] Anwar-McHenry *et al.* 2018.
[42] Barzanò *et al.* 2020.
[43] Black 2016.
[44] *Ibidem.*
[45] Black 2016; Mair, Duffy 2018.

ues[46]. Beyond offering entertainment and recreational opportunities, festivals help sustain collective pride and renew the perceived identity of a city or region[47]. Accordingly, they are frequently conceived as «community celebrations [...] representative of the many aspects of the social and cultural fabric of the community in which they are celebrated»[48]. These events seek to enhance residents' understanding of local cultural practices, strengthen identification with the local community, and reinforce shared cultural meanings and narratives[49].

Ducros (2017) and Bowers (2016) argue that ecomuseums in rural areas preserve and transmit cultural and natural heritage to both residents and tourists. In doing so, they transform local heritage into a resource that enhances territorial attractiveness and contributes to a more positive economic outlook, while remaining anchored in local identity[50]. Cultural institutions can therefore contribute to sustainable development in rural areas and help bridge the urban-rural divide[51]. Furthermore, both cultural institutions and festivals support local artists and creative professionals, helping them gain recognition as important facets of local identity[52].

However, tensions arise from global phenomena affecting many cities and regions, such as overtourism and gentrification, which risk eroding local identity and undermining culture's contribution to sustainable development. These dynamics may prompt some institutions and festivals to prioritize a market-driven logic in how they organize their services and activities, thus giving precedence to tourist appeal or commercial success over cultural and social goals[53]. As Aquilino and colleagues (2021) suggest, when festivals are primarily framed as tools for tourist attraction, the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage may be neglected, and the rich cultural meanings associated with a community's identity diluted – or even reconfigured – to appeal to tourists.

In parallel, gentrification processes may displace local artists, craft workers, and informal arts groups to more peripheral urban areas, weakening the social and cultural fabric of central neighborhoods[54]. As a result, cultural festivals, museums, theaters, and other institutions operating in gentrifying areas may struggle to engage community members and cultural actors, as they risk being perceived as less authentic or representative of local identity[55].

[46] Andersson *et al.* 2012; Aquilino *et al.* 2021; Simões, Almeida Carreira 2012.
[47] Hassanli *et al.* 2021; Leone, Montanari 2022.
[48] Arcodia, Whitford 2006, p. 13.
[49] Black 2016; Hassanli *et al.* 2021.
[50] Ducros 2017; see also Bowers 2016.
[51] Aquilino *et al.* 2021; Gamble 2022; Hjalager, Kwiatkowski 2018; Mahon *et al.* 2018.
[52] Leone, Montanari 2022.
[53] Madandola, Boussaa 2023.
[54] Andres 2011.
[55] Madandola, Boussaa 2023.

To address these challenges, cultural institutions and festivals should strike a balance between commercial and community-oriented objectives[56]. By doing so, they can ensure economic viability and promote cultural participation across all population segments, effectively integrating a focus on the cultural dimension of sustainable development with attention to its economic and social dimensions.

3.2.2. *Caring*

The *caring* mechanism illustrates how cultural institutions and festivals improve access to welfare provision, mitigate exclusionary dynamics, and favor the inclusion of individuals and groups from more fragile areas of society.

In line with this, the *caring* mechanism includes two sub-mechanisms: *supporting health and well-being* and *fostering social inclusion*.

3.2.2.1. Supporting health and well-being

Cultural institutions and festivals are increasingly recognized for their contribution to people's health and well-being. Several studies associate cultural participation with a wide range of positive outcomes, including stress reduction, improved mental health, enhanced self-esteem, and greater overall life satisfaction[57]. In this regard, Wood and Smith (2004) highlight culture's «therapeutic in the broadest sense» quality[58], underscoring its positive impact for both artists and audiences. Cultural institutions and festivals also provide opportunities for artistic expression that promote personal growth, vitality, and social connection[59]. These benefits are especially valuable for younger individuals, who may leverage such experiences to improve their social skills and develop a stronger sense of self and identity[60].

In rural areas and small-sized cities, where access to public health services is more limited, cultural institutions are increasingly expected to complement their traditional functions with social- and welfare-oriented services and activities[61]. Through such efforts, they aim to reduce social isolation and promote pro-social behaviors[62]. Public libraries, in particular, have played an important role in this regard, actively working to overcome barriers to cultural participation in underserved territories and contributing to the health and well-being of the communities they serve[63].

[56] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Hjalager, Kwiatkowski 2018; Quinn 2006; Robertson *et al.* 2009.
[57] Wheatley, Bickerton 2017.
[58] Wood, Smith 2004, p. 100 (quoted by Wheatley, Bickerton 2017, p. 28).
[59] Azmat *et al.* 2018; Wood, Dashper 2021.
[60] Wood, Dashper 2021.
[61] Wheatley, Bickerton 2017.
[62] Anwar-McHenry *et al.* 2018; Black 2016; Mair, Duffy 2018.
[63] Colibaba, Skinner 2019.

Cultural institutions and festivals can also engage local authorities, third-sector organizations, and companies in social innovation initiatives to address community needs unmet by traditional welfare systems or market-based solutions[64]. Furthermore, cultural institutions can promote the well-being of artists and creative professionals by advocating for improved social protection, job security, and work-life balance[65]. Another way cultural institutions contribute to individual and collective well-being is by supporting openness and tolerance for any form of diversity[66]. Finally, as Courchesne and colleagues[67] note, delivering services and activities focused on health and well-being also benefits cultural institutions themselves as they can improve their image and strengthen their relationships with donors, sponsors, and visitors.

3.2.2.2. Fostering social inclusion

Cultural institutions and festivals foster social inclusion by providing individuals and groups from more vulnerable segments of society with "safe" and "nonjudgmental" spaces for social interaction and for expressing artistic talent and cultural values[68]. Recent studies have emphasized the potential of cultural festivals to «promote equality, cultural diversity, inclusion, good community relations, and human rights [...] and foster civic norms that support the capacity for living with difference in otherwise segmented cities»[69]. Therefore, cultural festivals can build bridges across different cultural and social groups, challenging stereotypes, promoting intercultural understanding, and encouraging the sharing and hybridization of artistic practices[70].

Cultural institutions, too, are under growing scrutiny regarding how they embed a social purpose into their activities and act as agents of inclusion at both individual and societal levels[71]. Scholars note that many institutions pursue this purpose by co-creating exhibitions, workshops, and other cultural and educational activities in collaboration with community members[72]. These initiatives can bring together people from different age groups, religious affiliations, and national origins, responding to their specific needs[73]. In parallel, many museums have sought to promote gender equality in the cultural sectors by showcasing the work of female artists and appointing women to curatorial and leadership

[64] Kiddey 2018; Lucchi *et al.* 2024.
[65] Mahon *et al.* 2018.
[66] Anwar-McHenry *et al.* 2018; Chou *et al.* 2018; Quinn *et al.* 2021; Wood, Dashper 2021.
[67] Courchesne *et al.* 2017.
[68] Azmat *et al.* 2018; Hassanli *et al.* 2021.
[69] Quinn *et al.* 2021, p. 2.
[70] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Black 2016; Hassanli *et al.* 2021.
[71] Azmat *et al.* 2018.
[72] Kiddey 2018; Qu, Cheer 2021; Santos Silva *et al.* 2018.
[73] Azmat *et al.* 2018; Barron, Leask 2017.

roles[74]. Opera houses and theaters have likewise demonstrated their potential to foster social inclusion by involving children, adolescents, older people, or people with disabilities both as performers and audience members[75].

Despite these efforts, cultural institutions and festivals continue to face persistent challenges related to limited financial resources or a lack of dedicated staff[76]. They may also encounter difficulties establishing partnerships and networks with public and private actors[77]. Finally, museums are sometimes still perceived as "elitist" by specific population groups due to the nature of their collections or programming, which may limit their ability to engage broader audiences and fully promote social inclusion[78].

3.2.3. *Empowering*

The *empowering* mechanism illustrates how cultural institutions and festivals improve the skills, capabilities, and awareness of individuals, groups, and organizations, enabling them to address sustainability-related challenges more effectively.

In line with this, the *empowering* mechanism includes two sub-mechanisms: *enhancing skills and capabilities* and *raising awareness*.

3.2.3.1. Enhancing skills and capabilities

Cultural institutions and festivals promote skill development for younger individuals (e.g., students, researchers, early-career professionals, and early-stage entrepreneurs) alongside lifelong learning opportunities for diverse population segments[79]. In recent years, many museums, libraries, and other institutions have organized seminars, workshops, and courses aimed at helping students, researchers, and community members in general develop creative skills[80]. Some institutions also support emerging artists and creative entrepreneurs and professionals through vocational training and mentoring focused on organizational, entrepreneurial, and networking skills[81]. As a result, they help people working in the cultural sectors structure and manage the early stages of their careers or the launch of new cultural enterprises.

By offering education and training, cultural institutions and festivals also help diffuse specialized artistic and craft skills among younger generations, ensuring the survival of culturally significant practices[82]. In doing so, they

[74] Duxbury *et al.* 2017.
[75] For similar considerations, see Guachalla 2017.
[76] Hedges 2021; Zutshi *et al.* 2021.
[77] Andres 2011; Bell, Jayne 2010; Gamble 2022.
[78] For similar considerations, see Azmat *et al.* 2018.
[79] Giliberto, Labadi 2022; Mair, Duffy 2018; O'Sullivan, Jackson 2002.
[80] Ernst *et al.* 2016; Giliberto, Labadi 2022.
[81] Mahon *et al.* 2018; van der Hoeven, Hitters 2019.
[82] Giliberto, Labadi 2022.

integrate heritage preservation with the development of professional skills and capabilities required to sustain artistic or craft-based careers. Many museums and festivals have also begun promoting lifelong learning through several initiatives, such as exhibitions, live performances, and community engagement programs, designed to expand local knowledge on various sustainability-related topics[83]. Through these initiatives, they can deepen the understanding of environmental challenges within their local communities, simultaneously strengthening people's skills and capabilities and positively influencing their behaviors and attitudes toward environmental sustainability[84].

Cultural institutions and festivals often collaborate with local authorities, universities, and cultural associations to position themselves as alternative venues for knowledge sharing and research about sustainability-related topics at both urban and regional levels[85]. This is particularly evident in museums, which have increasingly integrated education, training, and knowledge dissemination into their core mission alongside preserving, exhibiting, and promoting cultural heritage[86]. However, museums still face significant challenges, such as constrained budgets, limited expertise, and low staff motivation, which may hinder the design, delivery, and outward communication of educational, training, and knowledge dissemination activities[87].

3.2.3.2. Raising awareness

Cultural institutions and festivals contribute to raising awareness of sustainability-related challenges and fostering active engagement – both individual and collective – toward sustainable development[88]. For instance, cultural institutions and festivals can raise awareness through thematic exhibitions, public talks, seminars, and workshops that address pressing issues such as climate change, economic and social inequalities, and socio-political polarization. These initiatives stimulate ideas, dialogue, and collective sensemaking across individuals and groups, encouraging community driven responses to challenges affecting cities and regions[89].

Many institutions and festivals further empower local communities to advance sustainable development, for instance, by inspiring them to advocate for and participate in preserving locally based cultural and natural heritage[90]. They can also help individuals and groups confront ongoing exclusionary dy-

[83] Barzanò *et al.* 2020; Black 2016.
[84] Lucchi *et al.* 2024; Mair, Laing 2013.
[85] McGhie 2020.
[86] Ernst *et al.* 2016; Song *et al.* 2024; Wickham, Lehman 2015.
[87] McGhie 2020.
[88] Giliberto, Labadi 2022; Lucchi *et al.* 2024.
[89] Andres 2011; Dessein *et al.* 2015.
[90] Ducros 2017.

namics. For instance, Azmat and colleagues (2018) show that museums can promote intercultural exchange and reduce polarization by co-designing arts-based initiatives with companies. Similarly, Ernst and colleagues (2016) argue that involvement in arts-based initiatives raises companies' awareness of social and environmental challenges and prompts more transparent and responsible corporate practices.

In addition, many cultural institutions have introduced initiatives to raise awareness among artists, creative professionals, and residents of the need to foster greater inclusivity and accessibility within cultural experiences[91]. However, focusing on climate change awareness initiatives, McGhie (2020) cautions that such initiatives often lack a clear emphasis on practical actions and measurable outcomes, which are crucial for supporting long-term engagement and concrete action.

3.3. *Practitioner documents: how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue interventions aimed at sustainable development*

Whereas academic articles enabled us to identify the mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals directly contribute to sustainable development, practitioner documents provided insights into how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue interventions aimed at sustainable development. Together, these two bodies of knowledge offer a comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development.

Specifically, practitioner documents show that policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals across four key policy areas: *value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance*. These documents also illustrate how each policy area encompasses multiple SDGs, further explaining how cultural institutions and festivals can enable the achievement of a broad set of goals (see Table 5 in the Appendix).

The following paragraphs detail each of the four policy areas we identified by reviewing practitioner documents.

3.3.1. *Policy areas*

3.3.1.1. Value creation

The *value creation* policy area illustrates how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to promote sustainable economic growth, enhance territorial attractiveness, and stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship. In this regard, cultural institutions and festivals can be integrated into tourism

[91] Song *et al.* 2024.

development strategies and broader policy frameworks targeting professionals and entrepreneurs in the cultural sectors[92]. Cultural institutions and festivals are frequently portrayed as local development "cornerstones" capable of improving the image of cities and regions, reinforcing place identity, and generating new employment and business opportunities[93].

Simultaneously, cultural institutions and festivals emerge as policy tools for regenerating abandoned or underused historical buildings and former industrial sites. These urban regeneration initiatives seek to create vibrant cultural quarters that attract and retain creative talent while improving the image of economically marginalized neighborhoods[94]. However, the success of these initiatives depends on the ability of local authorities to balance the influx of new creative entrepreneurs and professionals, residents, and tourists with the need to preserve the existing social and cultural fabric of areas undergoing transformation[95]. When this balance is achieved, cultural institutions and festivals can be effectively leveraged to foster sustainable economic growth in both smaller and larger cities.

Finally, in recent years, museums and other cultural institutions have also been mobilized as platforms for collaboration among local stakeholders, particularly within innovation and knowledge transfer initiatives [96].

3.3.1.2. Equity and resilience

The *equity and resilience* policy area highlights how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to incorporate the needs of diverse individuals and groups – particularly those from more vulnerable segments of society – into policy interventions. In doing so, they enhance local communities' capacity to respond to sustainability-related challenges.

For instance, policy interventions aimed at social inclusion often engage museums in designing and delivering services, activities, and programs to foster dialogue and mutual understanding among individuals and groups from different social and cultural backgrounds[97]. At the same time, there is increasing policy recognition of the contribution of cultural participation to individual and collective health and well-being[98]. This has led to a growing number of policies that integrate culture into welfare provision, for instance through the allocation of resources to arts-on-prescription schemes. These schemes constitute a form of culture-based social prescribing in which healthcare or

[92] OECD/ICOM 2019; OECD 2022a, 2022b, 2022c.
[93] Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2022; OECD 2022c, 2022d; UCLG 2016; UNESCO 2019.
[94] OECD/ICOM 2019; OECD 2022a; UCLG 2018a, 2018b.
[95] UNESCO/World Bank 2021.
[96] European Commission 2022a, 2022b; OECD/ICOM 2019.
[97] NEMO 2024.
[98] Fancourt, Finn 2019.

community professionals formally refer people to structured arts and cultural activities as part of their care pathway, with the aim of improving mental health, reducing loneliness, and strenghtening social connections[99].

Within this framework, policymakers also frame cultural institutions and festivals as crucial venues for identity formation among young people, supporting their personal growth and ability to build relationships with others[100]. This role is particularly relevant in rural areas and lagging regions, where cultural participation can help mitigate social isolation and foster stronger community ties through shared experiences[101].

In addition, a growing number of policy initiatives aimed at reducing structural inequalities support museums and other cultural institutions in developing programs that ensure fair representation of marginalized individuals and groups within the social and cultural fabric of cities and regions[102].

3.3.1.3. Education and training

The *education and training* policy area describes how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to promote capacity building. In recent years, many local education offices have worked alongside museums and libraries to co-design hands-on programs that complement traditional school curricula and weave artistic and creative skills into the teaching of STEM subjects (i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)[103].

Local and regional authorities also fund cultural activities and community-oriented programs that spur collective reflection on local issues[104]. Within this scenario, they leverage museums to shift attitudes and inspire action among community members on pressing economic, cultural, social, and environmental challenges[105]. At the same time, policymakers echo growing calls for museums to boost staff digital, relational, and communication skills[106].

These developments suggest that the growing commitment of cultural institutions and festivals toward education is aligned with – and reinforced by – policymakers' efforts to define culture as a strategic component of their interventions.

[99] Napier *et al.*, 2017. For a review on the impact of arts-on-prescription schemes on health and well-being, see Jensen *et al.* 2024.

[100] Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021.

[101] UCLG 2018b.

[102] European Commission 2022a, 2022b; UCLG 2016; UNESCO 2019.

[103] This reflects the STEAM approach, which integrates the arts into STEM subjects – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics – to promote interdisciplinary forms of learning and foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity (see also OECD 2022d).

[104] OECD/ICOM 2019.

[105] NEMO 2022.

[106] OECD 2022b.

3.3.1.4. Participatory governance

The *participatory governance* policy area describes how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to promote the active engagement of diverse population segments and local stakeholders in the design and implementation of policy interventions. Cultural institutions and festivals are increasingly valued for their capacity to foster civic participation and facilitate collaboration among residents, businesses, local authorities, universities, and third-sector organizations. Accordingly, policymakers often embed them in policy interventions as "community hubs" that bring together a broad range of actors and support the development of cooperative networks[107].

These networks may span multiple sectors, contributing to the formation of dynamic local ecosystems capable of addressing the localized impacts of complex global challenges[108]. Museums and libraries, in particular, can play a key role in attuning the implementation of the SDGs with the specific needs and priorities of local communities[109]. Policymakers leverage the strong embeddedness and deep understanding of community needs of such institutions to translate higher-level policy goals, strategies, and frameworks into place-based interventions[110]. Cultural institutions and festivals contribute to these interventions through various participatory practices such as organizing calls for ideas, living labs, or hackathons that engage residents and other local stakeholders in co-designing context-sensitive solutions. These initiatives can also create feedback loops, where cultural institutions and festivals give policymakers insights into the effectiveness and reception of their policy interventions[111].

3.4. *Bridging academic articles and practitioner documents*

The last step of our analysis consisted of highlighting the interactions between the mechanisms identified in the academic literature (i.e., *connecting*, *caring*, and *empowering*) and the policy areas emerging from practitioner documents (i.e., *value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance*). This step allowed us to bridge theoretical insights and policy practices by mapping how each mechanism supports one or more policy areas.

The resulting framework (see Fig. 3) offers an integrated perspective on how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development, showing the policy areas that each mechanism primarily underpins.

[107] Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021.
[108] OECD 2022b.
[109] Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2022; McGhie 2023.
[110] UCLG 2018a.
[111] NEMO 2024.

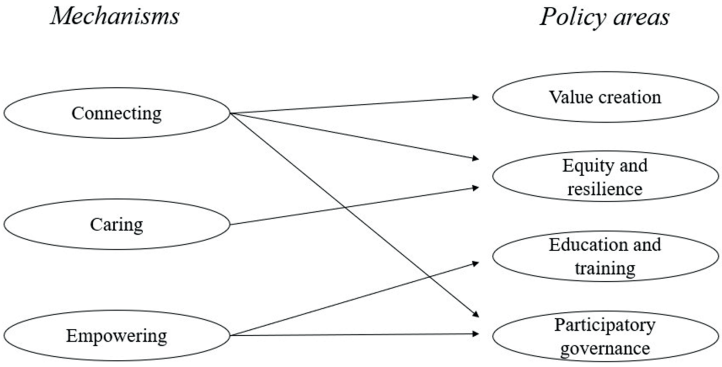

Fig. 3. Links between mechanisms and policy areas (Source: own elaboration)

The *connecting* mechanism primarily underpins three policy areas: *value creation*, *equity and resilience*, and *participatory governance*. When cultural institutions and festivals mobilize local identity, they contribute to policy interventions oriented toward value creation by driving urban regeneration, boosting territorial attractiveness, and expanding employment and business opportunities. As a result, culture becomes a key economic resource within local contexts. Furthermore, the capacity of cultural institutions and festivals to foster social cohesion reinforces policy efforts aimed at building more equitable and resilient local communities. Stronger social cohesion also facilitates participatory governance by uniting residents, companies, and third-sector organizations around a shared purpose, motivating them to tackle common challenges together.

The *caring* mechanism primarily underpins the policy area of *equity and resilience*. By fostering social inclusion, cultural institutions and festivals support policy interventions that address structural inequalities and broaden access to culture across all segments of society. Cultural institutions and festivals also support health and well-being at both individual and societal levels, further promoting equity and resilience within their local communities.

The *empowering* mechanism primarily underpins two policy areas: *education and training* and *participatory governance*. Through seminars, workshops, courses, and research-oriented activities, cultural institutions and festivals emerge as alternative learning spaces that policymakers leverage to promote skill development and lifelong learning across various domains and population segments. As such, many institutions and festivals have contributed to policy interventions focused on education and learning in recent years. By enhancing skills and capabilities and increasing awareness of sustainability-related challenges, cultural institutions and festivals also stimulate civic engagement and collective action; therefore, they have the potential to inform and support policy efforts oriented toward participatory governance.

4. *Conclusion*

Cultural institutions and festivals are increasingly important in advancing sustainable development. Research has shown that they can contribute to sustainable development by engaging community members in initiatives that improve health and well-being at both individual and societal levels[112]. As a result, cultural institutions and festivals promote access to culture across diverse demographic groups, including those from more fragile areas of society[113]. Recent studies have also highlighted their role in delivering positive economic outcomes by attracting tourists and creative talent and offering job opportunities in their local contexts[114]. Simultaneously, cultural institutions and festivals help renew the image and attractiveness of cities and regions[115], sustain collective pride[116], and enhance civic engagement[117]. They also support the regeneration of abandoned buildings and can positively influence people's behaviors and attitudes toward environmental sustainability[118]. Thanks to this wide range of positive outcomes, cultural institutions and festivals are increasingly recognized for their potential to contribute to all four dimensions of sustainable development (i.e., economic, cultural, social, and environmental).

Despite this growing recognition, the specific mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals generate value across the four dimensions of sustainable development remain conceptually fragmented. To address this gap, we conducted an interpretive review combining insights from academic articles and practitioner documents to offer an original framework to depict how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development. In particular, whereas academic articles enabled us to identify three mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development (*connecting*, *caring*, and *empowering*), practitioner documents allowed us to uncover four key policy areas across which policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue interventions aimed at sustainable development (*value creation*, *equity and resilience*, *education and training*, and *participatory governance*).

By analyzing the academic and practitioner literature, our review also identifies several blind spots in the current debate, pointing to promising avenues for future research. Future studies should attempt to uncover the potential in-

[112] Colibaba, Skinner 2019; Wheatley, Bickerton 2017.
[113] Azmat *et al.* 2018; Hassanli *et al.* 2021; Song *et al.* 2024.
[114] Arcodia, Whitford 2006; Black 2016; Hjalager, Kwiatkowski 2018; Leone, Montanari 2022.
[115] Hassanli *et al.* 2021; Leone, Montanari 2022.
[116] Getz 2009; Hassanli *et al.* 2021; Mair, Duffy 2018; Quinn *et al.* 2021.
[117] Wheatley, Bickerton 2017.
[118] Ducros 2017; Ernst *et al.* 2016; Lucchi *et al.* 2024; Mair, Laing 2013.

terconnections among the three mechanisms identified in this study. Although our review of academic articles identified three specific mechanisms through which cultural institutions and festivals contribute to sustainable development, we were not able to trace interaction effects among them. Future research could also investigate the underlying factors that make certain types of cultural institutions more (or less) likely to activate specific mechanisms. We also call for studies to explore in greater depth how cultural institutions and festivals can function as local "hubs" that favor collaboration, cross-sectoral exchange, and co-creation among diverse local stakeholders, such as residents, local authorities, companies, universities, and actors operating in the cultural sectors. Cultural institutions and festivals have the potential to intermediate relationships among this broad set of stakeholders by nurturing social cohesion, inclusion, and a greater sense of belonging[119]. As a result, they may assume a "semi-public" role and emerge as an important component of the "social infrastructure" in their territories, helping address pressing local issues[120]. Future research could also examine how cultural institutions and festivals facilitate the alignment of policy goals set at higher levels (e.g., national or supranational) with the needs articulated by community members and other local stakeholders. Although some academic articles and practitioner documents have explored this issue[121], further work is needed.

We also call for research that investigates the internal organizational practices enabling cultural institutions and festivals to contribute to sustainable development. This includes studying their coordination and communication processes, as well as the skills and capabilities they require to integrate new services and activities and generate value across various dimensions of sustainable development. Furthermore, future studies should consider the role of informal cultural actors – such as artist collectives, informal arts groups, and cultural associations – whose contribution to sustainable development remains underexplored. For instance, it would be important to study how these informal actors complement the multifaceted role of more formalized cultural institutions, especially when the latter struggle to meet the needs of specific population segments and local contexts. We also call for further research into how cultural institutions and festivals contribute to the environmental dimension of sustainable development, which has been overlooked compared to other dimensions, particularly the social one. Finally, future studies could focus on how cultural institutions and festivals balance cultural and social goals with

[119] Getz 2009; Hassanli *et al*. 2021; OECD/ICOM 2019.

[120] The term "social infrastructure" relates to «the structures and practices that people create so as to enable social connections, social togetherness and social spaces come into being. These structures may take material or built forms but they may also be immaterial networks, associations and linkages that enable people to come together» (Quinn 2025, p. 2).

[121] Andres 2011; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021.

economic objectives, especially when public funding for culture is limited. In this regard, exploring how they mobilize companies to strike such a balance would be interesting, for instance in the context of arts-based initiatives and CSR-related practices.

Our review also holds relevant practical and policy implications. It shows how policymakers leverage cultural institutions and festivals to pursue policy interventions aimed at sustainable development. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of adopting an "ecosystemic" approach in designing and implementing public policies – i.e., one that rests on the active engagement of cultural institutions and festivals in policy efforts as local "nodes" that connect diverse actors. By underscoring the positive outcomes of cultural institutions and festivals, our review also calls for renewed and more comprehensive forms of public support. Although direct financial support often remains crucial, local authorities and policymakers may also focus on enhancing cultural institutions and festivals' visibility, impact assessment systems, and fundraising capabilities. Finally, our review can help policymakers further recognize the value of culture as a "transversal" tool to address economic, cultural, social, and environmental challenges. This calls for a better intertwining between culture-led and sustainability-oriented policies, and for a long-term and more direct involvement of cultural institutions and festivals in policymaking.

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Appendix

	Authors	Year	Article title	Journal title
1.	Acevedo, B.; Malevicius, R.; Fadli, H.; Lamberti, C.	2022	Aesthetics and education for sustainability	Culture and Organization
2.	Al-hagla, K.S.	2010	Sustainable urban development in historical areas using the tourist trail approach: A case study of the Cultural Heritage and Urban Development (CHUD) project in Saida, Lebanon	Cities
3.	Andersson, T.D.; Armbrecht, J.; Lundberg, E.	2012	Estimating use and non-use values of a music festival	Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism
4.	Andres, L.	2011	Alternative initiatives, cultural intermediaries and urban regeneration: The case of La Friche (Marseille)	European Planning Studies
5.	Anwar-McHenry, J.; Carmichael, A.; McHenry, M.P.	2018	The social impact of a regional community contemporary dance program in rural and remote Western Australia	Journal of Rural Studies
6.	Aquilino, A.; Harris, J.; Wise, N.	2021	A sense of rurality: Events, placemaking and community participation in a small Welsh town	Journal of Rural Studies
7.	Arcodia, C.; Whitford, M.	2006	Festival attendance and the development of social capital	Journal of Convention & Event Tourism
8.	Azmat, F.; Ferdous, A.; Rentschler, R.; Winston, E.	2018	Arts-based initiatives in museums: Creating value for sustainable development	Journal of Business Research
9.	Bakas, F.E.; Duxbury, N.; Remoaldo, P.C.; Matos, O.	2019	The social utility of small-scale art festivals with creative tourism in Portugal	International Journal of Event and Festival Management
10.	Baker, S.; Collins, J.	2015	Sustaining popular music's material culture in community archives and museums	International Journal of Heritage Studies
11.	Baldi, L.; Peri, M.; Baldi, G.; Trentinaglia, M.T.	2022	Economic impact of an international musical event in a small destination: What benefits for local and rural development?	Event Management
12.	Barron, P.; Leask, A.	2017	Visitor engagement at museums: Generation Y and 'Lates' events at the National Museum of Scotland	Museum Management and Curatorship

13.	Barzanò, G.; Amenduni, F.; Cutello, G.; Lissoni, M.; Pecorelli, C.; Quarta, R.; Raffio, L.; Regazzini, C.; Zacchilli, E.; Ligorio, M.B.	2020	When the place matters: Moving the classroom into a museum to re-design a public space	Frontiers in Psychology
14.	Belfiore, E.	2002	Art as a means of alleviating social exclusion: Does it really work? A critique of instrumental cultural policies and social impact studies in the UK	International Journal of Cultural Policy
15.	Belfiore, E.; Bennett, O.	2007	Rethinking the social impact of the arts	International Journal of Cultural Policy
16.	Bell, D.; Jayne, M.	2010	The creative countryside: Policy and practice in the UK rural cultural economy	Journal of Rural Studies
17.	Black, N.	2016	Festival connections: How consistent and innovative connections enable small-scale rural festivals to contribute to socially sustainable communities	International Journal of Event and Festival Management
18	Bowers, J.	2016	Developing sustainable tourism through ecomuseology: a case study in the Rupununi region of Guyana	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
19.	Budd, W.; Lovrich, N.; Pierce, J.C.; Chamberlain, B.	2008	Cultural sources of variations in US urban sustainability attributes	Cities
20.	Chou, C.Y.; Huang, S.-C.; Mair, J.	2018	A transformative service view on the effects of festivalscapes on local residents' subjective well-being	Event Management
21.	Colibaba, A.; Skinner, M.W.	2019	Rural public libraries as contested spaces of older voluntarism in ageing communities	Journal of Rural Studies
22.	Courchesne, A.; Ravanas, P.; Pulido, C.	2017	Doing well by doing good: Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal offers dance therapy as a strategic initiative	International Journal of Arts Management
23.	Dodds, R.; Holmes, M.; Novotny, M.	2022	Because I believe in it: examining intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for sustainability in festivals through self-determination theory	Tourism Recreation Research
24.	Dredge, D.; Whitford, M.	2010	Policy for sustainable and responsible festivals and events: institutionalisation of a new paradigm – a response	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events
25.	Ducros, H.B.	2017	Confronting sustainable development in two rural heritage valorization models	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
26.	Duffy, M.; Mair, J.	2018	Engaging the senses to explore community events	Event Management

27.	Duxbury, N.; Kangas, A.; De Beukelaer, C.	2017	Cultural policies for sustainable development: four strategic paths	International Journal of Cultural Policy
28.	Džupka, P.; Gróf, M.	2021	The influence of the new cultural infrastructure on residential property prices. Evidence from Košice ECoC 2013	Cities
29.	Ernst, D.; Esche, C.; Erbslöh, U.	2016	The art museum as lab to re-calibrate values towards sustainable development	Journal of Cleaner Production
30.	Gamble, J.R.	2022	Exploring the relationship between arts festivals and economic development in rural island regions: A case study of Scotland's Orkney Isles	Event Management
31.	George, J.	2015	Examining the cultural value of festivals: Considerations of creative destruction and creative enhancement within the rural environment	International Journal of Event and Festival Management
32.	Getz, D.	2009	Policy for sustainable and responsible festivals and events: institutionalization of a new paradigm	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events
33.	Giliberto, F.; Labadi, S.	2022	Harnessing cultural heritage for sustainable development: an analysis of three internationally funded projects in MENA Countries	International Journal of Heritage Studies
34.	Guachalla, A.	2017	Social inclusion and audience development at the Royal Opera House: a tourist perspective	International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research
35.	Hassanli, N.; Walters, T.; Williamson, J.	2021	'You feel you're not alone': how multicultural festivals foster social sustainability through multiple psychological sense of community	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
36.	Hedges, E.	2021	Actions for the future: determining sustainability efforts in practice in Arizona museums	Museum Management and Curatorship
37.	Hjalager, A.M.; Kwiatkowski, G.	2018	Entrepreneurial implications, prospects and dilemmas in rural festivals	Journal of Rural Studies
38.	Istvandity, L.; Baker, S.; Long, P.	2024	Creative futures for cultural heritage: a typology of creative practice in the GLAM sector–towards a creative heritage approach	Museum Management and Curatorship
39.	Jeannotte, M.S.	2003	Singing alone? The contribution of cultural capital to social cohesion and sustainable communities	International Journal of Cultural Policy
40.	Jones, P.; Wilks-Heeg, S.	2004	Capitalising Culture: Liverpool 2008	Local Economy
41.	Kaltenborn, B.P.; Thomassen, J.; Wold, L.C.; Linnell, J.D.C.; Skar, B.	2013	World Heritage status as a foundation for building local futures? A case study from Vega in Central Norway	Journal of Sustainable Tourism

42.	Kiddey, R.	2018	From the ground up: cultural heritage practices as tools for empowerment in the Homeless Heritage project	International Journal of Heritage Studies
43.	Lee, D.	2013	How the arts generate social capital to foster intergroup social cohesion	The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society
44.	Leone, L.; Montanari, F.	2022	The impact of festivals on the image of a cultural industry: The case of the new Italian dance platform	Poetics
45.	Liu, Y.; Wang, Y.; Dupre, K.; McIlwaine, C.	2022	The impacts of world cultural heritage site designation and heritage tourism on community livelihoods: A Chinese case study	Tourism Management Perspectives
46.	Lucchi, E.; Turati, F.; Colombo, B.; Schito, E.	2024	Climate-responsive design practices: A transdisciplinary methodology for achieving sustainable development goals in cultural and natural heritage	Journal of Cleaner Production
47.	Madandola, M.; Boussaa, D.	2023	Cultural heritage tourism as a catalyst for sustainable development; the case of old Oyo town in Nigeria	International Journal of Heritage Studies
48.	Mahon, M.; McGrath, B.; Ó Laoire, L.; Collins, P.	2018	Artists as workers in the rural; precarious livelihoods, sustaining rural futures	Journal of Rural Studies
49.	Mair, J.; Duffy, M.	2018	The role of festivals in strengthening social capital in rural communities	Event Management
50.	Mair, J.; Laing, J.H.	2013	Encouraging pro-environmental behaviour: the role of sustainability-focused events	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
51.	McGhie, H.	2020	Evolving climate change policy and museums	Museum Management and Curatorship
52.	Moscardo, G.	2007	Analyzing the role of festivals and events in regional development	Event Management
53.	O'Sullivan, D.; Jackson, Marion J.	2002	Festival tourism: A contributor to sustainable local economic development?	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
54.	O'Sullivan, D.; Pickernell, D.; Senyard, J.	2009	Public sector evaluation of festivals and special events	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events
55.	Ouazzani, Y.; Calderón-García, H.; Tubillejas-Andrés, B.; Cervera-Taulet, A.	2022	Perceived value of the opera experience in the real and virtual spheres:	International Journal of Arts Management
56.	Pasanen, K.; Taskinen, H.; Mikkonen, J.	2009	Impacts of cultural events in Eastern Finland – Development of a Finnish event evaluation tool	Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism

57.	Patiwael, P.R.; Groote, P.; Vanclay, F.	2019	Improving heritage impact assessment: an analytical critique of the ICOMOS guidelines	International Journal of Heritage Studies
58.	Pavlis, E.	2024	The ecomuseum as a platform for territorial development: the case of Greek ecomuseums	International Journal of Heritage Studies
59.	Perry, B.; Ager, L.; Sitas, R.	2020	Cultural heritage entanglements: festivals as integrative sites for sustainable urban development	International Journal of Heritage Studies
60.	Pulido, C.; Ravanas, P.; Courchesne, A.	2022	Walking the eco-talk: Cultural and arts management during an era of sustainable development	International Journal of Arts Management
61.	Qu, M.; Cheer, J.M.	2021	Community art festivals and sustainable rural revitalisation	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
62.	Quinn, B.	2006	Problematising 'festival tourism': Arts Festivals and sustainable development in Ireland	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
63.	Quinn, B.; Colombo, A.; Lindström, K.; McGillivray, D.; Smith, A.	2021	Festivals, public space and cultural inclusion: public policy insights	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
64.	Redaelli, E.; Hansen, L.E.; Djupdræt, M.B.	2025	Museums as public spaces in the City: Insights from Aarhus, Denmark	Cities
65.	Robertson, M.; Rogers, P.; Leask, A.	2009	Progressing socio-cultural impact evaluation for festivals	Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events
66.	Sabatini, F.	2019	Culture as fourth pillar of sustainable development: Perspectives for integration, paradigms of action	European Journal of Sustainable Development
67.	Santos Silva, A.; Santos, H.; Ramalho, J.; Moreira, R.	2018	Theatre and sustainable territorial communities: A case study in Northern Portugal	Journal of Rural Studies
68.	Simões, O.; Almeida Carreira, V.	2012	Póvoa Dão Village: An Instance of "Heritagization" for Tourist Attraction and Local Development	Tourism Culture & Communication
69.	Solum, E.E.B.-D.	2025	Negotiating neutrality and activism in Norwegian public libraries: the case of environmental sustainability	Journal of Documentation
70.	Son, I.S.; Krolikowski, C.	2024	Developing a sense of place through attendance and involvement in local events: the social sustainability perspective	Tourism Recreation Research
71.	Song, Y.; Gilardi, F.; Lam, C.	2024	Building culturally sustainable communities. Community museums and transmedia storytelling	Museum Management and Curatorship

72.	Stevenson, N.	2016	Local festivals, social capital and sustainable destination development: experiences in East London	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
73.	Stylianou-Lambert, T.; Boukas, N.; Christodoulou-Yerali, M	2014	Museums and cultural sustainability: stakeholders, forces, and cultural policies	International Journal of Cultural Policy
74.	van der Hoeven, A.; Hitters, E.	2019	The social and cultural values of live music: Sustaining urban live music ecologies	Cities
75.	Wells, V.K.; Manika, D.; Gregory-Smith, D.; Taheri, B.; McCowlen, C.	2015	Heritage tourism, CSR and the role of employee environmental behaviour	Tourism Management
76.	Wheatley, D.; Bickerton, C.	2017	Subjective well-being and engagement in arts, culture and sport	Journal of Cultural Economics
77.	Wickham, M.; Lehman, K.	2015	Communicating sustainability priorities in the museum sector	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
78.	Wood, E.H.; Dashper, K.	2021	"Purposeful togetherness": Theorising gender and ageing through creative events	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
79.	Woosnam, K.M.; Jiang, J.; van Winkle, C.M.; Kim, H.; Maruyama, N.	2016	Explaining festival impacts on a hosting community through motivations to attend	Event Management
80.	Xu, H.; Dai, S.	2012	A system dynamics approach to explore sustainable policies for Xidi, the world heritage village	Current Issues in Tourism
81.	Zutshi, A.; Creed, A.; Panwar, R.; Willis, L.	2021	Corporate social responsibility (CSR): Curators' specific responses from Australian museums and art galleries	Current Issues in Tourism

Tab. 3. Academic articles included in the review

	Authors/Organizations	Year	Document title
1.	British Council	2020	The missing pillar: culture's contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals
2.	Canadian Commission for UNESCO	2022	Culture for SDGs toolkit: a practical guide to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for cultural and heritage organizations in Canada
3.	Center for Music Ecosystems	2021	Your guide to music and the SDGs
4.	Culture 2030 Goal Campaign	2019	Culture in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda: a report by the Culture 2030 Goal Campaign
5.	Culture 2030 Goal Campaign	2021	Culture in the localization of the SDGs: an analysis of voluntary local reviews
6.	Culture 2030 Goal Campaign	2022	A culture goal is essential for our common future

7.	Dessein, J.; Soini, K.; Fairclough, G.; Horlings, L. (COST EU)	2015	Culture in, for and as sustainable development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 investigating cultural sustainability
8.	European Commission	2018	European framework for action on cultural heritage
9.	European Commission	2021	Culture and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: challenges and opportunities
10.	European Commission	2022a	Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions to on the cultural dimension of sustainable development in EU actions
11.	European Commission	2022b	Stormy times. Nature and humans: cultural courage for change
12.	Fancourt, D.; Finn, S. (WHO)	2019	What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review
13.	ICOM	2022	Presentation of the proposal for a new definition of 'museum'
14.	ICOM/OECD	2019	Culture and local development: maximising the impact
15.	IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations)	2018	Exemplars, educators, enablers: libraries and sustainability
16.	McGhie, H. (Curating Tomorrow)	2023	Localizing the SDGs through museums and libraries: making a better difference
17.	Napier, D.A.; Depledge, M.; Knipper, M.; Lovell, R.; Ponarin, E.; Sanabria, E.; Felicity, T. (WHO)	2017	Culture matters: using a cultural contexts of health approach to enhance policy-making
18.	NEMO	2022	Museums in the climate crisis: survey results and recommendations for the sustainable transition of Europe
19.	NEMO	2023	Developing education and public engagement in museums
20.	NEMO	2024	Diversity and inclusion in European museums
21.	OECD	2005	Culture and local development
22.	OECD	2021	Economic and social impact of cultural and creative sectors: note for Italy G20 Presidency Culture Working Group
23.	OECD	2022a	Culture and the creative economy in Glasgow city region, Scotland, United Kingdom
24.	OECD	2022b	Culture and the creative economy in Emilia-Romagna, Italy
25.	OECD	2022c	Culture and the creative economy in Colombia
26.	OECD	2022d	The culture fix: creative people, places and industries

27.	Stevenson, D.; Barns, S.; Clements, J.; Cmielewski, C.; Mar, P. (Institute for Culture and Society)	2019	The social impact of the NSW arts, screen and culture programs
28.	UCLG	2016	Why must culture be at the heart of sustainable urban development?
29.	UCLG	2018a	Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: a guide for local action
30.	UCLG	2018b	SDG 11.4 culture and heritage for more sustainable, inclusive and open cities and societies
31.	UNESCO	2019	Culture|2030 Indicators. Thematic indicators for culture in the 2030 Agenda
32.	UNESCO	2021	Managing creativity and the arts in South-East Asia
33.	UNESCO/World Bank	2021	Cities, culture, creativity: leveraging culture and creativity for sustainable urban development and inclusive growth

Tab. 4. Practitioner documents included in the review

Policy areas	SDGs	Examples of practitioner documents
Value creation	SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth	British Council 2020; European Commission 2021; 2022a; McGhie (Curating Tomorrow) 2023
	SDG 9 - Industry, innovation and infrastructure	British Council 2020; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; European Commission 2021; 2022a
	SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities	British Council 2020; Canadian Commission for UNESCO 2022; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2019; 2021; European Commission 2021; UCLG 2016; 2018a; 2018b; UNESCO 2019
Equity and resilience	SDG 3 - Good health and well-being	British Council 2020; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; McGhie (Curating Tomorrow) 2023; UCLG 2018a
	SDG 5 - Gender equality	British Council 2020; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; European Commission 2022; UCLG 2018a; UNESCO 2019
	SDG 10 - Reduced inequalities	British Council 2020; Canadian Commission for UNESCO 2022; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; European Commission 2021; 2022a; 2022b
	SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities	McGhie (Curating Tomorrow) 2023; UCLG 2018a; 2018b
Education and training	SDG 4 - Quality education	British Council 2020; Canadian Commission for UNESCO 2022; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; European Commission 2021; 2022a; 2022b; McGhie (Curating Tomorrow) 2023; UNESCO 2019
	SDG 12 - Responsible consumption and production	British Council 2020; Canadian Commission for UNESCO 2022; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; European Commission 2021; 2022b; UCLG 2018a
	SDG 13 - Climate action	Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; 2022; European Commission 2021; 2022b; McGhie (Curating Tomorrow) 2023

Participatory governance	SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities	European Commission 2021
	SDG 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions	Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2021; European Commission 2021; UCLG 2018a
	SDG 17 - Partnerships for the goals	British Council 2020; Culture 2030 Goal Campaign 2019; 2021; European Commission 2021; 2022a; UNESCO 2019

Tab. 5. SDGs addressed by each policy area

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