Integrating Cultural and Natural Heritage into the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda: Policy Challenges, Indicators and the Albanian Perspective

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Abstract
A country's cultural fabric lies at the core of its identity, and embedding that fabric within the 2030 Agenda is a precondition for development that is genuinely inclusive, equitable, and human-centred. None of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals treats culture as a stand-alone target, yet culture runs through the framework as a connecting thread, present in education, employment, urban sustainability, and institutional governance alike. This paper investigates how cultural and natural heritage relate to the SDGs, pairing a review of cultural-sustainability theory with an empirical look at where Albania currently stands. With an aggregate SDG score of 73.51 points, Albania holds the 54th position worldwide, and its statistical coverage has widened considerably in recent years, most visibly for gender-related indicators. What is still missing, however, is a dedicated national study of culture's specific contribution to that progress. To address this gap, the paper maps existing SDG indicators for explicit and implicit cultural content, reads the results against the European policy debate, including the New European Bauhaus, and closes with recommendations for embedding culture more firmly within the current Agenda and its eventual successor.

Keywords: SDGs, Agenda 2030, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, Albania

1. Introduction

Heritage, whether cultural or natural, is not a static inheritance but a living asset: it anchors identity, carries collective memory, and ties communities to place. Its contribution to development runs through several channels at once — cohesion within communities, the revival of local economies, poverty reduction, improved well-being, greater regional appeal, innovation, and durable tourism revenue. Because this resource is finite and cannot be recreated once lost, protecting it for future generations demands sustained, coordinated effort (Auclair, E., Fairclough, G. 2015).

When the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, it built the framework around five themes — *People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace,* and *Partnership* — translated into seventeen goals meant to confront climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and global health emergencies through coordinated action. For all its breadth, the Agenda gives culture only a marginal, largely implicit place.

Ahead of the Agenda's adoption, coalitions campaigning under the banner *"The Future We Want Includes Culture"* pushed for either a dedicated cultural goal or the systematic threading of culture through every SDG. Neither outcome fully materialised: no single goal is devoted to culture, though several — SDG 4 on education, SDG 8 on decent work, SDG 11 on sustainable cities, and SDG 16 on peace and institutions — do reference cultural diversity, heritage protection, or community involvement directly.

Even so, culture operates as a connective force across the Agenda, supporting cohesion, economic inclusion, environmental care, and participatory decision-making wherever it appears. The global heritage regime anchors this role: the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention set the baseline norms for conservation, later extended toward sustainability through the 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape and the 2015 Policy Document on integrating a sustainable-development perspective into the World Heritage Convention.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the theoretical arguments connecting culture to sustainability. Section 3 examines how culture is classified and folded into the SDG architecture, both in general and for Albania specifically. Section 4 situates these findings within the wider European policy debate. Section 5 proposes policy directions, and Section 6 concludes. Throughout, the underlying argument is that culture underpins the success of the 2030 Agenda even where its presence is not spelled out.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainability

Heritage management today contends with chronic underfunding, patchy legal safeguards, and a shortage of trained expertise — conditions that make strategic, adequately resourced

management all the more necessary, given how much heritage contributes across economic, social, and environmental domains simultaneously.

Cultural sustainability, the theoretical lens most commonly applied to this problem, owes much of its foundation to Jon Hawkes[1] (2001), who proposed treating culture as a ***fourth pillar*** standing alongside the economic, social, and environmental ones rather than beneath them. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) formally adopted this position in 2010, and a range of models has followed since, although the field is still consolidating; the COST research network "Investigating Cultural Sustainability" has traced several competing narratives running through the academic literature.

Because culture sets the values a society holds, the economic logics it follows, and the way it responds to environmental pressure, it cuts across — rather than sits beside — the other sustainability dimensions. Treating cultural considerations as secondary to policy misreads their role (Dessein , J., Battaglini, E., & Horlings , L, 2015). This paper follows that logic, treating culture not as an add-on to the three familiar pillars but as the ground on which they all rest, each pillar being, at bottom, cultural in nature.

2.2 Culture as the Fourth Pillar: A Conceptual Framework

The Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage identifies sustainability as one of its core pillars, pointing to heritage's capacity to build social capital, stimulate economic activity, and strengthen environmental resilience. It organises action around three broad strands:

1. Reviving cities and regions through cultural heritage;
2. Giving heritage buildings productive new uses rather than letting them fall idle;
3. Reconciling public access to heritage with sustainable tourism and the stewardship of natural sites.

Tourism sits uneasily within this picture. It can widen access to heritage and generate funding for its upkeep, but pushed too far it produces overcrowding, erodes authenticity, and strains host communities — outcomes that have already triggered resistance from residents and heritage authorities in several places. A sustainability-minded approach to tourism therefore has to put local communities and heritage assets at the centre of decision-making, rather than treating them as backdrop. Genuine engagement with residents and stakeholders is what keeps tourism aligned with conservation and local benefit; sustainable cultural tourism, in practice, means honest interpretation, careful management, and revenue that actually reaches host communities (Duxbury, N., Dragićević Šešić, M., & Hristova, S. 2015).

3. Practices: Classifying and Integrating Culture into the SDG Framework

3.1 Classifying Cultural and Natural Heritage

Heritage classification and documentation rest on standards developed mainly by UNESCO and the Council of Europe, codified in a series of founding instruments:

[1] Sustainable Development Report 2023, dashboards.sdgindex.org/rankings.

- The Athens Charter;
- The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention;
- The 1996 ICOMOS Principles;
- The 2001 and 2003 UNESCO Conventions, covering underwater and intangible heritage respectively;
- The Valletta Principles for historic urban areas;
- The 1985 Granada Convention on architectural heritage;
- The 1992 European Convention on Archaeological Heritage.

Instability in several regions — the Arab world being a prominent recent example — has exposed both tangible and intangible heritage to heightened risk, prompting UNESCO to stress how closely the two are bound together. That interdependence was written into the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which treats traditional knowledge, social practice, and community process as building blocks of cultural diversity and, by extension, of sustainable development.

A somewhat older instrument, the 1954 Hague Convention, sorts cultural property into three types: movable or immovable items of exceptional cultural value; buildings that house such items, such as museums and archives; and historic monuments or structures in their own right. The World Heritage Convention narrows this further for immovable heritage into monuments, groups of buildings, and sites, while intangible heritage spans oral tradition, performance, social ritual, and craftsmanship passed down through practice. Movable heritage, meanwhile, is protected mainly through the 1970 UNESCO Convention against illicit trafficking in cultural property and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on stolen or illegally exported cultural objects.

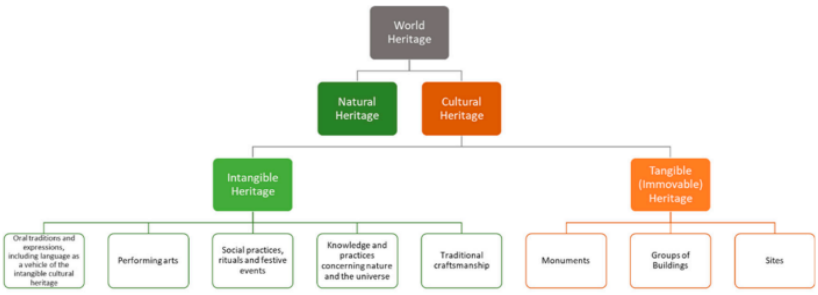

Figure 1. UNESCO cultural heritage classification framework.

3.2 Integrating Culture into the SDG Framework

Culture supplies much of what the SDGs need in order to succeed: shared knowledge, values, and channels of communication, alongside direct economic activity and employment. Cultural diversity and intercultural exchange, in turn, underpin social cohesion and peace. Given all this, it is striking how often culture is sidelined in discussions of goal-related

progress; folding it more deliberately into implementation, including through dedicated indicators, would meaningfully strengthen the push toward 2030.

Nearly four decades on from the Brundtland Report[2], culture's place within sustainability frameworks is still being worked out. The UN's 2023 SDG Report[3] calls explicitly for cultural contributions to be embedded more deeply in development strategy at every level — national, regional, and global. No single SDG is built around culture, but it surfaces across a range of targets, some directly, some by implication. Cultural organisations and policy researchers have reached a rough consensus on where these connections lie[4] — understood as a starting inventory rather than an exhaustive list — and cultural-policy institutions have since mapped this terrain in further detail[5], distinguishing targets that name culture outright from those where the link, though unstated, is substantial (drawing on ifa's *"Culture and Foreign Policy"* research programme).

Group 1 — Where the SDGs Name Culture Explicitly

SDG 4, Target 4.7, commits countries to equip all learners with the understanding needed for sustainable lifestyles — spanning human rights, gender equality, non-violence, global citizenship, and respect for cultural diversity — tracked through *Indicator 4.7.1*, which measures how far global-citizenship and sustainability education is built into national policy, curricula, teacher training, and student assessment.

Under SDG 8, Target 8.3 calls for policies that back productive activity, job creation, entrepreneurship, and creative innovation, measured through the share of informal employment (*Indicator 8.3.1*); Target 8.9 goes further, asking states to design tourism policy that creates jobs while promoting local culture and products, tracked via tourism's direct contribution to GDP (*Indicator 8.9.1*).

SDG 11's Target 11.4 asks governments to step up protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage, with progress captured through per-capita spending on preservation, broken down by funding source, heritage type, and level of government (*Indicator 11.4.1*).

SDG 12's Target 12.b calls for monitoring tools that track the sustainability impact of tourism built around local culture and products, measured by the presence of standard accounting frameworks for sustainable tourism (*Indicator 12.b.1*).

Targets 8.9 and 12.b also intersect with Target 14.7 on the sustainable use of marine resources, tourism and aquaculture included.

Group 2 — Where Cultural Relevance Is Implicit

A second set of goals touches culture without naming it outright, since their targets are shaped by, and in turn shape, cultural context:

[2] Brundtland Report (1987), "Our Common Future," World Commission on Environment and Development.
[3] The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023, United Nations, unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023.
[4] De Vries, R., "Culture and Sustainable Development," SDG Toolkit, sdgtoolkit.org.
[5] Mapping based on ifa's "Culture and Foreign Policy" research programme; see De Vries, sdgtoolkit.org.

- **SDG 4, Target 4.4:** tracks growth in the share of young people and adults holding relevant technical, vocational, and digital skills.
- **SDG 5, Target 5.c:** calls for enforceable legislation advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.
- **SDG 10, Target 10.2:** seeks the social, economic, and political inclusion of all people, regardless of age, sex, disability, ethnicity, origin, or belief.
- **SDG 11, Target 11.7:** aims for universal access to safe, inclusive public and green space, with particular attention to women, children, older people, and persons with disabilities.
- **SDG 13, Target 13.1:** concerns resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of climate hazards and disasters.
- **SDG 16, Targets 16.3, 16.8, and 16.b:** cover the rule of law, equitable access to justice, developing countries' voice in global governance, and non-discriminatory legislation.

Figure 2. Culture within the Sustainable Development Goals.

Cultural relevance, in one form or another, touches every target in the SDG framework. This is increasingly acknowledged internationally, for instance in calls for a standing mandate on cultural rights, and cultural heritage is now understood not just as a human right in itself, but as a bulwark against extremism and a foundation for peaceful, resilient, inclusive societies.

3.3 The SDGs in Albania and the Contribution of Culture

Albania's government has placed considerable weight on delivering the 2030 Agenda. Responsibility for coordinating this effort sits with the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the SDGs, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and bringing together the relevant government bodies together with representatives from business, civil society, academia, and international partners.

Globally, the Agenda comprises 17 goals and 169 targets. Domestically, the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) has carried the main responsibility for tracking progress, beginning with the statistical annex prepared for Albania's 2018 Voluntary National Review, presented that July at the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York. A first national SDG report followed in 2019, with further editions produced annually since. Drawing on the UN's official indicator metadata, INSTAT has identified the indicators falling within its remit and now

maintains 61 of them on a public dashboard (instat.gov.al/al/sdgs), built with UNDP support, offering definitions, methodology, and data sources goal by goal.

Roughly halfway to the 2030 deadline, data coverage has expanded substantially, gender statistics being the clearest example: coverage rose from 31% in 2020 to 61% by 2025. Since 2020, INSTAT has also worked with UNICEF to build a new set of indicators on children, adolescents, and youth, published as *"Indicators of the Well-Being of Children, Adolescents and Youth in Albania."*

Progress has been most visible for SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 3 (health), SDG 4 (education), SDG 12 (consumption and production), and SDG 13 (climate). Current trends put Albania on course to reach SDGs 1, 6 (water and sanitation), and 10 (inequality), though SDGs 4, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 17 remain considerably off track.

No study to date has specifically examined culture's contribution to this record, even though cultural content, named or implied, runs through several of the tracked indicators. This paper's mapping exercise is a first attempt to close that gap, identifying where cultural dimensions already sit within Albania's national SDG reporting. Table 1 sets out a sample of indicators carrying explicit or implicit cultural content, situated within the broader push for inclusion, education, innovation, and good governance; these can serve as practical starting points for weaving cultural considerations more systematically into national policy and reporting.

SDG	Target	Description	Indicator
SDG 4: Quality Education	4.4	Growth in the share of young people and adults holding relevant technical and vocational skills for employment and entrepreneurship.	4.4.1: Share of youth and adults with ICT skills, by type of skill.
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	8.3	Policy support for productive activity, creativity, and innovation as drivers of decent work.	8.3.1: Share of informal employment in total employment, by sector and sex.
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	10.2	Social, economic, and political inclusion of all people, regardless of age, sex, disability, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic status.	10.2.1: Share of people living below 50% of median income, by sex, age, and disability.
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	16.3	Advancing the rule of law nationally and internationally, with equal access to justice for all.	16.3.2: Unsentenced detainees as a share of the total prison population.

Table 1. Selected SDG indicators available in Albania with explicit or implicit cultural relevance. Source: compiled by the author based on INSTAT's SDG Dashboard.

Culture, in short, functions as connective tissue running beneath education, inclusive growth, social cohesion, and governance, even where SDG language itself stays silent on the point. Albania's statistical system already captures a good deal of this indirectly; making the connection explicit, and building cultural indicators more deliberately into national reporting,

would sharpen the country's approach to the 2030 Agenda without requiring an entirely new data infrastructure.

4. Outreach: Culture in the European Sustainability Agenda

The European Commission's New European Bauhaus initiative marks a turning point in how Brussels frames culture's place in the systemic shift demanded by the Green Deal. Its underlying premise is that the green transition is not purely a technical or environmental undertaking — it is a *cultural* one too, reshaping how people build, live, and relate to their surroundings.

This argument runs through initiatives such as *"Culture and the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges and Opportunities,"* which frames culture as an active driver of change: the source of the values, stories, behaviours, and aesthetic sensibilities that sustainability depends on. Whether the Green Deal succeeds, on this reading, hinges less on technology than on whether the social and economic cultures that produced unsustainable patterns in the first place can actually shift. Culture is what allows societies to make sense of that shift and to change behaviour accordingly, mediating the relationship between people and the natural world.

Yet policy has not fully caught up with this insight. The EU's current cultural strategy acknowledges the creative sectors' potential contribution to the Green Deal, but instruments such as the 2018 New European Agenda for Culture still say little about the Green Deal directly, or about culture's role in driving a just and inclusive transition.

Closing this gap will take a more deliberate rethink of where culture sits in EU and global sustainability strategy, one that treats it as capable of mobilising collective action, community outreach, and behavioural change at scale. Three priorities stand out for Europe's cultural engagement with sustainability going forward. The first is preparing communities for climate disruption, building their capacity to anticipate and manage risk through adaptation strategies rooted in local culture. The second is accelerating the sustainability transition itself, through inclusive, co-created visions and innovation pathways grounded in local context rather than imposed from outside, enabling transformative adaptation within planetary limits. The third is building resilience for the long term: scaling up culturally grounded solutions, testing them through real-world demonstrations across European communities, and supporting cross-border exchange that generates shared cultural and economic value.

5. Policy Recommendations

Unlocking culture's full potential for sustainable development calls for coordinated action on four fronts: better data and measurement systems; formal recognition of culture as a sustainability pillar; adequate financing and capacity-building; and stronger governance, coordination, and participation.

5.1 Strengthening Data and Measurement Systems

1. Through a participatory process involving cultural stakeholders, develop and update measurement tools that connect Eurostat culture statistics more closely with the SDG monitoring system, the UNESCO 2005 Convention, and the "Culture 2030 Indicators" framework, while pushing for greater interoperability and data portability across statistical systems adapted to local needs.
2. Push for culture-related indicators to be built into the EU's SDG indicator set, in dialogue with public and private stakeholders and through national voluntary reporting, raising culture's visibility within 2030 Agenda implementation reports.
3. Align statistical data spatially and temporally, so that indicators and indices can be aggregated and compared consistently across time and geography.
4. Broaden the evidence base by systematically gathering and analysing examples of culture's social impact across different sustainability contexts, including comparative work that accounts for path dependence and context-specific factors across countries.

5.2 Recognising Culture as a Sustainability Pillar

1. Formally recognise culture as the missing fourth pillar of sustainable development at every level — local, national, European, and global — building on a growing body of cross-disciplinary research and on the practical experience of local authorities that have long built culture into their development strategies.
2. Update the international definition of sustainable development to name culture explicitly as a distinct pillar alongside the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, in recognition of its foundational role in shaping cohesive, inclusive, and resilient societies.
3. Push for a dedicated, stand-alone SDG on culture within the post-2030 agenda, building on the recognition above through stakeholder consultations at European and international level aimed at producing a shared position paper, while also promoting culture's relevance across every other SDG area.
4. Align culture-related policies, measures, and documents produced by EU institutions and Member States, along with the projects and initiatives they support, more closely with the SDG framework.

5.3 Financing and Capacity-Building

1. Within the EU's SDG implementation architecture, launch a dedicated funding mechanism, potentially a public–private matching-fund scheme, for "Culture4SDGs," supporting bottom-up initiatives from national and local government, civil society, and the private sector, with a focus on generating solid evidence of culture's contribution to sustainable development and ensuring impacts hold over the long term.
2. Support cultural actors in building their own institutional capacity, so they are better placed to contribute directly to SDG implementation.

3. Treat culture as both a sector in its own right and a vector for wider policy goals, developing tracking systems at national and European level that capture financial and institutional support to cultural actors and organisations, as well as culture's contribution to other policy areas, reducing duplication and encouraging cross-sector partnership and research collaboration.

5.4 Governance, Coordination, and Participation

1. Improve information systems at national and European level across policy areas, ensuring access for a full range of cultural stakeholders, public, private, for-profit, and not-for-profit, and tracking more carefully which actors, territories, and activities receive technical and financial support.
2. Build on existing knowledge about public space, development, and cultural rights through targeted policy and programming, using diverse funding channels supported by EU institutions, national and local government, and civil society to build knowledge-management systems and support peer learning, particularly at grassroots level.
3. Encourage EU institutions and Member States to widen consultation and participation when preparing Voluntary National Reviews and other SDG planning and monitoring processes.
4. Strengthen coordination with other cross-cutting international and European agendas, establishing culture clearly as a vector for achieving shared policy priorities.
5. Support physical and online forums dedicated to the SDGs and to the culture–sustainability nexus, raising awareness among cultural-sector actors and the public while supporting data collection, dissemination, and media coverage.

Use the SDG framework as a platform for deeper cross-sectoral cooperation and ongoing knowledge exchange between fields that do not typically interact.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to show that culture, despite lacking a goal of its own, threads through the 2030 Agenda as a connective enabler rather than a peripheral concern. Building on Hawkes' proposition of culture as a fourth sustainability pillar standing alongside the economic, social, and environmental ones, it has traced how cultural and natural heritage intersect with SDG targets, directly in education, decent work, urban sustainability, and responsible consumption, and indirectly across gender equality, reduced inequality, climate resilience, and institutional strength.

Albania's experience captures both sides of this picture. INSTAT's monitoring work, backed by UNDP and UNICEF, has produced a solid and growing statistical base for tracking the Agenda nationally. What is missing is a dedicated assessment of culture's specific contribution, a gap this paper's indicator mapping begins to address by surfacing where cultural relevance already sits within existing national data.

Bringing culture more fully into the 2030 Agenda, and arguing for its recognition in whatever framework follows after 2030, will require coordinated movement on data systems, financing, and governance alike, along the lines set out in Section 5. The underlying point, though, is straightforward: treating culture as foundational rather than optional is what will make the sustainability transition not just green and inclusive, but genuinely rooted in the places and communities it is meant to serve.

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