CULTURE IN VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS 2022-2025
TRENDS OVER TIME

In each of the last four years, the Culture2030Goal campaign has carried out an assessment of every single Voluntary National Review of implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals – a total of 155 reports from 142 different countries (13 have submitted a VNR twice in the period 2022-2025).

While the methodology has evolved, notably in the first years, it is possible to look back at the data gathered through this process in order to build up an idea of how the treatment of culture in Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) has evolved over time. This is the purpose of this article. Further information about the methodology used for compiling the annual reports can be found in these (2022, 2023, 2024, 2025).

This short article mirrors the structure of these annual reports, but looks at longitudinal trends (insofar as these can be identified over such a limited period). It looks first at how the share of VNRs referring to culture in relation to different clusters of SDGs has changed. Then it considers the share of VNRs looking at particular dimensions of the relationship between culture and wider development strategies. Finally, it explores the share of VNRs highlighting the themes covered by the targets proposed in the Culture-2030Goal campaign's own draft Culture Goal.

This report has been elaborated by the
International Federation of Library Associations
and Institutions (IFLA) in the context of the
#Culture2030Goal campaign.

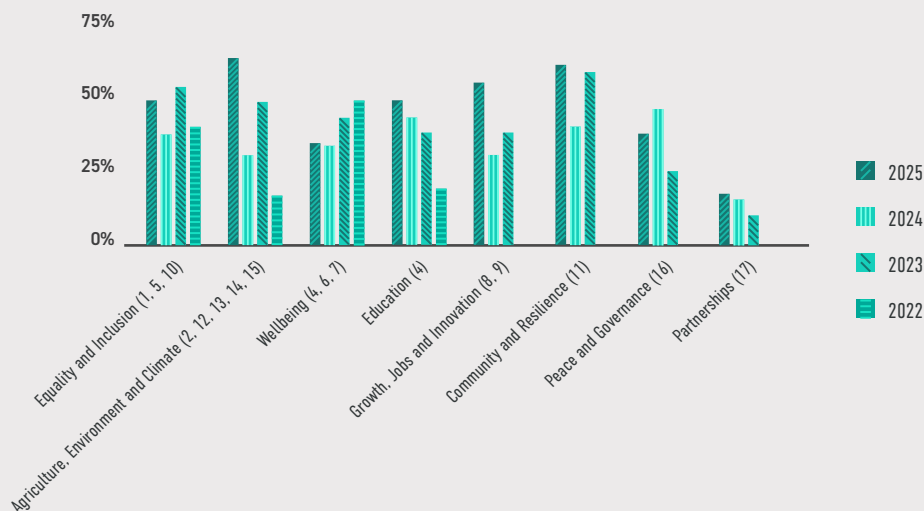# 1. CULTURE CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SPECIFIC CLUSTERS OF SDGS

In the annual reports of the campaign, we have consistently looked at references to culture in the context of efforts to achieve existing SDGs. To do this, we use the following clusters:

- **Equity and Inclusion**: SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)

- **Agriculture, Environment, and Climate**: SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land)

- **Wellbeing**: SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy)

- **Education**: SDG 4 (Quality Education)

- **Growth, Jobs, and Innovation**: SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure)

- **Community and Resilience**: SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)

- **Peace and Good Governance**: SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)

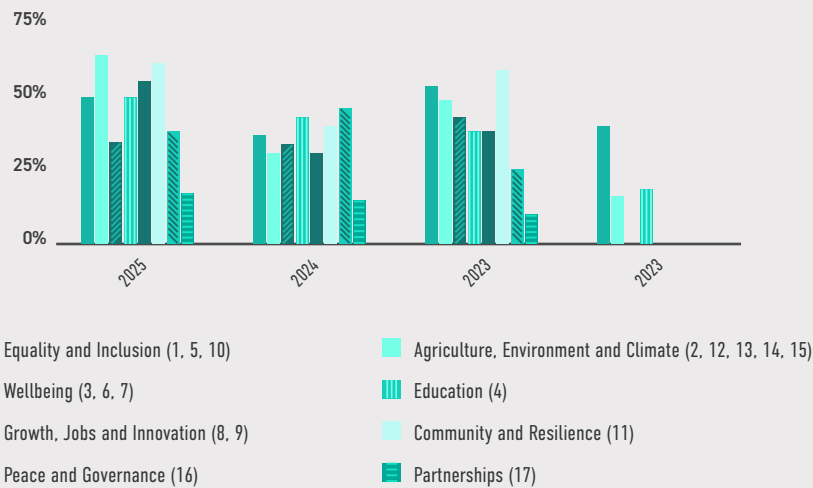- **Partnerships**: SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)

We have consistent data for the share of VNRs each year which associate culture in some way with each of these clusters from 2023, and partial data from 2022. This is provided in Graphs 1a and 1b. In these, each bar indicates the share of VNRs in a given year referring to culture in the context of the relevant cluster of SDGs.

Graph 1a provides information grouped by cluster (in order to see trends over time), while Graph 1b groups information by year, in order to see which clusters saw the highest attention to culture.

Graph 1a: SDG Clusters and Culture in VNRs: 2022-2025

Graph 1b: SDG Clusters and Culture in VNRs: 2022-2025

From Graph 1a we can see that there has been relative stability in the share of VNRs referencing equality and inclusion (varying between 36% and 53%), and wellbeing (between 22% and 43%). There has been much stronger fluctuation in the share highlighting links between culture and agriculture, environment and climate, ranging from just 16% in 2022, rising to 48% in 2023, dropping to 30% in 2024 and then rising to 63% in 2025.

Discussion of culture and communities and resilience stood at around 60% of VNRs in 2023 and 2025, but dropped to just 40% in 2024. That of growth, jobs and innovation and culture went from 38% of VNRs in 2023 to just 30% in 2024, but up to 54% in 2025.

There has been a more consistent rise in references to culture and education – from 19% of VNRs in 2022 to 49% in 2025. Similarly, discussion of culture in the context of SDG 17 – partnerships for the goals, has also been consistently rising, although remains low.

From Graph 1b, we can see trends over time. In 2022, data was only collected for three clusters, with equality and inclusion being most commonly linked to culture. In 2023, equality and inclusion came second highest, with community and resilience the cluster of SDGs most commonly associated with culture. In 2024, peace and governance, and education came top, while in 2025, it was agriculture, environment and climate, as well as community and resilience most commonly seen as having a cultural aspect.

It is also worth noting the overall strength of connections between culture and other SDGs in 2025 in particular, with 3 clusters of SDGs linked to culture in over 50% of VNRs, and all but one cluster referenced in at least 1/3 of VNRs.
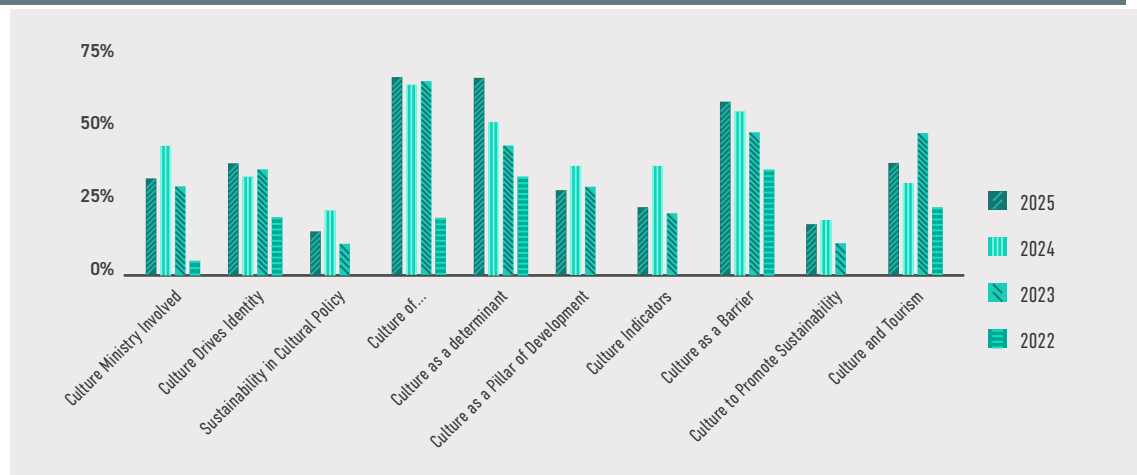
2. RECOGNISING DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Secondly, our annual reports have looked at the different ways in which culture is seen as interacting with wider development agendas. The different dimensions and tracked over the years are:

- The involvement of culture ministries in the preparation of VNRs

- The role of culture in defining national identities, and so shaping both social togetherness and wider policy-making

- The importance of promoting sustainable development principes in culture policy, notably as concerns equality and environmentally friendly behaviours

- A 'culture of…', which relates to how many VNRs talk about the importance of having a 'culture of…' different behaviours, such as democracy, accountability, inclusion and more

- Culture as a determinant of policy effectiveness, for example through shaping the effectiveness of different policy interventions or through the engagement of cultural actors

- Culture as a pillar of development, with culture seen more clearly as a fundamental dimension of sustainable development alongside the economic, social and cultural aspects

- Culture indicators relates to the share of VNRs which share data around culture, primarily spending on cultural heritage

- Culture as a barrier, covering examples of where cultural factors and practices are seen as preventing the achievement of development goals, most notably around gender inclusion

- Culture to promote sustainability relates to references to working through culture to build awareness and ownership of the SDGs and the wider sustainability agenda

- Culture and tourism, given the connection between cultural tourism and wider growth goals.
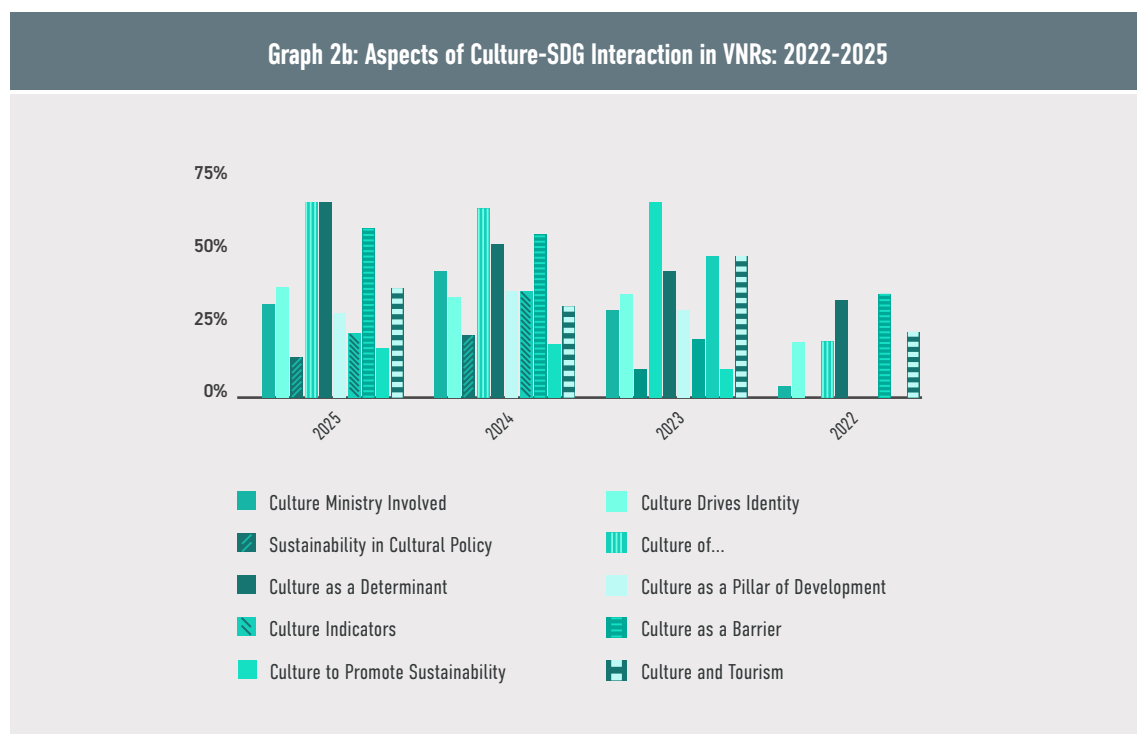
Graphs 2a and 2b present the data, with 2a clustering this by the aspect of culture-development interaction, and 2b by year. As in the previous section, evolutions in the methodology applied for reports means that we do not have full data available for 2022.

Graph 2a: SDG Clusters and Culture in VNRs: 2022-2025

In Graph 2a, we can see that after 2022, a consistently high share of VNRs refer to the existence of a 'culture of…' different behaviours. This is followed by culture as a determinant and culture as a barrier, both of which have seen steady growth in the share of VNRs citing them. This is perhaps not surprising, given the close relationship between these two aspects. It is also a welcome vindication of the Culture2030Goal campaign's emphasis on seeing culture not just as a sector, but also as a vector of change.

The picture elsewhere is of relative consistency in the share of VNRs referring to different aspects of the culture-development relationship. This is the case in the share of VNRs to which culture ministries contributed, which refer to culture as a factor in national identity and as a pillar of development, which highlight indicators related to culture, and to culture and tourism. The lowest scores are for efforts both to promote sustainability in cultural policies, and to use culture to promote the SDGs and sustainability more broadly.

Graph 2b: Aspects of Culture-SDG Interaction in VNRs: 2022-2025

Graph 2b shows that there has been a relatively similar pattern of references to different aspects of the culture-development relationship from one year to the next. Once again, we can see that references to a 'culture of' are consistently the most common aspect highlighted, with culture as a barrier and culture as a determinant also regularly commonly cited. Culture and tourism was also in the top 3 in 2023, but has been less prolific in subsequent years.

Overall, as already mentioned, this points to a welcome recognition of the fundamental role of culture in enabling (or hindering) policy effectiveness, and so the need to integrate it properly into policy making. Perhaps more concerning is the lack of progress in the engagement of culture ministries in VNRs, or of wider recognition of the role of culture as a pillar of sustainable development.

3. EXPLORATION OF THE THEMES COVERED BY THE CULTURE2030GOAL CAMPAIGN CULTURE GOAL TARGETS

Finally, following the publication of the Culture2030Goal Campaign's Zero Draft of a Culture Goal at the 2022 MONDIACULT Conference, our annual reports on culture in VNRs have assessed to what extent VNRs are already reporting on work against the priorities identified in the Goal's ten targets.
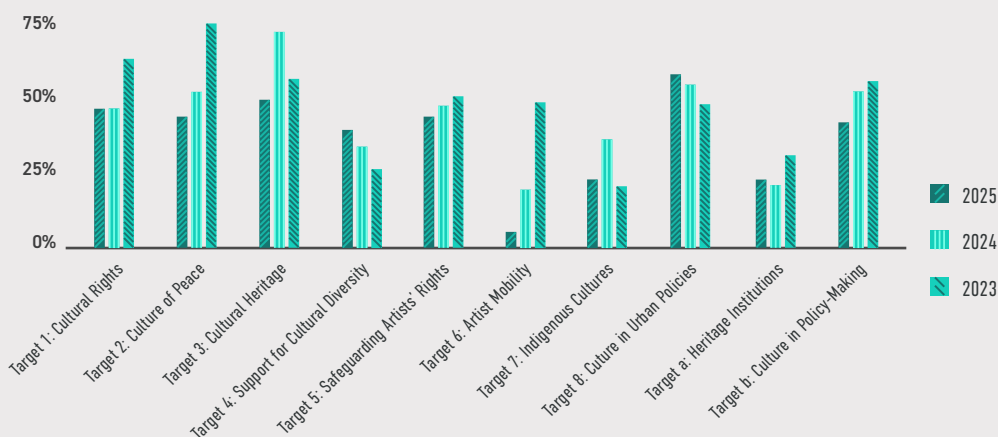
These targets are explained in more depth in the Zero Draft, but in short are:

1. Realise cultural rights for all;
2. Promote a culture of peace and non-violence;
3. Protect and safeguard all forms of heritage;
4. Protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions;
5. Promote local culture, and the rights of artists and culture professionals;
6. Enhance legal conditions and practical opportunities for mobility of cultural professionals;
7. Empower indigenous peoples to strengthen their own institutions, cultures and languages;
8. Develop a cultural approach in environmental protection and sustainable urbanisation;
a. Strengthen cultural institutions;
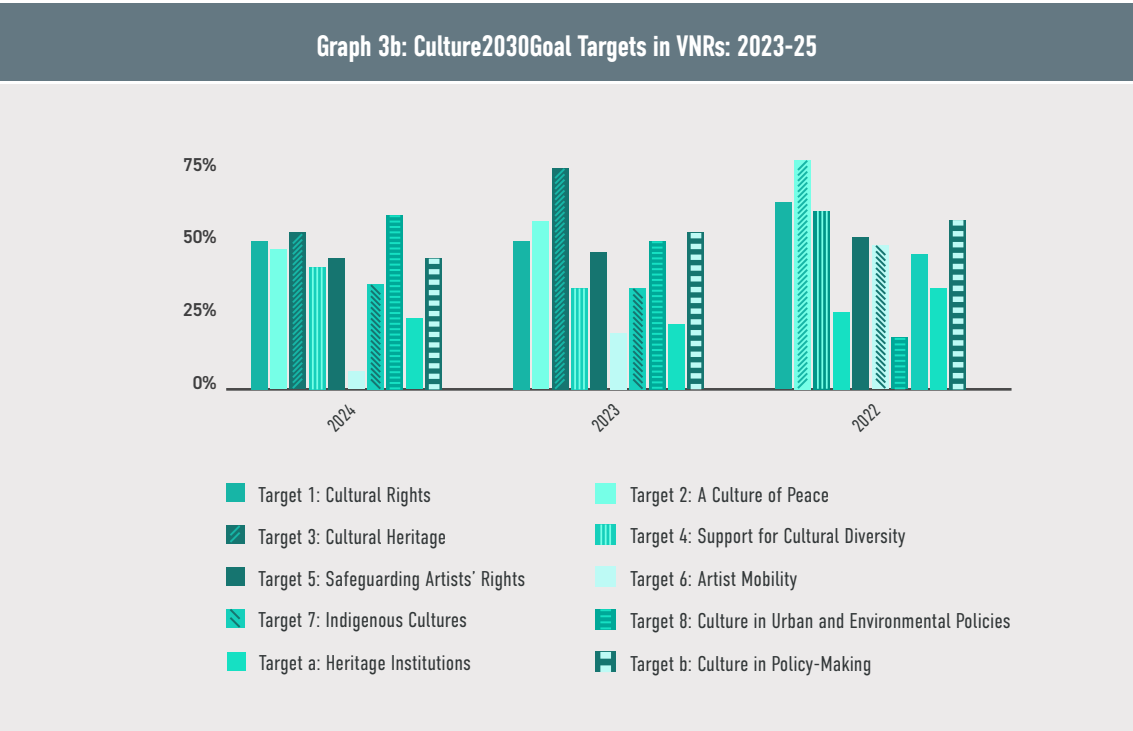b. Ensure that cultural considerations are taken into account in all international development goals.

Graphs 3a and 3b set out the data about the share of VNRs in each year referring to each of the targets' themes. Once again, 3a groups the data by theme, and 3b by year to facilitate analysis.

In Graph 3a, we can see that for most of the themes, there has been relatively little variation from one year to the next, despite different countries being covered. This is particularly the case for Target 1 (Cultural Rights), Target 3 (Cultural Heritage), Target 5 (Artists' Rights), Target 8 (Culture in Urban and Environmental Policies), Target a (Cultural Institutions) and Target b (Culture in Policy-Making).

Graph 3a: Culture2030Goal Targets in VNRs: 2023-25

There has been more variation in the share of VNRs referencing to other target themes. There have been falls when it comes to a culture of peace and respect for cultural diversity (a fall from 75% of VNRs in 2023 to 46% in 2025), and artist mobility (from 47% to 6%), but then rises in references to support for the diversity of cultural expression (rising from 25% to 40%), and support for Indigenous cultures (rising from 17% to 34%).

Graph 3b: Culture2030Goal Targets in VNRs: 2023-25

Graph 3b underlines a degree of variation in focus from year to year, although Targets 1 (Cultural Rights), 2 (Culture of Peace), 3 (Cultural Heritage), 8 (Culture in Urban and Environmental Policies) and b (Culture in Policy Making) are consistently highly rated, even if the order is not the same each time. Meanwhile, reference to Target a (Cultural Institutions), Target 6 (Artist Mobility) and Target 7 (Indigenous Groups) are also relatively low throughout.

For each year, there have always been a group of countries referencing 7 or more of the themes covered by the Targets.

In 2023, these were: Chile, Croatia, the EU, Guyana, Lithuania, and Portugal.

In 2024, these were: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Oman, Palau, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

In 2025, these were: the Federated States of Micronesia, Finland, Malta, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Seychelles, and Suriname.

These together represent a wide diversity of countries both in terms of geography (although it is worth noting that Africa is not represented among them) and levels of development.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The main takeaway from this analysis of the place of culture in Voluntary National Reviews since 2022 is that even as the set of countries presenting changes from year to year, recognition of culture has remained relatively constant.

Within this, 2025 does appear to be a high point in terms of the diversity of SDGs referred to in relation to culture. On other analyses – discussion of the different aspects of the relationship between culture and development, and coverage of the themes addressed by the Targets in the Cutlure2030Goal Campaign's draft Culture Goal – the story is more one of overall stability, with some variation in individual areas.

In policy terms, we can draw the following lessons:

1. Culture is well-established as a key factor in the achievement of the SDGs, as recognised by a significant share of countries each year.

2. There are always some countries that take a markedly broad approach to culture each year, from a wide variety of geographies and levels of development. However, we are far from every country addressing and mobilising culture comprehensively.

3. The combination of the stock of good practice identified through our reports, combined with a (de facto or de jure) culture goal could offer a powerful route towards ensuring that the potential of culture is fully recognised.