



# G20

SOUTH AFRICA 2025



Solidarity

Equality

Sustainability

Sherpa Track  
**ISSUE NOTE**

# Culture Working Group

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# Culture Working Group (CWG)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all United Nations (UN) Member States in 2015, are a global call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives of everyone.** Through the Group of Twenty (G20) Culture Working Group (CWG), the South African Presidency aims to emphasise the importance of achieving the SDGs, as well as the aspirations of the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063. This includes addressing and tackling socio-economic challenges in the global South and supporting solidarity efforts to enable an inclusive multilateral dialogue, encompassing the perspectives from global North and global South countries towards achieving increased equality in dignity and rights among and within countries.

**The role of culture as a key driver for inclusive sustainable development, contributing directly and indirectly to the implementation of the SDGs, is now widely acknowledged** by the international community, including as part of the G20 and other global and regional fora. The inclusion of culture in the Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024, also reflects this global commitment. Such recognition has anchored culture as a cornerstone of a rights-based approach to sustainable development, one that also requires international cooperation in addressing disparities. The protection and promotion of cultural rights are essential for achieving sustainable development. These rights ensure that communities and peoples can access, participate in, enjoy, and contribute to culture, including their cultural heritage and expressions. This encompasses combating the illicit trafficking of cultural property, fostering open and inclusive dialogues on the return and restitution of cultural heritage, and safeguarding the artistic freedom and the socioeconomic rights of artists and culture professionals, who often face significant levels of precarity. Additionally, the rights and knowledge of indigenous peoples and other minorities must be prioritised in policymaking processes, including in the context of climate action.

**Culture also promotes inclusive economic growth while fostering innovation, creativity, equity and social cohesion and ensuring that a diversity of cultural expressions flourishes in a globalised world.** As of 2022, the cultural and creative sector accounts for 3.1% of global gross domestic product and supports nearly 50 million jobs worldwide, representing 6.2% of all employment. The cultural and creative sector also has a higher representation of youth and women than other sectors, thereby contributing to greater equality. The aspiration to

achieve a more inclusive and balanced trade of cultural goods and services worldwide is also fundamental to fostering greater equality, noting that 95% of international trade in this sector originates from countries in the global North. In this context, the role of the G20 cannot be overemphasised with regards to the African Continental Free Trade Area, which needs to be realised, and implementation mechanisms have to be put in place within all African Union (AU) member states.

**Echoing such momentum, the Final Declaration of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO) World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT 2022) calls to position culture as a stand-alone goal** in the international development agenda beyond 2030 for its impact on social development, economic growth, environmental sustainability, peace and security—a call that was reiterated across the G20 CWG and beyond. The declaration acknowledged culture as a global public good, providing the international community with an important principle to position culture as a structuring element for sustainable development in the discussions of the Post-2030 Agenda. The MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration adopted the following strategic areas of policy engagement for the future:

- (i) cultural rights
- (ii) culture and the digital transformation
- (iii) culture and climate action
- (iv) the economy of culture
- (v) culture, heritage and crisis
- (vi) culture and education.

The G20 CWG will consider these as we engage on identified priority areas under the South African Presidency.

**South Africa has assigned the theme *Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability* for its G20 Presidency.** The CWG will thus align to this theme and focus engagements on mobilising unified efforts and mutual support among member nations with the recognition that in an interconnected world, the challenges faced by one nation can have ripple effects globally, thus reinforcing the need for solidarity. The principle of equality is also essential to ensuring fair treatment, opportunities, and advancement for all individuals and nations, regardless of their economic status, gender, race, geographic location, or other prohibited grounds of discrimination. In this context, culture has a privileged role to play towards increasing equality through the inclusion of diverse perspectives—both among and within

countries—into policymaking and development conversations, bolstering effective multilateralism on a global stage and participatory governance at the local level. While culture is not explicitly recognised as a stand-alone SDG, it is a key enabler of sustainability, from education and economic growth to climate action and peacebuilding. In this context, and in line with the request of member states, the role of culture for inclusive, rights-based and sustainable development, should be fully integrated into the international development agenda after 2030, with a stand-alone goal that reflects the aspirations of member states through clear priority areas and objectives. As major global actors, G20 countries can play a pivotal role in driving such efforts in order to effectively leverage culture for sustainable development.

The G20, under the presidency of South Africa, has identified the following priority areas to guide dialogue within the G20 CWG:

- Priority 1:** Safeguarding and Restitution of Cultural Heritage to protect Human Rights
- Priority 2:** Integrating Cultural Policies in socio-economic strategies to ensure an Inclusive, Rights-based Development
- Priority 3:** Harnessing Digital Technologies for the Protection and Promotion of Culture and Sustainable Economies
- Priority 4:** The Intersection of Culture and Climate Change: Shaping Global Responses

## 2. PRIORITIES, TOPICS AND DELIVERABLES

### 2.1 PRIORITY 1: SAFEGUARDING AND RESTORATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

**The safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage is intrinsically linked with sustainable development as well as with the achievement of fundamental rights and the respect of the equal dignity of all cultures**, notably as regards ensuring the right for peoples and communities to access and enjoy their cultural heritage and expressions, while promoting equal participation and contribution to cultural life through heritage. Such right is undermined by the illicit trafficking of cultural property, which deprives communities of their heritage and cultural expressions to the detriment of both present and future generations, as well as of the livelihoods that such heritage supports. Recognising such impact on communities, the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property is included

in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development under Target 16.4. Likewise, the return and restitution of cultural property and human remains play an important role in enhancing the access to cultural heritage for all communities while also enabling reconciliation and the restoration of human dignity.

**Building on significant advancements under the Indian and Brazilian presidencies of the G20, as well as on the commitments of the MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration**, which notably calls for an “open and inclusive international dialogue for the return and restitution of cultural property”, the purpose of this priority is to advance the protection and restitution of cultural property and human remains, thus contributing to international cooperation and to the enjoyment of cultural rights by all communities. At the same time, this priority will seek to bolster the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property through international cooperation—a crosscutting priority of most presidencies of the G20 CWG since its inception—notably with regard to inventories, provenance research, due diligence efforts, and awareness raising, as well as cooperation among law enforcement authorities. In this context, addressing online illicit sales is paramount, as the rise of online platforms has facilitated the sale of stolen cultural artefacts while also offering tools to combat this issue. Enhanced commitment from countries is also essential to accelerate the implementation of guidelines provided by Interpol, UNESCO, and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in this field, as well as to increase knowledge exchange between law enforcement and heritage officials across G20 members.

**Several normative instruments and international mechanisms are available to ensure the protection of cultural heritage, including in situations of conflict, to support the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property**, as well as to facilitate processes of return and restitution of cultural property. Among them are notably the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols, the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) Convention of 1995, as well as the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property (ICPRCP). The discussions within the G20 CWG, notably under the Indian and Brazilian Presidencies, have underlined the importance of both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, as well as the need to support provenance research, enhanced dialogue at international and regional levels and knowledge building on

restitution cases, with a view to advance more broadly the return and restitution of cultural property.

**Guided by the principles of equality and solidarity, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage must be safeguarded and promoted, with the understanding that they hold universal value.** UNESCO conventions and recommendations, including the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, play a key role in making heritage preservation a shared responsibility, ensuring its transmission to future generations. Such normative instruments and their associated programmes, serve as tools for addressing challenges such as climate change, urbanisation and natural disasters while promoting sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development. The synergies between such instruments should also be highlighted, including the need to promote a more integrated and holistic approach to tangible and intangible cultural heritage through the active participation of communities in its safeguarding and promotion. In view of preserving authenticity and safeguarding the world’s cultural diversity, South Africa places particular importance on the transmission of living heritage— notably skills, knowledge, and traditions—across generations, including by leveraging digital means.

**Cultural institutions, including museums, serve as custodians of collective memory,** safeguarding ancestral legacies and promoting cultural identities, serving as a platform for social dialogue. Museums and galleries are key platforms for the exchange of ideas, promoting artists’ work, fostering intercultural dialogue through sustainable tourism, and educating the public, underscoring their agency for the transformation of societies. The UNESCO 2015 *Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society* highlights the importance of museums in achieving sustainable development through heritage preservation, cultural diversity promotion, and educational initiatives. Museums are now seen as essential for social cohesion and the development of creative industries and tourism. In this context, it is essential for G20 members to support cultural institutions as centres of cultural stewardship. This involves investing in their capacity to preserve, interpret, and promote shared heritage, thus honouring the legacy of ancestors and celebrating human diversity.

## 2.2 PRIORITY 2: INTEGRATING CULTURAL POLICIES WITH SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRATEGIES TO ENSURE HOLISTIC AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

**Aligning cultural policies with socio-economic strategies is essential to ensure an inclusive, rights-based and equity-driven approach to development.**

The impact of culture on sustainable development is now undisputedly acknowledged. The promotion of culturally sensitive approaches to development has proven to bear multifaceted social and economic benefits, spurring inclusion and participation. Cultural policies are a critical lever to forge more equitable societies, addressing the root causes of social inequalities, including those emanating from the legacy of the colonial era or slavery, while also building social capital. Within this priority, members of the G20 CWG will therefore be invited to reflect upon the contribution of culture to inclusion, poverty reduction and sustainable growth, outlining intersectoral and innovative approaches and necessary governance shifts.

**Ensuring the protection of cultural diversity and the full exercise of cultural rights is a foundational dimension of inclusive cultural policies.** Cultural rights are a core component of human rights, together with social and economic rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) both recognise the importance of cultural participation and access to cultural resources as fundamental human rights, essential for individual dignity, community well-being, and the development of societies. Cultural policies should provide an enabling environment to ensure the protection and exercise of cultural rights, allowing all individuals and communities to explore and express their humanity, worldview, and creative pursuits, to equally participate in cultural life, and to benefit economically from these expressions. Cultural policies should also reaffirm the protection of cultural diversity as a core imperative, including within the digital environment, particularly in the face of accelerated globalisation, which tends to marginalise local cultures.

**Considering culture as a common good of humanity,** as agreed by G20 members in the Salvador da Bahia Declaration, means collectively appreciating the diversity of the world's cultures as a fundamental feature of humanity, while at the same time acknowledging the need for investments and infrastructure to safeguard and promote such diversity as a shared responsibility, strengthening ecosystems at a local level to enable culture to flourish around the world. The G20 is a unique platform to intensify cooperation efforts in favour of such a notion,



accompanied by policy and investment frameworks to enable the effective protection and promotion of cultural rights in public policy.

**Strengthening the governance and the economy of the cultural sector is equally critical to underpin inclusive cultural policies.** Despite its economic and social importance, the cultural sector remains widely underfunded and undervalued in national development plans, in the face of competing economic priorities. Cultural institutions and ecosystems are often characterised by volatile economic models, particularly in the developing world, a vulnerability that was notably exposed by the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased investment in culture is therefore necessary to unlock its full potential for sustainable development and inclusive growth, notably by investing in cultural infrastructure, fostering the adaptation of skills through enhanced engagement in education and training, strengthening labour rights to enable decent work and revenue generation, including in the informal sector, as well as enabling systemic partnerships between the public and private sectors to forge more resilient economic models.

**Strengthening knowledge and data is critical to effectively integrate cultural and social policies.** Conceptual frameworks, indicators, and monitoring mechanisms are needed to inform cultural policies, notably as regards access to culture and participation in cultural life, intercultural dialogue and trust, decent work, social inclusion, citizen participation, community resilience, and well-being, among others. Existing international frameworks can be harnessed for that purpose, including the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics and the UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators Framework, which includes a set of indications dedicated to inclusion and participation.

## 2.3 PRIORITY 3: DIGITAL ECONOMY AND THE PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

**As the world rapidly transitions into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the intersection between culture, creativity, and technology has emerged as a crucial driver of economic growth, diversification, and inclusive development.** Priority 3 of the G20 CWG focuses on “Harnessing Digital Technologies for the Protection and Promotion of Culture and Sustainable Economies”, emphasising the transformative potential of digital technologies, including the digital economy and 4IR technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), and their multifaceted impact on the global cultural and economic landscape. These technological

advancements bring both challenges and opportunities across the entire value chain of the culture and creative sector. Globally, while some countries are leveraging a digital-led creative economy as a catalyst for economic growth and sustainable development through dedicated policies, institutions, and frameworks, many countries still require strengthened support and cooperation, at both the regional and international levels, to fully unlock the potential of digital transformation for the culture sector across all its dimensions.

**Strengthening dialogue and cooperation among the G20 membership is essential for addressing the challenges arising from the impact of the digital transformation on the cultural sector.** These challenges include, inter alia, bridging the digital gap for artists and creatives, ensuring equal access to culture online for all, addressing disparities in the global exchange of cultural goods and services, particularly due to the unequal concentration of global cultural platforms, and protecting cultural and linguistic diversity in the digital space. The global reach of digital platforms can lead to cultural homogenisation, where a limited number of cultures, often overshadowing local and Indigenous knowledge and languages, and cultural expressions of vulnerable groups. Protecting and promoting cultural diversity in the digital space is therefore crucial to maintaining the richness of the cultures of the world. Ensuring the cultural and linguistic diversity of online content has been central to both the previous G20 CWG deliberations as well as the UN Global Digital Compact adopted in September 2024, which establishes common principles for the digital space and guides global cooperation on digital governance. The G20 Salvador da Bahia Declaration equally calls for enhancing the cultural and linguistic diversity of online content through discoverability, availability and accessibility of culturally diverse and local content, including through international cooperation.

**The cultural and creative sector drives economic growth and diversification, particularly through the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) and revenues generated by cultural tourism.** The digital economy has amplified the reach and impact of the CCIs, enabling creators to access global markets and audiences. The convergence of culture and technology in the digital economy is also driving innovation and new models of entrepreneurship. E-commerce and digital platforms have notably enabled artists and creators to sell their goods and services directly to consumers around the world, reducing barriers related to geography, distribution, and access to international networks. Creative industries are therefore at the forefront of developing new business models, products, and services that leverage digital platforms, AI, and other 4IR technologies. This

innovation helps diversify economies, particularly in developing countries where traditional industries may be in decline. Moreover, creative content also plays a vital role in shaping the digital world, giving visual life to the digital environment. As such, the digital space has become a fertile ground for a more integrated and concerted creative economy, by pulling on the many levers of the creative industry: writing, design, video, software, music, publishing, photography, performance art, games, research and development (R&D), among others. Advancements in 3D technologies, augmented and virtual reality, remote sensing, and GIS have also significantly contributed to cultural heritage management and conservation. These technologies have increased interest and awareness, especially among younger audiences, and, by leveraging social media, can make curated digital cultural experiences accessible to a global audience. This, in turn, helps drive the global demand for cultural tourism.

**Additionally, the UNESCO 2017 Digital Guidelines provide a framework to implement the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in a digital environment.** The guidelines call upon countries to address the challenges and opportunities that digital technologies present to cultural diversity, as well as stress the need to support the creative industries in the digital economy, encouraging the development of innovative business models that allow for the global dissemination of cultural goods and services while also promoting local creativity and heritage. However, challenges persist, requiring new developmental frameworks and investments that recognise the value of the CCIs and support their growth. A significant obstacle lies in the unequal access to information, infrastructure, data, capacity-building, and the benefits of the digital economy. The rapid pace of technological change in the 4IR era requires continuous adaptation by CCIs. Ensuring that creators have the skills and resources to navigate emerging technologies, including AI tools, is crucial for their long-term success and the sustainability of the industry, enabling it to continue driving development.

**While the digital economy offers vast opportunities, access to digital technologies remains unequal, particularly in developing countries.** While digital technologies can enhance access to culture, the digital divide can exacerbate inequalities, particularly in low-income countries. Bridging the digital divide is crucial for ensuring that the benefits of digital culture are shared equitably. As highlighted in the 2024 UNESCO Framework for Culture and Arts Education, learners, educators and teachers should have equitable and inclusive access to infrastructure and resources and learning opportunities to develop the skills and

competencies to benefit from digital technologies, including AI. Bridging the digital divide is therefore essential to ensure that the benefits of the digital economy are shared equitably and that all creators and creatives have the tools they need to thrive.

**Additionally, AI is having a multifaceted and ripple effect across the value chains for creative content.** AI helps creators match content with audiences more effectively by analysing and classifying users' preferences, thus enabling personalised recommendations. AI is being used to create content in creative industries, including music, art, fashion and film. It can likewise aid production by performing tasks that are too difficult or time-consuming for humans. While these advances disrupt creative industries in positive ways, they also raise concerns, such as the amplification of disinformation and misinformation on social media, driven by algorithms that promote viral sharing. As a result, it is crucial for the G20 membership to debate the appropriate level of responsibility for AI developers in addressing these issues, as well as areas of progress, notably as regards transparency, ethical approach of fair payment of artists and creators, among others. The 2021 UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence serves as a valuable reference document to guide ongoing discussions on AI. Moreover, the rapid expansion of digital platforms, as well as AI tools, has raised concerns about the protection of intellectual property (IP) rights, especially since the advent of consumer-grade AI across software and digital tooling. Ensuring that creators are fairly compensated for their work and that their IP is protected in the digital environment is critical for sustaining the growth of the culture sector, especially CCIs, and its developmental impacts.

## 2.4 PRIORITY 4: THE INTERSECTION OF CULTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE: SHAPING GLOBAL RESPONSES

**G20 Culture Working Groups from previous years have achieved commendable advancements on the intersection between culture and climate change,** notably in the Salvador de Bahia Declaration under the Brazilian Presidency. Such advancements include commitments to safeguard tangible and intangible cultural heritage from the risks of climate change and natural disasters, as well as scaling up culture-based strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation, including resilience-building, all underpinned by technical and economic cooperation among countries. Within other policy fora, it is worth noting the adoption of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Framework for Global Climate Change Resilience at COP28, which marked a significant advancement by setting



a specific target for the protection of cultural heritage. Also noteworthy is the launch of the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action at the first-ever Ministerial Meeting on Culture and Climate at COP28, sustained at COP29, which advocates for effective steps towards unlocking the potential of culture to support climate action, notably by fully integrating culture into relevant COP processes.

**Tackling the multifaceted impact of climate change on culture is paramount.**

Climate change is one of the major threats facing the conservation and safeguarding of both tangible and intangible heritage worldwide affecting, for example, an estimated 30% of World Heritage sites. Extreme weather events imperil cultural and natural heritage sites, while also jeopardising the safeguarding of living heritage practices. Similarly, the cultural and creative sector is vulnerable to climate change effects, including damage to infrastructure, disruptions to events, escalating costs, supply chain issues, and increased risks for precarious workers.

**In addition, the support of Member States for the ecological transition of the cultural sector is another important area of commitment**

taking into account the important ecological footprint of carbon-intensive production processes notably in the creative industries. By embracing sustainable practices, such as renewable energy, waste reduction, and efficient logistics, notably in the field of tourism, the cultural sector can reduce its carbon footprint, enhance its preparedness for climate disruptions and contribute to adaptation strategies.

**In this context, culture holds a transformative role as a driver and enabler of climate action and resilience,**

increasingly recognised as a powerful resource for addressing the impact of climate change through both mitigation and adaptation measures, including that of addressing loss and damage. In this context, there is a need for strengthened commitments and actions to drive culture-based climate action, particularly given the disproportionate impact faced by certain regions and countries, such as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Another important area at the intersection of culture and climate action is harnessing the power of culture to raise awareness about the impacts of climate change to support societal behavioural change and promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, particularly through creative content that highlights environmental challenges, inspiring broader action across industries.

**Indigenous and local knowledge systems serve as important reservoirs of information and understanding about our environment and changing climate,** offering insights for resilience building, disaster risk reduction, and climate adaptation. When interacting with scientific knowledge, local and indigenous knowledge systems allow policies to be relevant to local ecosystems and to take into account the diversity of factors that shape communities' responses to climate change, which include rainwater harvesting, agroforestry, indigenous crop varieties, pastoralism, drought resistance, livestock breed, and weather forecasting.

### 3. DELIVERABLES

Around the four aforementioned priorities of the G20 South African Presidency, the following deliverables could be considered:

- A **G20 Side Event at MONDIACULT 2025** – UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (29 September to 1 October 2025).
- **Online thematic workshops** bringing together experts designated by all members of the group, with a view to foster inclusive dialogue, build knowledge and share good practices among the membership, while also informing the preparation of the Ministerial Declaration, which may lead to a synthetic publication encompassing the main policy outcomes of the 2025 G20 CWG. Two thematic focuses are identified in particular at this stage: Culture for Climate Action, and the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property to effectively implement the UNESCO 1970 Convention in the G20 countries.
- **Side events organised on the margins of the meetings of the G20 CWG** in relation to the four priorities, engaging both national and local stakeholders as well as representatives of the membership towards an inclusive dialogue, which could include a training component.
- A **calendar** of existing festivals, exchange programmes, artistic-cultural residencies in the G20 countries to promote dialogue and cultural diplomacy across the membership.

The deliverables will be implemented in cooperation with UNESCO as Lead Knowledge Partner, and other partners as appropriate.