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UCLG Committee

A CULTURE GOAL IN THE SDGS: CONTEXT, ACTORS AND CHALLENGES **BILBAO**

SEPTEMBER 2024



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REPORT



INTRODUCTION

The seminar **A Culture Goal in the SDGs: Context, Actors, and Challenges** was held on September 27, 2024, in Sala Bastida of Azkuna Zentroa, Bilbao. Organized by UCLG and Bilbao City Council, it aimed to present the international actions that the **Culture 2030 Goal** campaign is carrying out to include culture as a Goal in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, in particular, the document “**A Culture Goal**” that was presented at Mondiacult. The seminar also aimed to reinforce the argument for a standalone culture goal and discuss the strategic challenges and opportunities for achieving this vision, in collaboration with the campaign.

The **Culture 2030 Goal** campaign has been working since 2013 to achieve a Culture Goal and, “in the meantime”, to ensure that cultural issues are as present as possible in local, national and international programmes to achieve the current SDGs. In September 2022, the campaign presented an initial proposal or **zero draft** of the “Culture Goal” in the framework of the UNESCO Mondiacult 2022 Conference, held in Mexico City. In the Final Declaration of that conference, UNESCO explicitly mentions the need to explore such a Goal.

The international community has already started to reflect on the challenges and terms of reference for a post-2030 Agenda. It is worth considering as soon as possible how culture could be given its rightful place in the commitments, goals and targets that will eventually be adopted through the United Nations mechanisms. Achieving this would facilitate a strong consideration of cultural issues as essential for the full and equal potential of all human beings, through explicit mentions of culture, with a standalone goal, as well as through education, gender equality, sustainable production and consumption, liveable cities, climate action, peace, justice, and inclusion, among others.

In this context, the seminar was an opportunity to discuss with some of the most relevant cultural actors the context of the proposed Culture Goal and the conceptual and strategic challenges it poses.

THE SEMINAR

The seminar was structured in two sessions moderated by Jordi Pascual and Marta Llobet (UCLG Culture Committee), followed by Q&A segments and conclusions.

After institutional presentations by Eider Inunciaga, Councillor for Agenda 2030 and International Affairs, Bilbao City Council, and Gonzalo Olabarría, Councillor for Culture and Governance, Bilbao City Council, Jordi Pascual, Assistant Secretary General for Knowledge Co-Creation and Coordinator of the UCLG Culture Committee, introduced the first roundtable, “The context of the proposal of a Culture Goal”. The roundtable counted with the participation of Alfons Martinell, Director of the Pau Casals UNESCO Chair, former Professor at the University of Girona; Anne Mistler, Deputy Mayor on Culture, Eurometropole Strasbourg (online); Alicia Sellés, President of the Foundation for Book and Reading, member of IFLA - the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions; Gabriel Caballero, ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) Focal Point for the UN SDGs (online) and Emmanuelle Robert, Programme Specialist, Culture Sector, UNESCO (online).

The second roundtable, “Conceptual and strategic challenges for a “Culture Goal”, gathered Jordi Martí, Secretary of State for Culture, Ministry for Culture, Spain; Sébastien Vauzelle, Director, Secretariat of the United Nations Local2030 Coalition; Arantzazu Acha, Director of UN Etxea, and John Crowley, international consultant, author of the Culture Goal proposal for the Culture 2030 Goal campaign. Both roundtables were followed by rounds of questions by the audience to the participants.



ROUNDTABLE 1: “THE CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL OF A CULTURE GOAL”

The session was opened by **Eider Inunciaga**, Councillor for Agenda 2030 and International Affairs. She emphasized Bilbao’s leadership in cultural innovation and its transformation through culture since hosting the first Culture Summit in 2015. She also discussed the intersection of culture and sustainability, citing examples from Bilbao’s strategic plans that include the 2030 Agenda localization and the city’s commitment to cultural rights. Finally, she stressed that culture acts as both a unifier and a driver of social and economic development, deeply rooted in Bilbao’s policies.

“CULTURE IS OUR SOUL AND OUR CONNECTION TO HUMANITY. IT’S A TRANSFORMATIVE TOOL THAT BILBAO HAS PLACED AT THE CENTER OF ITS DEVELOPMENT.”

Gonzalo Olabarria, Councillor for Culture and Governance, continued to provide inputs on the local context of Bilbao. In this regard, Bilbao’s strategic cultural plan (2023–2033) was noted as a guiding document that aligns with the city’s efforts to advance cultural inclusion, sustainability, and cohesion. He also positioned Bilbao as a hub for international collaboration and as a model city for leveraging culture in global sustainability dialogues. Reflecting on the global context, he highlighted the absence of a culture-specific SDG as a missed opportunity in 2015 but applauded ongoing efforts to integrate culture into post-2030 agendas.

“THE ABSENCE OF A DEDICATED CULTURE GOAL IN THE 2015 SDGS WAS A MISSED OPPORTUNITY. HOWEVER, OUR CONTINUED ADVOCACY REFLECTS OUR COMMITMENT TO EMBEDDING CULTURE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS.”



After those two institutional presentations, **Jordi Pascual**, Assistant Secretary General for Knowledge Co-Creation and Coordinator of the UCLG Culture Committee, kicked-off the roundtable with the participants. He first traced the evolution of the Culture Goal campaign from 2013 to its current proposal, emphasizing milestones such as Mondiacult 2022 and the analyses of Voluntary National and Local Reviews. He commented on the campaign's conceptual framework, highlighting the interdependence of culture with education, gender equality, urban development, and climate action, and read the targets of the first Culture Goal proposal developed by the campaign and presented in Mondiacult 2022. He also asserted the necessity of advocating for cultural integration across global policies, underscoring the campaign's resilience and persistence.

"THE JOURNEY FROM THE 2013 CAMPAIGN TO THE 2022 MONDIACULT PROPOSAL HIGHLIGHTS THE RESILIENCE AND DETERMINATION OF CULTURAL ADVOCATES WORLDWIDE."

Then Jordi Pascual introduced the first participant, **Alfons Martinell**, Pau Casals UNESCO Chair. He stated that working together for a Culture Goal was a positive idea, framing culture as an essential system within the broader context of sustainable development, advocating for its recognition as a core pillar of global agendas. He then addressed the historic challenges faced by cultural advocates, including conceptual resistance within international cooperation frameworks, and proposed actionable steps as well, including amplifying the voices of civil society and cultural networks and aligning efforts with key milestones such as Mondiacult 2025.

"WITHOUT INTEGRATING THE CULTURAL SYSTEM, GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CANNOT BE FULLY ACHIEVED."



Anne Mistler, Deputy Mayor on Culture, Strasbourg, explained why Strasbourg had decided to include an SDG 18 on Culture in their Local Voluntary Report to the High Level Political Forum. In this regard, she shared Strasbourg's integration of an "SDG 18" cultural goal in municipal policies, backed by a significant budget allocation for cultural development. She highlighted as the main reason the importance of cultural rights as foundational to sustainable urban transformation and societal inclusivity. She also linked the VLR, SDG 18 and a major event such as the UNESCO's World Book Capital, that Strasbourg is organising this year, demonstrating how cultural initiatives can drive community engagement and resilience.

"STRASBOURG'S ODD 18 PROVES THAT CULTURE IS THE GLUE BINDING TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTAINABLE GOALS IN URBAN SETTINGS."

As president of the Fundación por el Libro y la Lectura and member of IFLA, the world federation of libraries and the champion on the right to information, **Alicia Sellés** shared her views on the implementation of target 16.10, after ten years since the approval of the SDGs. She highlighted the transformative role of libraries as cultural and informational hubs, especially in reducing inequalities and promoting education, and the success of IFLA's advocacy efforts, such as the Library Map of the World, which connects libraries with SDG localization processes. She also mentioned the importance of data and indicators in showcasing the contributions of libraries and culture to sustainable development, as key elements that a Goal 18 should aim to reinforce.

"LIBRARIES ARE MORE THAN REPOSITORIES OF KNOWLEDGE; THEY ARE PIVOTAL IN REDUCING INEQUALITIES AND FOSTERING SOCIETAL PARTICIPATION."

Gabriel Caballero, ICOMOS Focal Point for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, participated online to the session. He critiqued the current SDG framework for its lack of robust indicators for cultural heritage, calling for more comprehensive and representative data. He also argued for the role of heritage as both an enabler and driver of sustainable development, extending beyond SDG 11.4 to address broader challenges, and highlighted the need for increased collaboration between cultural actors and policymakers to strengthen the integration of cultural heritage in global development agendas.

"HERITAGE IS NOT JUST ABOUT PRESERVATION—IT'S A DRIVER OF INNOVATION AND RESILIENCE."

To finalise the roundtable, **Emmanuelle Robert**, Programme Specialist, Culture Sector, UNESCO, commented online on the active support of UNESCO towards a standalone Culture Goal in the shaping of the Post2030 Agenda. She focused on the necessary human dimension of development and advocated for more inclusive and culturally diverse multilateralism in the fragmented global policy landscape, capable to engage a

diversity of voices and cultures. Finally, she recalled that a more sustainable financing system for the cultural sector is crucial to ensure its development.

“A standalone Culture Goal is not just an aspiration—it is a necessity. Culture shapes identities, fosters inclusion, and builds bridges in a fragmented world. It is time for the global development agenda to reflect this indispensable role.”

ROUNDTABLE 2: “CONCEPTUAL AND STRATEGIC CHALLENGES FOR A “CULTURE GOAL”

As a start to Roundtable 2, Jordi Pascual and Marta Llobet presented the UCLG Culture Committee’s programmes and activities, which are based on the promotion of culture as a pillar of sustainable development, and the advocacy for a standalone Culture Goal, and introduced the 10 targets of the 2022 Culture Goal proposal.

Jordi Martí, Secretary of State for Culture, Ministry for Culture, Spain, emphasized the critical need for a standalone Culture Goal within the SDGs, arguing that culture is essential for fostering inclusive multilateralism and bridging global communities. He highlighted Spain’s leadership in integrating culture into sustainable development policies and its support for global cultural events like Mondiacult 2025. Martí identified key challenges, including the lack of dedicated cultural indicators and the need for stronger alliances among nations and cultural networks. He called for actionable strategies, including measurable indicators and broad-based civil society engagement, to advance the Culture Goal campaign. His message underscored culture’s role as a fundamental right and pillar of sustainable human development.



“10 YEARS AFTER THE ADOPTION OF THE SDGS, IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE, THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT AND GROWING INEQUALITIES, IT WILL ONLY MAKE SENSE TO WORK FOR A CULTURE GOAL IF CULTURE IN GENERAL IS MAINSTREAMED INTO THE REST OF THE GOALS.”

Sébastien Vauzelle, Director, Secretariat of the United Nations Local2030 Coalition, similarly stressed the critical role of culture in localizing the SDGs. He highlighted the importance of integrating cultural dimensions into global development policies, particularly through partnerships with local governments and grassroots organizations. Vauzelle emphasized that cultural initiatives not only foster social cohesion but also enhance resilience and innovation in addressing global challenges. He identified Mondiacult 2025 as a key opportunity to advance the Culture Goal and called for collaborative efforts to align cultural objectives with broader SDG strategies. His intervention reinforced the importance of connecting global frameworks with local realities to ensure the success of a standalone Culture Goal.

“TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, WE MUST CONNECT GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS WITH LOCAL REALITIES. CULTURE IS THE BRIDGE THAT ENSURES INCLUSIVITY, INNOVATION, AND RESILIENCE IN THIS PROCESS.”

Arantzazu Acha, Director of UN Etxea, highlighted the role of UN Etxea as a bridge between international organizations, local governments, and civil society to promote the localization of global agendas like the SDGs. She emphasized the role of cultural



policies in fostering equality, human rights and resilience, particularly in the face of global challenges such as climate change and social inequality. Acha highlighted the necessity of aligning local and national efforts to promote cultural inclusion and stressed the value of partnerships between governments, civil society, and international organizations. She identified the Pact for the Future as a positive framework to build upon and urged stakeholders to amplify advocacy efforts leading to Mondiacult 2025, positioning it as a pivotal moment for cultural integration within the SDG framework.

“CULTURE IS THE THREAD THAT CONNECTS PEOPLE TO THEIR COMMUNITIES AND THE WORLD. BY EMBEDDING IT INTO DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS, WE ENSURE NOT ONLY SUSTAINABILITY BUT ALSO DIGNITY AND EQUITY FOR ALL.”

John Crowley, International consultant and author of the Culture Goal Proposal for the Culture 2030 Goal Campaign, highlighted the strengths of the 2022 Culture Goal proposal, emphasizing its potential to reshape global development priorities. He identified the transition from Mondiacult 2022 to Mondiacult 2025 as critical for advancing the proposal, emphasizing the importance of aligning global cultural narratives with SDG processes. Advocated for conceptual clarity and strategic focus, recommending actions to mobilize political and civic support for a standalone culture goal. Recognizing the challenges in incorporating culture into the SDGs, Crowley called for conceptual clarity and strategic action. He underscores the importance of developing robust indicators, fostering global partnerships, and mobilizing political and civic support to advance the Culture Goal.

“STRATEGIC ACTIONS, ROBUST INDICATORS, AND GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS ARE VITAL AS WE APPROACH MONDIACULT 2025 TO ADVANCE THE CULTURE GOAL.”





CONCLUSIONS

The seminar “A Culture Goal in the SDGs: Context, Actors, and Challenges” underscored the necessity of integrating culture into global sustainable development agendas. With examples from Bilbao, Strasbourg, and beyond, the event showcased the significant progress made since the inception of the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, highlighted by robust discussions and diverse insights from global experts.

While celebrating the progress achieved, including the recognition of culture in frameworks such as the Pact for the Future and political declarations like the UN SDG Summit 2023, participants acknowledged the need for strategic actions. These include strategic advocacy and global partnerships, such as working closely with UN Major Groups, and deepening UN engagement to anchor culture in global policy dialogues, refining the conceptual framework, developing inclusive data systems and comprehensive indicators, and fostering collaborations to build momentum for the inclusion of a standalone culture goal in post-2030 global agendas. The upcoming Mondiacult 2025 and the UN World Social Summit (2025) were emphasized as decisive moments for advancing this ambition.

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