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Culture and technological advancement:

Articulating the value of culture to inclusive innovation and sustainable development

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[1] Indicate the specific type of cultural stakeholder, for example, civil society, cultural organization, educational institution, international organization, non-governmental organization, youth, or other.

Abstract

The world is grappling with multiple and interlinked radical transformations: from climate breakdown to the undermining of democratic infrastructure; from social and political polarisation to the disruptive acceleration of digital technologies. In this context, there is an urgent need to rethink the models that guide innovation and development, and to realign technological advancement with ecological and social wellbeing. As global systems struggle to respond to these compounding challenges, culture is a vital, yet underutilised foundation for shaping human-centric technologies that lay foundations for inclusive and sustainable futures.

This paper argues that the cultural and creative sectors are exceptionally well placed to not only drive innovation but also to shape technologies that are inclusive, ethical and resilient. It responds to this growing complexity of the relationship between digital technology and culture - particularly in light of the opportunities and risks posed by AI - by putting forward two key principles: (1) the cultural and creative sectors are key to innovation, and (2) that interdisciplinary, international collaboration enhances technological diversity and resilience.

In making this argument, this paper will:

- Examine how culture can inform and reshape technological innovation considering its transversal or foundational role in driving sustainable development (section 2).
- Explore the role of artists, cultural practitioners, and heritage sector in developing ethical and resilient technologies (section 3)
- Highlight international examples, spanning ASEAN to Africa, where culture and technology intersect to address real world challenges from climate adaptation to digital heritage (section 4)
- Offer policy recommendations that centre culture and creative sectors as central to innovation (section 5)

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1. Introduction

As highlighted by the 2022 Mondiacult Declaration, technology and culture share a complex and close relationship. Technologies can improve access to culture, foster creativity, drive innovation, and support the safeguarding and documentation of heritage. However, they also present risks, such as the erosion of cultural and linguistic diversity, the perpetuation of encoded biases, and the exacerbation of social, cultural, and economic inequalities.

Steering technological advancement towards diversity, sustainability, and inclusion, as opposed to inequality, polarisation, and bias, requires international cooperation grounded in new models for innovation that radically diversify technological advancements. In this context, culture is a vital yet underutilised foundation for shaping human-centric technologies and laying the groundwork for inclusive and sustainable futures.

These new inclusive models often emerge when technologies are developed in collaboration with cultural and creative practitioners or when the needs of the cultural and creative sectors are meaningfully integrated in the development of technologies. Here, cultural policy plays a pivotal role: not only does it foster the equitable and ethical adoption of technology within the cultural and creative sectors, but it also has the potential to ensure that innovation taking place within the arts and cultural sector influences wider industry and research.

In making this case, this paper will:

- Examine the role of culture in driving sustainable and inclusive futures across sectors (section 2).
- Explore the role of artists, cultural practitioners, and the heritage sector in developing ethical and resilient technologies (section 3)
- Highlight international examples where culture and technology intersect to address real world challenges from climate adaptation to digital heritage (section 4)
- Offer policy recommendations to support creative innovation (section 5)

2. Culture-led approaches to Sustainable and Inclusive Futures

Before discussing the role of culture in technological advancement, it is important to acknowledge that culture plays a central role in guiding more sustainable or inclusive approaches to societal development across sectors.

This is increasingly evidenced through a range of culture-led and culture-sensitive approaches that are reshaping how development is understood and practiced:

- **Culture-led development** includes a range of non-monetised benefits, such as greater social inclusiveness and rootedness, resilience, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship for individuals and communities, and the use of local resources, skills, and knowledge. Respecting and supporting cultural expressions contributes to strengthening the social capital of a community and foster trust in public institutions.

- **Culture-sensitive approaches** have demonstrated how to address both the economic and human rights aspects of poverty simultaneously, while offering innovative and multisectoral solutions to complex development challenges. (UNESCO 2012)
- **Cultural initiatives can make a unique contribution** to sustainable development by prioritising people-centred and culturally sensitive approaches that result in effective development in fields ranging from climate policy to peace and security. (Brennert et al. 2023)

This cross-cutting aspect of culture in public policymaking is increasingly evident in the Voluntary National Reviews submitted by Member States. These reports, which countries are invited to provide to monitor their progress in achieving the United Nations 2030 Agenda, serve as key indicators of public policy priorities and commitments at the national level, offering a global view of how countries envisage a more sustainable future. Out of the 205 reports submitted between 2016 and 2020, approximately 119 made substantive references to culture in relation to all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the growing recognition among Member States of the transversal role of culture for sustainable development. Annual reports on the implementation of the goals have also increasingly recognised this role. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 acknowledged that while culture and respect for cultural diversity remain undervalued and underutilised in the push for progress on the Goals, 'Greater consideration of culture's role in supporting the achievement of the Goals - including within relevant indicators - would generate an important boost for (the SDGs) implementation'. (UN, 2023)

In 2020, the British Council published its 'Missing Pillar: Culture's Contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals report. This report serves as a tool to enhance understanding of the connection between the arts, culture, and sustainable development. It is a first step in framing the impact of our British Council programmes alongside the SDGs. The Missing Pillar explores the place of culture in the SDGs through research, policy and practice. It analyses where arts and culture as a sector and as a creative process can fit within several goals, including their targets and indicators. 11 British Council programmes provide examples of cultural initiatives around the world, tackling a variety of issues and cutting across sectors, such as sustainable fashion, creative inclusion, and cultural heritage protection.

'The Missing Pillar' aimed to bridge the gap between policy and practice by encouraging connections between cultural and community-led activity and the thematic priorities of the SDGs. The report recommended finding better ways to measure and share the impact of participation in cultural life, as well as involving communities and local actors to understand cross-cutting needs and ecosystems. The report also recognised the importance of digital technologies and the climate emergency as emerging priorities to respond to. The conclusions of the Missing Pillar report, which identified arts and culture as key cross-cutting drivers of development, are closely linked to many SDGs.

The follow-up Missing Foundation: Culture's place within and beyond the SDGs (2023) report underscores the foundational role of culture in driving sustainable development, both within and beyond the parameters established by the SDGs. It provides insights tailored for policymakers and practitioners operating at the intersection of cultural and developmental spheres. Globally, the cultural sector recognises the intrinsic connection between culture and sustainable development. Cultural programmes reach beyond the confines of the SDGs, impacting on community development, intercultural dialogue, and cultural rights:

> *"Culture is best positioned to create the conditions for local understandings and applications of sustainable development to happen. Including through arts-based*

> *approaches, culture can help to renegotiate relationships with self, others, and the planet, ultimately increasing systems change capacity in our communities."*[2] (Brennert et al, 2023)

3. Culture-led innovation and technological advancement

In a few contexts, the ability for communities to increase "systems change capacity" is needed, especially in responding to the rapid advancement of technologies.

As technology impacts our social and cultural lives, there is a recognised need for collective action in (re)directing technologies towards sustainable and inclusive futures (for eg. UN's Digitization for Sustainability Initiative; The Coalition for Digital Environmental Sustainability; UN Pact for the Future). In this context, art, culture, and heritage serve as an overlooked, however essential, laboratory for guiding us towards the opportunities of technology, rather than the crises.

For example, The British Council's Arts and Technologies in India: Reimagining the Future report highlights:

"Artists are creatively decolonising technologies, challenging technological bias, and amplifying India's rich culture in visions of the future. Cultural heritage and creative technologies: Artists are connecting handicraft arts with technology to embrace, promote, preserve, and reimagine traditional Indian artistic cultures. Artists are decolonising Western-developed technology, adapting systems and diversifying datasets to better represent the Indian context Indo Futurism: Indo Futurism brings speculative storytelling closer home to India, integrating narratives rooted in Indian identity, culture, and aesthetics in liberatory futures development." (Barua et al, 2024)

Harnessing the cultural and creative sectors as drivers of sustainable and inclusive technologies is of utmost importance as countries internationally foreground technological advancement in their national agendas.

In the UK, the Modern Industrial Strategy identifies both 'Digital & Technology' and 'Creative Industries' as priority growth sectors (UK Government, 2025), whilst the AI Opportunities Action Plan emphasises the UK's imperative to actively 'shape the AI revolution' (DSIT, 2025). India's government has set ambitious targets for technology to represent 20–25% of national GDP, with artificial intelligence as a central component (PTI, 2023). Meanwhile, the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) seeks to generate US$2 trillion in value by 2030 through integrated digital economies across member nations.

Given this context of accelerating technological progress, international cooperation has become increasingly vital. The UN's Global Digital Compact underscores that multilateral collaboration is fundamental to achieving a robust and "inclusive digital economy," maintaining an "open, safe, and secure digital space," and ensuring effective "governance [of] AI for humanity" (UN, 2025). This collaborative imperative is exemplified by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Science and Technology Network, which examines emerging technology opportunities and challenges through strategic partnerships spanning more than 65 global locations.

Against this backdrop, a substantial governance gap has emerged in the context of rapid technological and digital transformation, between the accelerating development of technologies and the need to ensure they are all culturally sensitive and contextually relevant to all communities. In this way, culture, or the cultural sector, can help play a critical role in shaping

new digital technologies, ensuring they are human-centred, inclusive, and aligned with local values and lived experiences, while also protecting fundamental human rights.

As is stated in the British Council's report *Why technology needs artists* (Andrews & Hawcroft, 2025):

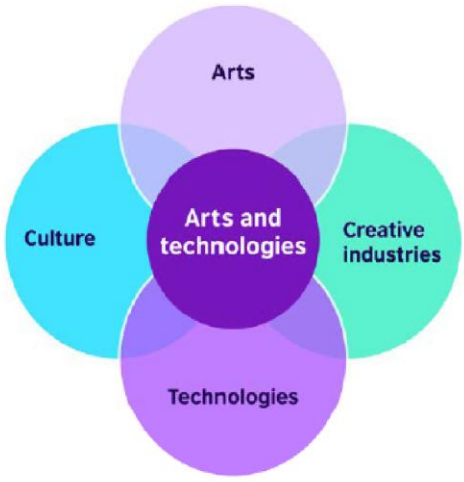
Artists have always driven the development of technologies. From telling stories that seed future breakthroughs to retraining AI on rare cultural archives, art, as both expressive and generative from, reimagines what technology is and who it is for. Yet, this practice often happens on the margins. However, in a world where understanding and trust between people are increasingly important, arts-led innovation becomes a vital resource.

Why technology needs artists: 40 international perspectives (Andrews & Hawcroft, 2025)

The following three case studies exemplify this, from three perspectives across the cultural ecosystem: arts and technologies innovation in Southeast Asia; digital cultural heritage preservation in the Middle East and Africa; and the use of cultural data for climate solutions in the UK.

Case Study One: ASEAN Arts & Technologies

The arts and technologies ecosystem in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is shaped by tradition, modernity, and a drive for prosperity. It has evolved significantly over the past decade, as marked by the expansion of social media platforms, immersive experiences and artificial intelligence. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift to hybrid and digital-first approaches in the arts, with a focus on upskilling and new livelihood opportunities for creative professionals. Artists are pushing the boundaries of practice by utilising technologies in lighting, 3D, sensors, sound production, and others. The report, Arts and Technologies in ASEAN: Interconnected Parts, articulates the reciprocal relationship between the arts, cultural, and creative industries and the advancement of technology. By exploring and understanding innovation at this dynamic intersection, the study uncovers the impact of technologies in the hands of artists and creatives both within and beyond arts. Key findings reveal that artists are driving new paradigms of creativity by integrating traditional practices with emerging technologies.



The arts and technologies ecosystem is dynamic, relying on collaboration between governments, educational institutions, startups, and civil society. Additionally, the blurring of boundaries between art, science, and technology is leading to new forms of artistic expression and innovation. These findings set the stage for a detailed analysis of initiatives that can be effectively supported through policy, investment, and international collaboration.

ASEAN's arts and technologies are driven by artist-led innovations that enhance tradition and establish new paradigms of artistic expression. Artists are advancing fields like fashion, new media, animation and music, setting new standards for creativity, research and development, and global engagement. Interdisciplinarity has blurred boundaries between traditional art forms, new media, and technology. Initiatives often bring together art, science, and community engagement. Practices highlight and challenge the evolving role of artists, who are increasingly becoming researchers, innovators, coders, and entrepreneurs. But more importantly, this evolution highlights the capacity of artists as connectors of knowledge and life-long learners.

The arrival of generative AI (GenAI) is a double-edged sword. Advanced AI models and tools remain largely proprietary and paying, limiting artists to content generation rather than higher-level innovation. Practitioners navigate this context by using technology selectively and ensuring it enhances rather than overshadows creativity. But this underscores a broader trend: despite technological advancements, ASEAN artists still view creativity as a fundamentally human, analogue endeavour.

Technology has transformed creative jobs and artistic practices. Design processes like research, prototyping, and ideation allow artists to become more competitive. While highly creative tasks are still highly valued, AI automation is displacing repetitive roles and creating job insecurity

Big technology companies impact accessibility, especially for developing countries. This has created dependencies through restrictive licensing, high fees and potential barriers to entry for smaller or independent creators. While open-source platforms offer flexibility, they often lack the resources and stability provided by big tech, creating barriers for smaller creators. Adobe Creative Cloud, for instance, generated over USD 11.5 billion in 2023, with Photoshop being used by over 90% of creative professionals.

Case Study Two: Digital Cultural Heritage

The UK's Cultural Protection Fund has launched sector-leading research on digital heritage, with a report identifying 52 technologies for protecting cultural heritage and outlining areas for future intervention (McKenna et al, 2025). Understanding (Digital) Cultural Heritage on a global level requires us to be sensitive to a range of voices, perspectives and narratives. Our New Hybrid Reality: Digital tools have profoundly transformed the way we interact with cultural heritage, merging the physical and digital to create a hybrid reality. The increasing digital documentation of heritage requires careful curation, with an emphasis on decentralising decision-making to include diverse voices while maintaining the relevance of data in different contexts and settings.

Digital Cultural Heritage is a growing field of practice, well-placed to engage with and navigate these complexities, building on our histories to imagine and engineer shared futures. Cultural heritage practitioners have already been navigating hybrid realities for some time, fostering an emergent approach that is part-material, part-digital and inherently networked. Museums and heritage sites offer digital collections, virtual tours, immersive audio-guides and game-style visitor experiences; archaeologists and conservationists use a vast array of 3D scanning tools and bio-technologies to further their research; community groups use immersive technologies to facilitate

decolonial recurations of displaced heritage materials; preservation specialists leverage 3D printing to reconstruct destroyed sites; and archaeologists utilise Artificial Intelligence (AI) to detect new sites and objects.

In Ethiopia, for example, Yatreda's 'Strong Hair' Project uses Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) to preserve the unique cultural expressions woven into in traditional hairstyles, whilst ensuring ownership of these digital artefacts remains with the community. In Kenya, Black Rhino's MediAR platform is offering opportunities for everyday people to create Extended Reality (XR) designs and monetise their home-grown XR projects, thus affording a localised means for Kenyan culture and heritage to be integrated in the fast-growing field of spatial computing. In Egypt, the development of the video game, 'Assassin's Creed: Origins', by a team of commercial game developers and historical researchers has resulted in millions of players worldwide engaging with historic sites such as the Memphis.

The Digital Divide manifests at global, regional and local levels in various forms and is an umbrella term which describes nuances of digital access and lack thereof in a variety of cultural settings. It is important to note that whilst the socio-economic divides between the Global South and the Global North are closely intertwined with the Digital Divide, these are not the only lines of exclusion which matter in this context. Other lines of access can include uneven distribution of individual access to web-based services, tech companies separating 'design' and 'building' across the globe in a division that mirrors colonial distributions of labour, or strategic network outages during national elections. (McKenna et al, 2025)

Case Study Three: Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage

The Climate Change and UNESCO Heritage (CCUH) Project, co-led by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport and UK National Commission for UNESCO, is an example of how data and technology can be designed in culturally responsive ways to support place-based, sustainable responses to long-standing social, ecological and environmental challenges, increasingly intensified by climate change.

Funded through the UK Government's Shared Outcomes Fund, the £1.8 million project has brought together local communities, organisations, and government departments in three UNESCO sites: the North Devon Biosphere Reserve, Fforest Fawr UNESCO Global Geopark, and Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site. The aim is to co-design open-source and replicable digital tools that are contextually grounded, accessible, and usable by multiple stakeholders across diverse cultural landscapes.

The project was informed by research showing that UNESCO-designated sites can serve as *living laboratories* for sustainability transitions. The report shows that UNESCO sites have the capacity to convene diverse stakeholders through shared management plans and governance systems, making them uniquely positioned to address interconnected challenges. However, while these sites often face similar climate threats, the data needed to understand and respond to them is fragmented across institutions and organisations, limiting collaborative action. The issue is not a lack of data, but the absence of shared systems to interpret and act on it.

The Skell Valley Project at Fountains Abbey (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) provided a key reference point to inform the CCUH project. Rather than relying on traditional technical interventions, such as dredging the river to temporarily mitigate flooding that affects the monastery ruins, the National Trust took a more integrated, culturally informed approach. They worked with

upstream farmers to explore regenerative land management practices and engaged downstream communities in Ripon to rebuild relationships with the river. By viewing the flooding not as an isolated problem but as part of a wider socio-ecological system rooted in the valley's cultural landscape, the project fostered a more inclusive, collaborative and sustainable solution. This shift in perspective provided a vital foundation for understanding how data and technology can support, rather than replace, existing systems of knowledge, care, and shared responsibility.

In this spirit, CCUH focused on co-developing digital tools that enhance participatory, values-driven approaches to managing change. Rather than imposing top-down technological fixes, the project explored how digital infrastructure can enable collaborative governance and support local decision-making in the face of accelerating climate impacts.

This aligns with broader calls within UNESCO for a community-led and culturally inclusive digital transformation. Avoiding flashy or extractive platforms, CCUH emphasised open-source, low-barrier tools that empower communities to share knowledge and take action collaboratively. These include:

- GIS-based mapping tools tailored to site needs
- A digital threat assessment framework
- A prototype Climate Vulnerability Index dashboard
- An open-source data catalogue to harmonise and share disparate datasets

The CCUH project ultimately demonstrates that climate adaptation in cultural heritage contexts is not just about technical resilience; it's about managing change. That means understanding what matters to people and why and designing digital tools that are embedded within and responsive to these deeper dimensions of place, identity, and value.

It also exemplifies how seeing the world as a complex, interconnected system requires more than linear or technocratic solutions. By supporting shared understanding(s) of complexity, uncertainty, and plural perspectives, digital technology can help communities navigate change without attempting to replace the nuanced, relational, and often unpredictable nature of human systems. In doing so, CCUH provides a model for digital transformation grounded in care, context, and collaboration.

Paper Recommendations

The position of "culture-led innovation" builds on multiple reports recently published in the UK: the Serpentine's Future Art Ecosystems: Creative R&D (2025) details arts practice with advanced technologies as developing "experimental methodologies that bridge artistic and scientific inquiry" to deliver public good; the Alan Turing Institute's *Doing AI Differently* advocates for the integration of arts and humanities with computer science research; and Creative UK's Provocation Paper: Creative Economy Capital (2025) proposes a framework to align public capital and private contributions to support the life cycle of creative innovation.

This paper endorses the insights and recommendations of these reports. It also offers an international dimension, drawing on a range of research, alongside British Council arts & technologies mapping in India, China, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and the Levant, and Digital Cultural Heritage research in Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq and Kenya.

Drawing on this wide body of expertise, it makes three overarching recommendations and a series of practical recommendations:

1. **Support the Arts, Cultural Sector, and Creative Industries as critical drivers of innovation**
2. **Encourage culture-led innovation as a valuable resource in developing diverse, representative, and resilient technologies**
3. **Position culture-led innovation as part of a modern approach to international development**

These recommendations can be operationalised not just through cultural policy, but also through technology and foreign policy. Pathways forward might include the following:

1. Direct technology and innovation funding into innovation emerging from the arts, cultural sector, and creative industries.
2. Establish models that measure the diversity of ways in which creative innovation returns on this investment with a focus on both economic and social impact. Measurement could incorporate public engagement with advanced technologies, spillover effects into high-growth industries, cultural-representation in the R&D of technologies both upstream and downstream, and contribution to fertile, cross-sector, internationally collaborative innovation environments are measured.

3. Invest in long term, person-to-person and organisation-to-organisation networks as intermediary bodies between creative innovation internationally. These networks should cut across arts, industry, and academia, and incorporate staff exchanges, professional development initiatives, fellowships, and funding mechanisms to incentivise interdisciplinary and international exchange

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