

RESEARCH BRIEF #2

Sustainability Standard as a Tool for Diagnosis, Learning, and Improvement in Arts and Cultural Organisations



Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) – View of the Lina Bo Bardi Building and the Pietro Maria Bardi Building
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Key Takeaways

- Owing to the varying number of premieres and exhibitions, it is difficult to compare sustainability achievements year by year. A standard would **allow the observation of progress over longer periods**.
- A standard would help combine **various perspectives and harmonise strategic goals**, while smaller steps are undertaken by individual employees with different skills.
- Arts and cultural organisations are eager to observe what others are doing, compare themselves to others, and improve. Certification could **structure** this process and **identify** avoidable mistakes through dialogue with auditors.
- The certification process is demanding yet rewarding. It is effective when perceived as a **shared commitment**, coordinated, but not carried out by a single organisational unit.

KEY TAKEAWAYS ARABIC

معيار الاستدامة كأداة للتشخيص والتعلم والتحسين في المنظمات الفنية والثقافية

النقاط الرئيسية:

- المنظمات الفنية والثقافية حريصة على مراقبة ما يفعله الآخرون، ومقارنة نفسها، والتحسين. يمكن أن تُنظم الشهادة هذه العملية وتحدد الأخطاء القابلة للتجنب من خلال الحوار مع المدققين.
- سبب العدد المتفاوت من العروض والمعارض، من الصعب مقارنة التحولات المستدامة من عام إلى آخر. سيتيح معيار ما ملاحظة التقدم على مدى فترات أطول.
- عملية الشهادات متطلبة لكنها مجزية. يكون هذا فعالاً عندما يُنظر إليه على أنه التزام مشترك، منسق، ولكن ليس مُنفذاً من قبل وحدة تنظيمية واحدة فقط.
- المعيار يساعد على دمج وجهات النظر المختلفة وتنسيق الأهداف الاستراتيجية مع الخطوات الصغيرة التي يتخذها الموظفون الأفراد ذوو المهارات المختلفة.

KEY TAKEAWAYS CHINESE

可持续发展标准：一种可用于艺术文化机构诊断、学习和改进的工具

核心要点:

- 由于首映和展览的数量不一，可持续发展转型情况难以逐年比较。该标准的确立将有助于观察更长时期内的进展。
- 艺术文化机构普遍希望借鉴同行经验，与自身进行比较并改进。认证流程不仅能让这一过程制度化，还能通过与审核员的沟通，及时发现并避开潜在的错误。
- 该标准有助于集思广益，将已有的战略目标与不同专业员工采取的操作步骤紧密对接。
- 认证过程虽有挑战，但意义非凡。它不应只是某个部门的“单打独斗”，只有全员达成共识、协同推进，认证才能真正发挥作用。

KEY TAKEAWAYS SPANISH

La norma de sostenibilidad como herramienta de diagnóstico, aprendizaje y mejora en las organizaciones artísticas y culturales

Mensajes clave:

- Debido al número variable de producciones y exposiciones, es difícil comparar los avances en sostenibilidad de un año a otro. Una norma permitiría evaluar el progreso a largo plazo.
- Las organizaciones artísticas y culturales desean observar, compararse y aprender de otras instituciones. La certificación podría estructurar este proceso y ayudar a identificar errores evitables mediante el intercambio con organismos certificadores.
- Una norma favorecería la integración de distintas perspectivas y la alineación de los objetivos estratégicos, facilitando acciones en toda la organización.
- El proceso de certificación es exigente pero enriquecedor. Resulta más eficaz cuando se basa en un compromiso colectivo y coordinado en toda la organización.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FRENCH

La norme de durabilité comme outil de diagnostic, d'apprentissage et d'amélioration dans les organisations artistiques et culturelles

Messages clés:

- En raison du nombre variable de productions et d'expositions, il est difficile de comparer les avancées en matière de durabilité d'une année à l'autre. Une norme permettrait d'évaluer les progrès sur le long terme.
- Les organisations artistiques et culturelles souhaitent observer, comparer et apprendre des pratiques d'autres institutions. La certification pourrait structurer cette démarche et aider à identifier des erreurs évitables grâce aux échanges avec les organismes de certification.
- Une norme favoriserait l'articulation des différentes perspectives et l'alignement des objectifs stratégiques, tout en permettant la mise en œuvre d'actions à différents niveaux de l'organisation.
- Le processus de certification est exigeant mais enrichissant. Il est particulièrement efficace lorsqu'il repose sur un engagement collectif et coordonné à l'échelle de l'ensemble de l'organisation.

Understanding the role of sustainability standards in the arts and cultural sector

This research brief discusses sustainability standards in the context of arts and cultural organisations. It shows **which challenges** result from using standards that are not fully aligned with

specific needs or are limited in scope. It explains the **process** behind deciding to adopt an existing standard and the possible **benefits** it creates for practice.

IMPORTANT TERMS

Standardisation

Defines **agreed rules** and **requirements** that serve as a standard to guide practice.

Certification

Verifies compliance with the agreed-upon rules and requirements.

Labelling

Signals **certified compliance** in a visible way.

Arts and cultural practitioners are increasingly using sustainability standards, often drawing on frameworks developed for tourism or the built environment. While sectoral tools are popular, **they often focus on just one dimension** of sustainability, and despite offering some guidance on ways to increase sustainability, they do not fully reflect the varied production contexts across the visual and performing arts. They may also **overlook the role and impact** of audiences and suppliers.

Research conducted by Culture for the Planet shows that a standard is **most effective when embedded within a broader governance and management system** that supports reflection and action as a shared commitment across leadership and teams. This observation informed the decision to begin developing sector-specific guidelines based on **ISO 20121:2024** within the context of the arts and cultural sector, with active participation from its representatives.

Standards as diagnostic tools to build credibility in the sustainability transition

Sustainability standards have become widely used **over the past 30 years**¹, mainly in the for-profit sector, driven by compliance and reporting requirements. They support organisations in their sustainability efforts, can demonstrate commitment, enhance transparency, and support decision-making. Standards may rely on different levels of conformity, ranging from self-assessment and second-party review by sectoral bodies to full credibility through independent third-party auditors. Widely used examples include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards and International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards.

In the non-profit and public sectors, such as the arts and cultural sector, where formal requirements to report on sustainability are rare², sustainability standards remain underexplored, but their importance is being noticed³. Also at the policy level, **the role of standards in the arts and cultural sector is recognised**. For example, Germany's updated sustainability strategy includes the goal of increasing the number of certified cultural organisations by 2030 as part of its national ambition⁴.

¹ Brunsson, N., Jacobsson, B. 2002. *A World of Standards*, Oxford University Press, DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199256952.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199256952.001.0001).

² Müller, M., Grieshaber, J. 2024. *How sustainable are cultural organizations? A global benchmark*, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 20:1, 2312660, DOI: [10.1080/15487733.2024.2312660](https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2024.2312660).

³ Borin, E., Cillo, V., Fait, M., Manzo, M., Valeri, A. 2024. *Towards aligned standards for reporting sustainability in the cultural and creative sector*. In: *Culture that matters: Interdisciplinary approaches for sustainable futures*, pp.233-248. ENCATC.

⁴ Federal Government of Germany. 2025. *German Sustainable Development Strategy. Update 2025 – Shaping transformation fairly together*. Federal Press and Information Office. See goal 12.2.b on page 154. *Federal Cabinet adopts German Sustainability Strategy 2025 | Federal Government*

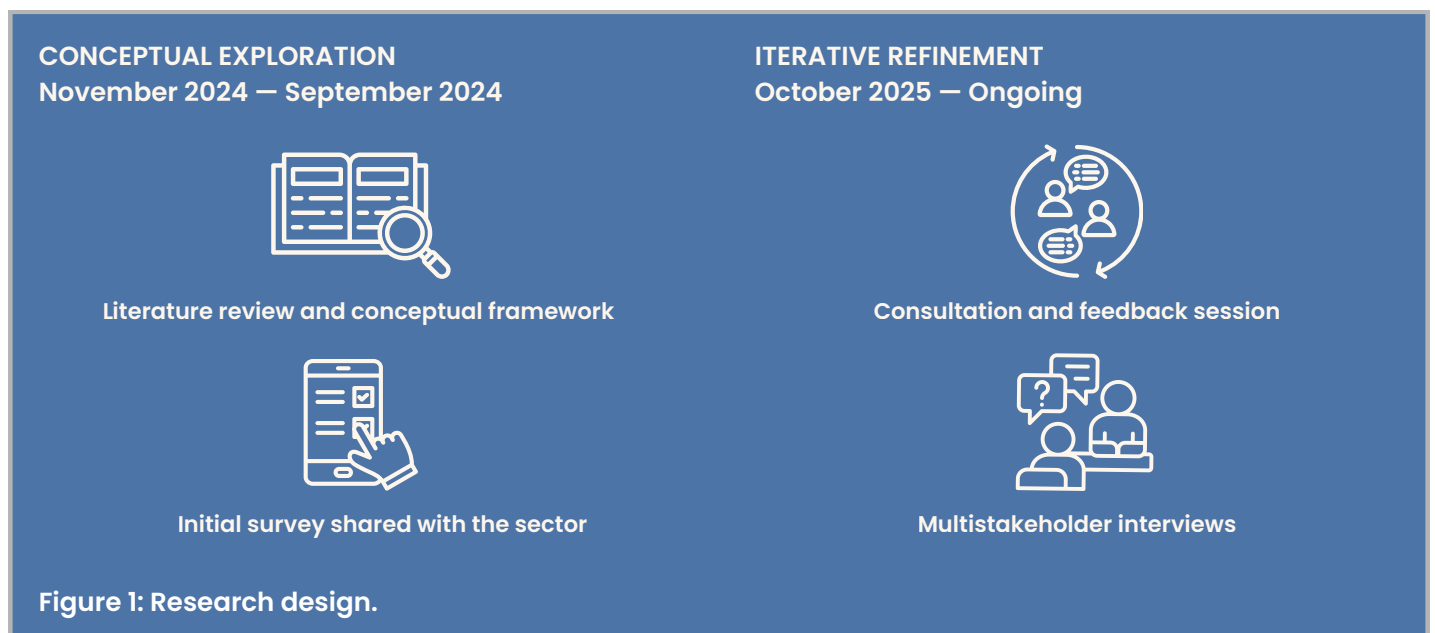
“Having a standard would become part of our core values. Once it is in place, we can clearly say, this is **what** we do, and this is **how** we work.” (Interview with a sustainability officer)

Methodological note

A mixed-method co-creation process

The research summarised in this brief followed several steps guided by a **qualitative approach**. It included a **review** of 42 research papers on sustainability standards in tourism to borrow key insights from this field to the arts and cultural sector. In addition, it is informed by a review of 75 research papers at the intersection of sustainability studies,

arts management, and cultural policy. Empirical insights were further generated through a **survey** (n=47), a **co-creative session** involving 27 participants, and **semi-structured interviews** with 30 participants from Culture for the Planet Alliance (Figure 1).



Workshop on the conceptual framework for a tailored standard in the arts and cultural sector, October 2025.

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Working with generic, narrow, or borrowed standards

Culture for the Planet research shows that for several years some **arts and cultural organisations have worked with different sustainability standards**. Examples include standards such as ISO 14001 Environmental Management Systems and the Greenhouse Gas Protocol (GHG). Certification schemes related to the built environment, such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) or the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM), are also used.

The motivation for using these standards varies. Culture for the Planet interviewed representatives of 23 organisations and found that some of them test available solutions and **try to adapt them to their own needs**. Others start certification with a **specific focus**, such as a new building or recently completed renovations. Another goal is to **increase funding opportunities and visibility**. Potentially, new generations of audiences can also be attracted by a clearly signalled sustainability commitment. Some organisations in the sample do not yet work with standards but are interested in working with them to **simplify** sustainability-related procedures.

Many practitioners from the research cite challenges in working with standards that are not

sector specific. A significant amount of time is therefore needed **to translate their requirements** into the realities of arts and cultural organisations. There is also uncertainty about **how to combine different dimensions**, including environmental impact, inclusivity, employee well-being, and governance. Some organisations have different labels for each aspect but lack a coordinated system. Owing to changes in reporting requirements, another difficulty concerns which data need to be collected and how to define the impact of suppliers and audiences.

Culture for the Planet found that an **overreliance on quantitative data** is often seen as poorly suited to the sector, as it overlooks qualitative dimensions such as artistic mission and cultural value. The lack of established sustainability workflows across departments can also limit organisational learning. Certification is then framed as a one-off compliance exercise rather than a long-term change process that includes recertification after a defined period (e.g., every three years, depending on the scheme). Many practitioners highlighted the role of temporality in the arts and cultural sector. While artistic decisions vary across seasons, it is difficult to make meaningful annual comparisons.

Standard-related work as a learning process

*“As an opera, we are different from museums, but I still see value in **having shared frameworks** with them and learning from them instead of learning from industry.” (Interview with a technical director)*

Many research participants doubt whether a single standard could meet the diverse organisational needs, yet there is a strong desire among theatres, opera houses, and museums **to learn from one another** rather than from other sectors. In this way, they can build on existing knowledge and for example benefit from traditional skills cultivated behind the scenes to support circular material flows and sufficiency.

Capacity-building also includes learning from mistakes encountered while exploring suitable solutions. Importantly, every standard involves trade-offs (such as a greater focus on processes than on performance and outcomes), but **a co-creative approach to developing a tailored standard would help reach consensus on core aspects**.

To learn more about how standards relate to various governance processes in arts and cultural organisations see also: *Ćwikła, M., Labaronne, L. (2026), Toward a Sustainability Standard for Cultural Organizations: Borrowing from Tourism. Sustainable Development. DOI: 10.1002/sd.71145.*

Participants in this study have described their engagement with standards, including certification conducted by external auditors, as “eye-opening,” “a form of sustainability training in itself,” and “an opportunity for cross-departmental exchange.” While some resource investment is inevitable, **working with standards is perceived as rewarding.** Interviewees highlighted that during data collection for standards, they heard many personal stories, celebrated their colleagues’ large and small achievements, and recognised good sustainability

practices. The engagement with standards is thus rooted in **interpretative and action-oriented steps.** Taken together, these elements act as an impetus for holistic change, helping to clarify organisational requirements, recognise the potential of people, assess feasibility, and communicate progress. It also creates a space to distribute sustainability tasks across various departments, from production teams to communication teams. Many participants emphasised that **“sustainability works” when institutionalised as a shared commitment.**

A tailored sustainability standard for lasting improvement

*“The main purpose should be to make it easier to implement a standard. You need to have **a process that is already verified.**”* (Interview with a sustainability specialist)

Based on research findings, the Culture for the Planet team decided not to develop an entirely new standard but instead to initiate the adoption of ISO 20121:2024 within the context of cultural organisations. Work on **ISO/AWI 26540 - Event sustainability management systems: Guidelines for application of ISO 20121:2024 in cultural organizations** is a crucial step in establishing a global reference point for change and in providing

a basis for credible certification. The work is conducted by the Working Group “Cultural Organizations” within **ISO/TC 354/SC 1 - Sustainability in event management**. The decision to use this original standard is further motivated by its **coverage of all dimensions of sustainability.** While events remain in focus, the standard addresses the organisational system that supports them.

Practitioners’ expectations of a tailored sustainability standard	How ISO 26540 can support this
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides diagnoses and structured objectives based on guidance rather than rigid rules. • Enables scalability; is process-oriented for long-term change. • Fosters exchange and encourages collaboration. • Ensures compatibility with reporting; supports integration across activities. • Reflects the role of stakeholders (coproducers, audiences, suppliers, and networks). • Balances quantitative and qualitative dimensions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasises context analysis and goal setting; provides adaptable requirements. • Supports continuous improvement. • Can be combined with peer-learning during certification. • Can be integrated with reporting schemes; addresses full operational scope. • Emphasises stakeholder identification and impact assessment. • Allows a combination of various data.

INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

PRACTITIONERS IN ARTS AND CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS can use standards to:

Asses

Identify relevant sustainability indicators to **diagnose** organisational realities and structure objectives.

Integrate

Audit the **current governance model** to determine how sustainability can be embedded across departments and identify who could lead certification efforts.

FUNDING BODIES can use standards to:

Facilitate

Encourage **learning-oriented exchange** with sustainability experts, including certifiers and auditors, with dedicated funds.

Prioritise

Consider linking **funding criteria to continuous improvement** (including recertification) rather than one-off compliance.

POLICYMAKERS can use standards to:

Align

Support alignment between **local** sustainability reporting requirements and a **global** standard.

Foster

Enable the upscaling of tested practices across the sector at various speeds by supporting peer learning and dialogue between the visual and performing arts for greater **experimentation, inclusion, and impact**.



The Olympic Museum and its gardens, Lausanne, Switzerland.
© Olympic Museum

Outlook and long-term vision

In the final interview question, participants were asked to describe their attitude toward sustainability standards. The most frequently used term was “**hopeful**”. Other participants characterised themselves as being a “navigator of complexity” or an “experimental collaborator.”

These sentiments are encouraging and resonate with Culture for the Planet’s vision. While work is still needed, **the goal of a tailored standard is to establish sustainability as an organisational routine and to build on the sector’s positive readiness to move in this direction.**

This research is part of the **CERTIFY** pillar within **Culture for the Planet**, a spin-off of the research-for-action project led by the University of Lausanne (UNIL) and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW). The standardisation of the project is led by the Culture for the Planet Alliance and supported by Pro Helvetia, University of Lausanne and FGSE – UNIL, Faculty of Geosciences and Environment.

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Culture for the Planet

One Sector, One Voice.