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Ecologies of practice



FMGB, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2026 - Photo: Erika Ede



TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION OF ARTS AND CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS: A RESEARCH-BASED, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH



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Sustainability has become one of the defining challenges faced by arts and cultural organisations worldwide. Among others, museums, theatres and opera houses are increasingly expected to contribute to responses to climate change, biodiversity loss, social inequities and broader questions of collective wellbeing. Yet arts and cultural organisations face a difficult paradox: they are expected to drive societal transformation while struggling to transform their own practices and operations.

This paradox was at the centre of discussions during the *14th ENCATC Academy on Sustainable Cultural Management and Policy* held in Bilbao in April 2026. Bringing together researchers, practitioners, policymakers, representatives of funding bodies and emerging as well as established professionals, the Academy provided an opportunity to explore how the cultural sector can move beyond isolated sustainability initiatives towards more systematic and measurable forms of change. It also offered a platform to present preliminary findings from the research-for-action project *Culture for the Planet*.

The discussions in Bilbao revealed a growing consensus across the sector: sustainability needs to become a strategic commitment of arts and cultural organisations in supporting organisational as well as broader societal transitions within the planetary boundaries.



Rethinking Sustainability in the Cultural Sector

Sustainability debates have evolved considerably over recent decades. Earlier approaches often framed sustainability through separate environmental, social and economic dimensions. Contemporary thinking increasingly emphasises the interdependence of ecological and social systems. Research on planetary boundaries and concepts such as Kate Raworth's Doughnut Model have shifted attention towards operating within ecological limits while ensuring social wellbeing and justice.

This shift has important implications for arts and cultural organisations. Sustainability is not simply about reducing emissions or improving operational efficiency. It requires organisations to reconsider how governance, artistic programming, community engagement, organisational culture and resource use contribute to long-term resilience and societal wellbeing.

Culture itself occupies a unique position within this discussion. As former UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay stated, culture should not be viewed as a peripheral sector to be supported but as a central force to be mobilised. More recent literature reframes culture as infrastructure. Accordingly, culture may be viewed as *patient capital* that yields long-term *cultural dividends* by strengthening human potential, fostering innovation, promoting social cohesion, encouraging environmental stewardship, and contributing to economic resilience.

Likewise, arts and cultural organisations enjoy high levels of public trust, create spaces for dialogue and reflection, and help shape collective narratives about the future. This gives them a significant capacity to contribute to sustainability transitions both within their own institutions and across society. At the same time, these organisations often depend on resource-intensive practices, international mobility, energy-demanding infrastructures and complex production processes. The result is a dual responsibility: to inspire sustainable futures while confronting their own environmental and social challenges.



The Gap Between Ambition and Implementation

While awareness of sustainability challenges has increased significantly throughout the sector, many organisations continue to struggle with implementation.

Research conducted within the *Culture for the Planet* project highlights several structural challenges. A literature review on sustainability research in arts and cultural management revealed a fragmented landscape characterised by disconnected thematic areas, limited comparative evidence and a persistent gap between conceptual discussions and practical implementation. Much of the available research remains qualitative and highly context-specific, making it difficult to establish common benchmarks or sector-wide approaches.

The review also found a strong concentration of research on museums, while theatres, opera houses and other cultural organisations receive considerably less attention. Furthermore, cultural policy scholarship often addresses sustainability primarily at a discursive level, offering limited operational guidance for practitioners. As a result, organisations frequently find themselves navigating sustainability transitions without clear frameworks, shared indicators or established standards. Commitment is growing, but the sector still lacks the collective, global infrastructure needed to translate ambition into measurable progress.

From Research Project to Global Alliance

Recognising these challenges, the *Culture for the Planet* project focuses on co-producing practical solutions, including processes and frameworks that support sustainability transitions in museums and performing arts organisations. This ambition led to the creation of the *Culture for the Planet Alliance*, a global community of practice that brings together dozens of (founding) members including international museums, theatres, opera houses, sector associations and funding bodies. The *Alliance* is based on a simple observation: sustainability transitions require collaboration, shared learning, and collective action.

A key milestone was the co-creation of the *Declaration of Lausanne* during the inaugural *Culture for the Planet Summit* in 2025. Signed by all founding members, the *Declaration* recognises the central role of arts and cultural organisations in fostering a good life for all within planetary boundaries and calls for coordinated action across the sector. It acknowledges that sustainability efforts remain fragmented despite widespread commitment, dedication, and engagement. It therefore promotes a collective approach based on forward-looking governance, transparency, collaboration, capacity building, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. Signatories commit to integrating sustainability into their organisational strategy and decision-making while supporting the development of sector-wide frameworks and standards.

Importantly, the *Declaration* frames sustainability not as an individual organisational challenge but as a shared responsibility requiring institutional and systemic responses. A coordinated global effort is needed while respecting different cultural, political and geographical contexts.

Building the Infrastructure for Change

One of the central lessons emerging from the research is that sustainability requires more than good intentions. It requires structures that allow organisations to understand



where they are in their change processes, measure progress, and learn from one another to institutionalise sustainability over time. For this reason, the *Alliance* has focused on developing practical mechanisms that bridge knowledge and implementation. These include a global community of practice, a sustainability management system, sustainability indicators, a future qualification programme and a global standard for arts and cultural organisations.

An analysis of more than 70 sustainability standards and certification models across different sectors demonstrated both the benefits and limitations of existing approaches. While standards can enhance transparency, trust and visibility, many remain insufficiently adapted to the realities of arts and cultural organisations. The challenge therefore lies in developing a standard that is sector-specific and aligned with existing reporting systems. The proposed answer is to adopt an existing ISO standard to the specific requirements, capacities and holistic processes (ISO/AWI 26540 Event sustainability management systems: Guidelines for application of ISO 20121:2024 in cultural organisations).

Another concrete measure and one of the key developments so far, is the creation of a modular set of 34 key sustainability indicators covering governance, social and environmental dimensions. The indicators emerged from a systematic review of academic research, sector toolkits and professional guidelines, followed by an expert validation process involving specialists and practitioners from the *Alliance*. The resulting framework recognises that organisations are at different stages of their sustainability journeys. Indicators are organised across basic, intermediate and advanced levels, enabling gradual implementation while maintaining common reference points across different organisational and geographical contexts.

Sustainability Is a Human Capability

Focus groups, interviews, and case studies conducted within the *Alliance* reveal substantial skills gaps and training needs in the field of sustainability across the sector. Beyond technical knowledge, organisations require professional, methodological, social and self-management competencies in leadership, communication, collaboration, systems thinking, impact measurement, and fostering organisational change.

Particularly notable is the emerging profile of sustainability leadership roles. Effective sustainability leaders must be capable of recognising entanglements, connecting diverse stakeholder groups, and inspiring collective engagement. Somewhat surprisingly, participants consistently highlighted soft skills and qualities such as empathy, patience, resilience, curiosity, and the ability to balance long-term vision with practical implementation.

At the same time, organisations continue to experiment with different governance models for sustainability. Responsibility may rest with dedicated chief sustainability officers, project managers, interdisciplinary green teams, executive leadership or cross-organisational structures. However, many institutions are still searching for arrangements that best fit their organisational contexts, suggesting that the professionalisation of sustainability management remains an evolving – but highly rewarding – process.



The ENCATC Academy as a Laboratory for Collective Action

The *ENCATC Academy 2026* provided an opportunity to collaboratively test and advance these ideas. In the workshop *Developing a 10-Point Change Agenda for Sustainability in Arts & Culture*, participants worked in peer groups representing museums, policymakers

and funding bodies, research and education institutions, and cultural networks. Each group was tasked with identifying strategic priorities, concrete actions and institutional responsibilities capable of accelerating sustainability transitions within their respective fields. A common message emerged: Progress depends on stronger connections between research, policy, education, funding and practice. It requires spaces where different actors can exchange perspectives, challenge assumptions and develop shared solutions.



Looking Ahead

The sustainable transformation of the arts and cultural sector remains a work in progress. Significant challenges persist, and there is still much to learn about how sustainability can be embedded into diverse organisational and cultural contexts. Research is essential to tackle this issue. But research alone is not enough. Sector-specific solutions require research and collaboration, shared frameworks, actionable tools and communities capable of turning knowledge into practice. For arts and cultural organisations, the specific challenge is to manage their own organisational transition, inspire change beyond the organisation, and demonstrate how arts and culture can contribute to a future that is socially just, environmentally responsible and resilient for generations to come.



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to this issue of
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Our contributors are leading academics, researchers, experts, practitioners, and policy makers. They are recognised by the industry we belong to as influencers. For our magazine, they are generously providing us with high-quality content, commentary, the best industry practices, and personal stories. Their contributions aim to help ENCATC to achieve its mission of helping the cultural sector become stronger and more sustainable. **This publication is made possible thanks to the financial support of the Creative Europe programme of the European Union.**

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It is an independent membership organisation gathering over 100 higher education institutions and cultural organisations in over 40 countries. ENCATC was founded in 1992 to represent, advocate and promote cultural management and cultural policy education, professionalise the cultural sector to make it sustainable, and to create a platform of discussion and exchange at the European and international level.

ENCATC holds the status of an NGO in official partnership with UNESCO, of observer to the Steering Committee for Culture of the Council of Europe, and is co-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union.

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