ESDN Policy Note

Sustainable Culture & Circular Economy:
Building Resilience for Tomorrow

Introduction

The Peer Learning Platforms are a special event format of the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN), which enables sustainable development (SD) policymakers and expert stakeholders to exchange in-depth on current developments, activities and challenges in an informal and safe-space setting, based on the Chatham House rules.

The **9th ESDN Peer Learning Platform** was held in Bucharest, Romania on 22-23 October 2024. It was organized by the ESDN under the auspices of Romanian Prime Minister's Office – Department of Sustainable Development, as Romania is holding the ESDN Presidency this year, represented by Mr. Laszlo Borbely, State Counsellor. More than **80 participants from 12 European countries** discussed and elaborated on two topics: **sustainable culture and circular economy**, both of which are **fundamental to fully embrace sustainability and develop increased resilience for society now and in the future**.

Culture and Sustainable Development

It is not the first time this topic was addressed by ESDN: At the 21st ESDN Workshop in Vienna in May 2023, culture and sustainability were debated to reveal their links and interrelations. The interest in the topic has not waned and thus the focus this time was on **putting culture in the context of SD** and **discussing how it can**

be a force for more sustainability transformations. In general, **"culture"** refers not only to **art and the different forms of artistic expressions**, but also to **values, language, behavior, heritage, tradition, etc.**

The report, "Culture in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda" (2019) revealed the **limited presence of culture in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)** and in other documents of the UN's High-Level Political Forum review process: **references to culture in the SDGs are scarce and do not sufficiently acknowledge the many ways in which cultural aspects influence and contribute to SD**. This issue was addressed during the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024 and the outcomes document **Pact for the Future** refers in Action 11 to protecting and promoting culture and sport as integral components of sustainable development.

The following **recommendations on culture and sustainability** are based on the presentations and discussions at the event:

1) **Use culture as an enabler to implement SD**
2) **Develop specific mindsets and values for culture and sustainability**
3) **Integrate culture systematically into SD policymaking**
4) **Make culture an important aspect in the post-2030 Agenda framework**
5) **Include SD holistically into education programs and awareness raising**

1) Use culture as an enabler to implement SD

- **Clarify and define the different meanings of culture** and their relation to sustainability. Culture has several layers, encompassing the individual person (e.g. values, identity, heritage), society (e.g. societal values, how we want to live), artistic expression (e.g. literature, paintings, music, etc.), and governments

and policymaking (e.g. administration, laws, politics).

- **Develop a strategic model** to foster sustainability through culture that can be upscaled across topic areas. This comprises identifying SDGs to support cultural change and developing practices to drive change by clarifying the role of culture in this process.

2) Develop specific mindsets and values for culture and sustainability

- **Develop a cultural mindset** in which sustainability is vital for collective well-being, includes all parts of society, and emphasizes long-term impacts over short-term gains.
- **Identify core values for system shifts** needed for sustainability and use them as a guiding compass: from sustainability as an obligation to an embodied, systemic, and societal value for the future, which is linked to issues like intergenerational justice, participation, collaboration, inclusion, and democratic governance.
- **Foster drivers of change** for mindset shifts, including community engagement and local sustainability activities; government leadership by implementing policies that reflect core sustainability values and hold institutions accountable; and holistic corporate sustainability strategies.

3) Integrate culture systematically into SD policymaking

- **Elaborate on culture in the context of SD** in forthcoming VNRs and all HLPF-related reporting and evaluation documents. Showcase what culture can contribute to implementing the different SDGs.
- **Create culture and sustainability initiatives** on the different political levels to reveal their interconnectedness and to allow a reflection on how culture supports sustainability policy and governance, including democratic processes and participation.
- **Apply the** [UNESCO thematic indicators for culture in the 2030 Agenda](#) which comprise a total of 22 indicators on 4 thematic areas (environment & resilience;

prosperity & livelihoods; knowledge & skills; inclusion & participation), all of which are linked to the 17 SDGs.

4) Make culture an important aspect in the post-2030 Agenda framework

- **Create a separate SDG on culture**, as this would guarantee more visibility of culture as a key area of sustainability, render it easier to include cultural aspects into policymaking, and enable budget measures on culture and sustainability for specific policy actions and initiatives.

> ### Estonia: 17+1 indicators, including culture as SDG 18
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> **Already in 2005, the Estonian SD Strategy had 4 main goals, including "Viability of Estonian cultural space" besides economic, social, and environmental goals. This has been reconfirmed in the national long-term strategy, "Estonia 2035", adopted in 2021. Estonia now uses the 17+1 system in implementing, monitoring, and reporting on SDGs which comprises the ["Tree of Truth"](#) national indicators set on national strategies and the SDGs as well as the country's VNRs.**

- **Reflect on culture-related aspects** in the individual SDGs. The main objective is to achieve the SDGs by focusing on values, building new forms of coordination, and adopting holistic approaches.

5) Include SD holistically in education programs and awareness raising

- **Foster education and awareness raising** approaches on SD which reflect values and behavior as cultural elements of sustainability.
- **Encourage imagination, creativity, and critical thinking** on sustainability issues at all levels of the education system.
- **Educate the broader public through awareness raising** and engaging narratives/stories that steer away from expert jargon and build emotional connections to sustainability topics.

Circular Economy

The second topic addressed was **Circular Economy (CE)**, an **economic model designed to minimize waste and make the most of the resources used**. Unlike the traditional linear economy, which follows a "take, produce, consume, dispose" logic, the goal of CE is to **close the loop of product life cycles through principles such as share, lease, reuse, repair, refurbish, recycle, and sustainable design**. The European Commission adopted the **new [Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP)](#)** in March 2020 as a main building block of the European Green Deal. CE is also an **important driver for achieving the SDGs in Europe**.

Based on the presentations and interactive exchanges among participants, these are **recommendations to foster CE**:

1) **Develop and continuously update national CE strategies and actions plans**
2) **Include the sub-national level (regions, cities and municipalities) into CE activities**
3) **Establish stakeholder exchange on advancing CE**
4) **Develop an integrated and holistic CE concept**
5) **Involve more scientific knowledge and research into CE policy design and actions**

1) Develop and continuously update national CE strategies and action plans:

- **Use CE strategies to develop clear and measurable objectives and targets** which also contribute to achieving the SDGs – this requires an integrated and holistic policy approach.

- **Design CE action plans with priority sectors** and a coordinated scope of short-, medium- and long-term actions.
- **Create a framework for financing the transition towards CE** as well as partnerships with various stakeholders to achieve practical results.
- **Develop a monitoring and evaluation scheme with implementation milestones** and progress measurement against the set of objectives and targets.

> ### Romania's Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan
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> **Romania's CE Strategy and Action Plan are in accordance with the SDGs and the National SD Strategy 2030. The CE Strategy defines 8 main objectives to ensure a sustainable path for future generations. The CE Action Plan includes measures for 9 priority sectors that have the greatest potential to facilitate Romania's transition to CE. The Action Plan comprises 52 short, medium and long-term actions that will contribute to achieving the EU's objectives of recirculating resources.**

2) Include the sub-national level (regions, cities and municipalities) into CE activities

- **Collaborate with the sub-national level** on further developing and implementing CE policies and activities.
- **Support sub-national political entities** on developing strategies, build capacities, and designing pilot projects on CE.
- **Guide and support** the sub-national level with programs that support circular innovation and experimentation.
- **Make resources available** to the sub-national level, especially regarding financial and human resources, and regulatory frameworks.
- **Provide practical tools** with which sub-national entities can foster CE in practice.

OECD Program on Circular Economy

The OECD has a [dedicated program](#) to support cities and regions in the transition towards CE through multi-level dialogues to identify challenges and opportunities, peer learning, and key CE indicators. This includes the OECD Roundtable on CE which brings together key stakeholders to share knowledge, experiences and best practices.

Luxembourg – Climate Pact for municipalities

CE is one of the main components of the Climate Pact 2.0 (2021-2030). It includes different levers to support the implementation of the CE on the municipal level, especially a catalog of measures as thematic and methodological framework for integrating and tagging of 16 measures related to CE. One of the CE implementation tools at the municipal level is the "BauCheck" for the building sector.

3) Establish stakeholder exchange on advancing CE

- **Engage with the broad stakeholder community** on achieving CE in practice by creating exchange spaces among public authorities, businesses, trade unions, consumers, and civil society.
- **Provide spaces for discussions** on fostering CE as well as identifying barriers for CE and how to overcome them.
- **Use the expertise and practical knowledge** of stakeholders to support implementing CE objectives and targets.
- **Create a stakeholder exchange platform** in which the above-mentioned issues can be realized in a coordinated and structured manner.

European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform

Established in 2017 as a joint initiative of the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), this [Platform](#) is a space for the exchange of ideas and information aimed at making CE happen faster to the benefit of all. Stakeholders meet to learn about good practices, identify bottlenecks of an effective CE transition, and provide advice to the policymaking process on CE.

4) Develop an integrated and holistic CE concept

- **Establish well-balanced policies** that reduce trade-offs between different policy sectors – this requires intensified efforts of horizontal policy integration and integrated policy planning.
- **Consider all aspects of the CE concept** and avoid restrictions to only recycling.
- **Act in all relevant sectors** for CE, especially the ones with a large material footprint like the building sector, food production, mobility/transport sector, and energy production.
- **Consider systemic pricing on material throughput** to make sustainability profitable for businesses, whilst mitigating socio-economic impacts on society and citizens.

5) Involve more scientific knowledge and research into CE policy design and actions

- **Increase the science-policy interface** in CE policymaking.
- **Base CE objectives and actions on scientific knowledge** of material throughput.
- **Include researchers in policy discussions** and advisory bodies for achieving CE.

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