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ESDN Policy Note

Building a Resilient Europe: Sustainable Development and Culture in focus

Introduction

The **ESDN Workshop 2026** took place in **Vienna on 28–29 May 2026**, and was organized by the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management as well as the Austrian Federal Chancellery. The workshop focused on **"Building a Resilient Europe: Sustainable Development and Culture in focus"**.

The first day addressed **"Culture and Sustainability"**, while the second day was dedicated to **"Sustainability, Resilience, and Democracy in Transformative Times"**. Both themes were explored through keynote presentations, panel discussions, and interactive exchange formats.

About 50 participants from across Europe attended, representing key stakeholder groups, including policymakers, researchers, civil society organizations, youth, as well as European and international organizations.



Culture and Sustainability: Perspectives and Approaches in Times of Change and Uncertainty

This is not the first time the ESDN has placed culture and sustainability at the center of its events. The ESDN Workshop 2023 had it as a core theme, and the 9th ESDN Peer Learning Platform focused on sustainable culture and the circular economy. Both events were followed by ESDN Policy Notes presenting concrete recommendations. You can find the respective Policy Notes on the ESDN website.

Culture shapes **how societies understand the world, define priorities, and respond to change**. In our current times of disruption and uncertainty, marked by deep but vulnerable global interdependence as well as intensified environmental pressures, **achieving sustainable development requires not only technological and institutional adaptation and innovation, but also cultural transformation**. Culture extends beyond heritage and the arts to encompass the values, meanings, knowledge systems, and practices that shape collective societal behavior and imagination. This broader understanding, reflected in UNESCO's work and reaffirmed by the adoption of the UN's Pact for the Future in 2024, recognizes **culture as a foundation for inclusive, people-centered, and context-sensitive policymaking**, which is also key for sustainable development.

Although culture is not a standalone goal in the 2030 Agenda, it is embedded across the different Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a **cross-cutting enabler of sustainability**. It contributes both to safeguarding cultural heritage, and to transforming the norms, behaviors and institutions needed for more sustainable futures. In an increasingly interconnected world, where actions in one place have far-reaching effects elsewhere, sustainability challenges cannot be addressed through traditional policy approaches alone. Integrating the cultural dimensions with sustainability is, therefore, essential to **foster resilient societies, inspire behavioral change, and enable systemic transformation**.

Building on the keynote presentations on culture and sustainability, a panel discussion, and the interactive group work addressing key dimensions of the topic, participants developed **4 recommendations**, which are presented and further elaborated below:

1) **Integrate culture into national sustainability strategies and policies**
2) **Build institutional capacity to address transformations and to champion sustainability policies**
3) **Use culture, narratives and storytelling to foster public engagement for sustainable development**
4) **Measure and monitor the contribution of culture to sustainable development**

Recommendations to Advance Culture and Sustainability

The following **four recommendations** should help policymakers at all political levels and responsible stakeholders to foster a better integration of culture and sustainability:

1) Integrate culture into national sustainability strategies and policies

- **Recognize culture as a strategic enabler of sustainable development in national strategies and policymaking as well as international commitments**. This could lead to the support of establishing a dedicated SDG on Culture (SDG 18), while also ensuring that cultural dimensions are more systematically embedded across existing SDGs and in future post-2030 sustainability goals.
- **Promote governance frameworks that value cultural diversity, local knowledge, and multiple perspectives on sustainability, alongside scientific knowledge and evidence.** This should enable the linkage of sustainability to the everyday life of citizens. In addition, it should entail the integration of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and local cultural practices into national sustainability and environmental policies.
- **Establish long-term funding mechanisms and partnerships that enable cultural actors to contribute to sustainability goals.** Cultural institutions and art itself can be important supporters in achieving more sustainability and increasing public awareness of sustainability. The growing contribution of cultural institutions to sustainability should also be recognized, including initiatives that integrate sustainability into art programs, reduce environmental impacts by cultural and art institutions, and develop tools, such as carbon footprint calculators for museums.

Finland: Culture as a driver of sustainability

Culture has long been a driving force in shaping sustainability policy and a key priority of the public administration in Finland. Over the years, numerous policy strategies and action plans have integrated culture as a means of fostering a holistic understanding of sustainable development, while also recognizing cultural heritage and the cultural sector as essential components of its practical implementation.
For instance, the National Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2030 highlights the role of cultural heritage in providing practical solutions that support climate change adaptation.
And the current Action Plan of the National Commission on Sustainable Development for 2025–2027 includes the objective to develop a roadmap and an operational framework for mobilizing cultural actors to support the sustainability transition towards a resilient and sustainable future.

2) Build institutional capacity to address transformations and to champion sustainability policies

- **Develop leadership capacities which help to better address the challenges of transformational change.** For instance, systems thinking, collaboration, empathy, and long-term stewardship across public institutions should become key leadership capacities. Long-term stewardship refers

to embedding sustainability into institutional culture, planning and decision-making beyond electoral cycles.

- **Reform governance structures and incentives to reward collaboration, innovation, continuous learning, and long-term sustainability outcomes.** For instance, include sustainability and cross-sector collaboration as performance criteria; make cross-sector training mandatory for civil servants; and establish adaptive governance approaches (e.g. continuous learning, monitoring, scenario-building, etc.) that focus on innovation and long-term sustainability impacts.
- **Strengthen cross-ministerial coordination between different sectoral policy portfolios**. For instance, between culture, environment, education, health, and economic development. It is essential to build on the expertise and experience developed within individual policy sectors while strengthening cross-sector collaboration to address complex sustainability challenges and societal transformations.



3) Use culture, narratives and storytelling to foster public engagement for sustainable development

- **Create a shared sustainability narrative that is compelling and offers a vision people can identify with.** People are more likely to adopt sustainable behaviors when they understand how those behaviors fit into a larger narrative about the future. Narratives should be co-created, easy to relate to, and supported by policy.
- **Make sustainability tangible through stories and translate abstract sustainability goals into relatable examples from everyday life.** Instead of discussing sustainability in abstract terms, it helps to show how it affects daily routines, neighborhoods, and quality of life. Stories help people imagine themselves participating in change. It may help to use storytelling, local success stories, social media, or community ambassadors to showcase real experiences and good practices.
- **Engage citizens through multiple pathways as different communities require different approaches.** There is no universal sustainability story. Cultural, geographic, and social contexts influence what resonates with people. Therefore, it is useful to adapt narratives and engagement strategies to local identities, traditions, and community structures.

4) Measure and monitor the contribution of culture to sustainable development

- **Embed cultural indicators into SDG monitoring and national policy frameworks.** This should support more people-centered decision-making and provide a more comprehensive assessment of societal progress.
- **Develop standardized cultural indicators alongside economic and environmental indicators.** These indicators should extend beyond conventional GDP metrics to capture broader dimensions of societal progress, including participation, inclusion, happiness, well-being, resilience, and living heritage.
- **Work on an indicator set that combines cultural and sustainability aspects more thoroughly.** This set could include pillars like, *cultural vitality* (e.g. living heritage, arts, creativity); *participation & inclusion* (e.g. access to policy and societal decisions, diversity, democratic engagement and youth participation); *knowledge & learning* (e.g. cultural education, intergenerational exchange); *resilience & wellbeing* (e.g. adaptive capacity, subjective wellbeing); *governance & investment* (e.g. cultural rights, participation in policymaking, public spending on culture); *culture for sustainable futures* (e.g. environmental stewardship, cultural innovation).

Sustainability, Resilience & Democracy in Transformative Times

Resilience generally refers to the ability of individuals, organizations, and societies to **withstand disruption, adapt to changing conditions, and continue to function effectively**. More than simply recovering from crises, resilience enables systems to emerge stronger, more adaptive, and better prepared for future challenges.

The European Commission (EC) has progressively strengthened its understanding of resilience. In the EC's **2020 Strategic Foresight Report**, resilience was defined as the capacity to withstand and cope with challenges while managing transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic way. By 2025, this concept had evolved significantly. The Commission recognized in the **2025 Strategic Foresight Report** that responding to crises one by one is no longer sufficient. Instead, resilience must be **transformative, proactive, and forward-looking**—enabling societies not merely to *bounce back*, but to *bounce forward* towards a more sustainable, competitive, and secure future.

From a **sustainability perspective**, resilience is rooted in the understanding that **human well-being depends on healthy and functioning ecosystems** as well as **strong governance frameworks**. Social and ecological systems are deeply interconnected, and strengthening resilience requires managing these systems together. Research by the Stockholm Resilience Centre identifies several key principles for building resilient social-ecological systems, including maintaining diversity; strengthening connectivity; encouraging learning and innovation; broadening participation; and promoting collaborative, multi-level governance.

The **2025 Strategic Foresight Report** identifies three pillars of a resilient EU by 2040: **peace and security**; **democratic values** (including human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, and human rights); and **people's well-being**. Together, these pillars reflect the core objectives of sustainable development, demonstrating that **resilience and sustainability are mutually reinforcing**. Building resilience, therefore, requires not only preparing for future shocks, but also **investing in inclusive governance, healthy ecosystems, social cohesion, and long-term well-being**.



Drawing on the keynote presentations, a panel discussion, and the ESDN's interactive Exchange Spaces format, participants developed **3 recommendations**, which are presented and further elaborated below:

1) **Accelerate the path towards Circular Economy to decrease resource dependency**
2) **Enable sustainable transformation through resilience, democracy, and knowledge**
3) **Support sub-national governance and multi-level cooperation**

Recommendations to Foster Sustainability, Resilience & Democracy

The following **three recommendations** identify key priorities for policymakers and stakeholders to strengthen sustainability, foster resilience, and enhance democratic approaches:

1) Accelerate the path towards Circular Economy to decrease resource dependency

- **Expand Circular Economy practices to strengthen Europe's resource security.** The EU Circular Economy Act, expected later in 2026, provides a key opportunity to

create a Single Market for secondary raw materials and accelerate the use of high-quality recycled materials. Embedding circularity through resource efficiency, reuse, repair, remanufacturing, and recycling will support a sustainable, climate-neutral, and resilient European economy.

- **Increase responsible domestic extraction and processing of critical raw materials in Europe.** Growing geopolitical uncertainties and fragile supply chains highlight the risks of Europe's dependence on external sources. Sustainable mining, faster permitting procedures, strong environmental standards, and meaningful local engagement are essential to strengthen strategic autonomy, and support the green and digital transitions.

Circular Economy & Decreasing Raw Materials Dependency

Europe is extremely dependent on imports for critical raw materials (CRMs), with a particularly strong dependence on China. Potential approaches to decrease dependency include the following: extract more CRMs in Europe; identify potential new mining sites in Europe; make use of existing mines; or identify substitutes for CRMs which can be extracted locally.

In addition, it is crucial to reduce demand for CRMs by minimizing the export of e-waste to maximize local recycling potentials; maximizing the lifetime of products and equipment; or rethinking systems for value creation.

The 9R framework provides an important pathway towards achieving greater circularity in economic systems. When applied, it helps to reduce resource use by avoiding unnecessary products and components or using them more efficiently; extend the lifetime of products and components through reuse, repair, and maintenance; and optimize the use of materials through smarter resource management and recycling.

In addition, the Digital Product Pass (DPP) should provide a unified, verifiable digital record of a product's lifecycle, materials, and environmental footprint.

2) Enable sustainable transformation through resilience, democracy, and knowledge

- **Adopt a comprehensive resilience approach for sustainable transformation.** Resilience must go beyond defense and preparedness and acknowledge that for instance, climate action, biodiversity protection, social cohesion, and economic stability are inseparable elements of security. Strengthened, integrated risk assessment and management frameworks which include sustainability aspects are needed to anticipate interconnected challenges and enable sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready transitions.
- **Strengthen public trust through strategic and inclusive communication.** Effective sustainability transitions require public trust and broad societal support. Policymakers should communicate the benefits of sustainability through clear, accessible, and evidence-based narratives that connect environmental action with quality of life, economic prosperity, and resilience. Transparent communication and active engagement are essential to counter misinformation, reduce polarization, and strengthen democratic legitimacy.

German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE): A Broader Perspective for Sustainability

A colleague from the RNE provided an input for rethinking our sustainability perspective for successful policy making and communication. To position sustainable development as the North Star for a livable future within planetary boundaries, its narrative should be broadened and integrate resilience, security, democratic governance, and societal acceptance. Sustainability should become a "strategic compass" for Europe: A sustainable Europe needs to strengthen democracy, resilience, competitiveness, and climate neutrality to secure long-term prosperity.

- **Deepen democratic governance for sustainable transitions.** Long-term sustainability transitions require strong democratic institutions and inclusive national decision-making. Governments should embed citizen participation, scientific evidence, and transparent policymaking into national sustainability strategies/policies while strengthening scientific literacy and public dialogue. This will build public trust, democratic legitimacy, and long-term support for transformative policies.
- **Bridge science and policy through scientific evidence and foresight.** Effective responses to transformations and complex challenges require an increasingly closer integration between scientific knowledge and policymaking. Governments should embed scientific evidence, foresight, and risk assessment into decision-making processes across all sectors. Further strengthening science-policy interfaces will help overcome short-term thinking, improve preparedness, and enable more sustainable and informed policy choices.

(3) Support sub-national governance and multi-level cooperation

- **Empower the sub-national level through capacity-building and long-term funding.** Cities, regions and local authorities are key drivers of sustainable transformation but require stronger institutional capacity and predictable funding. Long-term support mechanisms should enable sub-national innovation, experimentation, and implementation beyond short-term project cycles.
- **Advance multi-level governance cooperation.** Sustainability transitions require coordinated action and shared responsibility across local, regional, national, and European levels. Cooperation mechanisms should align priorities, resources, and capacities across governance levels.
- **Foster participatory governance at the sub-national level.** Cities, regions, and local authorities play a central role in translating sustainability policies into action. They should be empowered to engage communities, facilitate dialogue, and manage local conflicts through transparent and participatory governance processes. Strengthening local participation will improve policy implementation, increase public ownership, and enhance the resilience of communities.

Conclusion: Towards a Sustainable, Resilient, and Democratic Future

In times of profound transformation and growing uncertainty, **sustainable development must become Europe's strategic compass** for strengthening resilience, competitiveness, democratic governance, and long-term prosperity within planetary boundaries. Achieving this requires recognizing **culture** as a driver of societal change, and **resilience** as the capacity to anticipate, adapt, and transform rather than simply respond to crises.

Building a sustainable Europe demands **integrated policies that connect circular economy, resilience, democratic governance, scientific knowledge, and citizen participation**. By investing in long-term governance, multi-level cooperation, cultural innovation, and public trust, policymakers can accelerate the transition towards a Europe that is more sustainable, resilient, competitive, and inclusive. The opportunity is within reach—**if Europe mobilizes its democratic strengths, collective knowledge, cultural diversity, and shared commitment to transformative action**.

The European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) is a non-profit, pan- European peer-learning, networking, knowledge, and advocacy platform for sustainability professionals in the public sector working in collaboration with other organisations and institutions dealing with sustainable development issues. It is based on the transparent and trustful cooperation of these actors. It collects, compiles and shares information on sustainability policies, strategies, and practises, and provides expertise to political decision-makers at European, national, and sub-national levels. The ESDN also fosters sustainable development through active communication and continued cooperation with other stakeholders and civil society.