

Cooperatives as Key Actors in Positioning Culture as a Common Good, and as a Standalone Goal for Sustainable Development

This brief is prepared by the International Cooperative Alliance's Global Office as part of its efforts to organize an official pre-event for the UNESCO Mondiacult 2025, and in anticipation of the UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies | Culture: The Missing SDG to be launched during in Barcelona, Spain during Mondiacult. As the first publication of its kind to span all regions and cultural domains, it draws on 1,200 national and local reports and 200 case studies submitted between 2019 and 2024, offering the most comprehensive global evidence base to date for shaping cultural agendas and strengthening multilateral cooperation. The findings underscore culture's

accelerating role in sustainable development, peace and security. Key findings as reported by the UNESCO include, 93% of reporting Member States include culture in their national sustainable development plans, a rise from 88% in 2021. Cultural and creative industries already contribute 3.39% of global GDP and 3.55% of total employment, while cultural tourism generated USD 741.3 billion across 250 cities in 2023. Yet, disparities remain stark: per capita public spending on culture averages USD 418.56 in Europe and North America, nearly thirteen times higher than in the rest of the world combined.



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Introduction: Culture as a Common and Public Good

Culture must be recognised as a common and public good, as essential and primary as health and education. It is a foundation for human dignity, social cohesion, and sustainable development. Culture ensures that diverse voices are heard, collective memories preserved, and new generations empowered to imagine alternative futures. In this sense, culture is not a commodity, but a shared heritage and a right of all. Like clean air or public health systems, culture sustains communities and strengthens democracy.

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) supports UNESCO's initiative to establish Culture as a stand-alone global goal, and affirm that cooperatives, as innovative, equitable, and rights-based models in the cultural and creative industries, are uniquely positioned to advance this agenda, ensuring diversity of voices, ownership, and community impact.

Since September 2024, which was termed as the mid-point towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals, several major multilateral agreements/resolutions, such as the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact, the UN General Assembly Resolution proclaiming 2025 as the Second International Year of Cooperatives, the Financing for Development (FfD4) outcome document or the Sevilla Commitment, and the soon to be adopted outcome document of the 2nd World Summit for Social Development, appear to underscore collectively the importance of culture for meaningful sustainable development. The documents have acknowledged, often explicitly, the role of cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy (SSE) as central pillars for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development, including a digital cooperation framework intended to ensure that digital technologies contribute to human rights, inclusion, and opportunity rather than deepen inequalities.



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Cooperatives as Cultural Heritage

In 2016, UNESCO inscribed the idea and practice of organising shared interests into cooperatives in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The same year, the Haenyeo traditions of diving and fishing, which are often protected by fisheries cooperatives in Jeju Islands in the Republic of Korea, were also inscribed in the same list. Another emblematic case is the UN General Assembly's recognition of cooperatives in the resolution proclaiming May 10 as the International Day of Argania, which is an element inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Studies (see Knubben, 2018, 2021; Padmanabhan, 2022; Martinelli, Kumar & Woolard, 2023) have shown numerous intersections of cooperatives and elements of intangible as well as tangible cultural heritage, which is an encouraging sign to deepen such relationships that tend to guard the cultural elements from extractive, exploitative and commodifying practices.

Furthermore, large-scale cooperatives also play a crucial role in preserving culture and the creative sector. For instance, Migros, a Swiss-based retail cooperative, dedicates a portion of its revenue to its Culture Percentage initiative, which invests in culture, society, education, leisure, and the economy. Specifically, 1% of the Federation of Migros Cooperatives' wholesale revenue and 0.5% of the retail revenue from its cooperatives are allocated to this fund. In recent years, this has amounted to roughly CHF 120-140 million annually!

Encouraged by these developments, particularly since 2016, the International Cooperative Alliance in 2024 set up a global working group on "cooperative cultural heritage" to map and develop exchange programmes for legacy sites as well as practices that strive to advance awareness and the study of cooperatives and their practices.



Photo: UNESCO

The Value of Culture and Creativity in Society

The cultural and creative industries (CCI) generate USD 2.25 trillion in annual revenues and 29.5 million jobs worldwide (EY, 2015). Creative work is often high-skilled, less susceptible to automation, and a driver of innovation across industries. Research shows that creative workers enhance organisational adaptability and resilience, contributing to fairer and more sustainable economies (Banks, 2024).

For society, cultural participation fosters inclusion, civic engagement, and social well-

being (KEA, 2006; UNESCO, 2013), aligning with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Culture promotes diversity, dialogue, and community-building, echoing the principles of the UNESCO 2003 and 2005 Conventions. Furthermore, culture generates positive externalities, from environmental awareness to sustainable practices (OECD 2022). Education plays a central role as a cornerstone of cooperative identity, sustaining cultural literacy, democratic participation, diversity, and lifelong learning (Knubben, 2018, 2021).

Challenges in the Cultural Sector

Despite their transformative role, the cultural and creative sectors face pressing global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption, with Europe alone losing €199 billion in 2020 (~30% of revenues) (EY, 2021). Workers experience precarity, unstable contracts, and limited social protections (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2022). Many organisations are small, fragmented, and struggle to access finance (Martinelli, Kumar & Woolard, 2023).

In addition, the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge is at risk, particularly for intangible heritage practices. These vulnerabilities demonstrate the urgent need for sustainable, inclusive, and cooperative approaches.

Cooperative Best Practices: Addressing Global Challenges

Cooperatives across the world demonstrate how collective entrepreneurship, democratic governance, and solidarity can protect culture as a public good while creating fair and sustainable livelihoods. Their practices directly address the vulnerabilities of the cultural and creative sectors.

1. Cooperatives in the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI)

- Doc Servizi (Italy) – Founded in 1990, with over 6,000 members, Doc Servizi provides artists with dual status as workers and members. Ensuring access to social protections and collective bargaining through digital platforms, the cooperative reduces precarity and supports innovation, directly contributing to decent work (SDG 8) (Martinelli, Kumar & Woolard, 2023).
- Smart (Belgium) – Established in 1998, Smart became a cooperative in 2016 and today supports almost 44,000 members in Europe, mostly freelancers in CCI. Its model pools risks, provides social protections, and promotes resilience, empowering cultural workers and strengthening social and institutional solidarity (Martinelli & Kumar, 2024).
- Means TV (USA) – Launched in 2019 as a worker-owned streaming service, it offers

an alternative to venture-capital-driven platforms. Through democratic ownership and equitable distribution of revenues, Means TV amplifies diverse cultural voices and resists commodification, fostering pluralism and fairness.

2. Cooperatives Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

- CoopCulture (Italy) – Founded in 2010, with 2,000 workers (71% women) and 18 million visitors annually, CoopCulture manages sites such as the Colosseum. It reinvests revenue into preservation, uses digital tools for accessibility, and sustains cultural commons, showing how cooperatives can protect heritage as a shared public good (Martinelli & Kumar, 2023).
- Pintao Hat Cooperatives (Panama) – These cooperatives preserve the craft of the pintao (toquilla straw) hat, an iconic cultural symbol. By promoting fair trade and training artisans, they safeguard intangible knowledge while creating sustainable livelihoods.
- Kyrgyz Handicraft Association (Kyrgyzstan) – A federation of women's cooperatives preserving the UNESCO-listed alai-kiyiz and shyrdak felting traditions. It fosters intergenerational transmission of skills,

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women's empowerment, and local resilience (Martinelli & Kumar, 2023).

- Knowhow about the Argan Tree (Morocco) – Cooperatives led by women produce organic argan oil, the traditions and practices of which recognised by UNESCO in 2014 as Intangible Cultural Heritage. These community based enterprises provide sustainable income, childcare, healthcare, and financial services, showing how cultural cooperatives strengthen both livelihoods and communities.
- Jeju Haenyeo Cooperatives (South Korea) – Women divers, some in their 80s, sustain the tradition of shellfish harvesting through breath-hold diving. Their cooperatives protect intangible heritage, promote gender equality, and ensure environmental sustainability.

3. Cooperative Meta-Organisations

- CulTurMedia (Italy) – Created in 2017 as the Culture, Tourism and Communication sector of Legacoop, CulTurMedia unites around 900 cooperatives with more than 10,000 employees and an annual turnover of €600

million. It enhances the voice of cultural cooperatives through advocacy, public-private partnerships, training, and research. By strengthening coordination at the meso level, it supports systemic change and promotes the cooperative model within cultural policies, embodying the 6th Cooperative Principle (Martinelli & Kumar, 2024).

- TRIFED (India) – Established in 1984, TRIFED supports tribal cooperatives through training, market access, and state-backed fair trade. It protects traditional crafts while fostering strong institutions (SDG 16) and aligning with UNESCO conventions (Martinelli & Kumar, 2023, 2024).
- Pan-African Fashion Alliance (Africa) – Supported by the Afrexim Bank, the International Trade Center, and the ICA, this initiative aims to build a transnational cooperative for the African fashion sector, promoting regional identity, market access, and sustainable governance, linking culture with institutional development and resilience (Martinelli & Kumar, 2024).

4. Cooperatives empower culture, workers, and communities

These cases demonstrate that cooperatives can be meaningful instruments for linking culture and sustainable development. They embody:

- Inclusive governance, ensuring that different stakeholders work together and engage in dialogue.
- A strong focus on decent work, offering fair wages, social protections, and security to cultural and creative workers.
- Capability to innovate, including the use of digital platforms and the creation of new forms of innovation and cooperative networks.
- The ability to valorise tradition without commodification, showing that safeguarding cultural heritage can manifest in real-world initiatives without reducing culture to a mere product.
- Fair trade practices that protect artisans and workers in traditional craftsmanship, ensuring cultural survival and economic sustainability.
- Attention to intergenerational solidarity, supporting the transmission of traditions and knowledge between generations.
- Recognition that safeguarding cultural heritage is a community concern, not only the responsibility of individual practitioners.
- A strong presence of entrepreneurship, with cooperatives offering support structures that empower women and foster gender equality.
- Digital platforms that expand reach, improve access, and allow cooperatives to innovate in both production and distribution.
- Wider and deeper community impact, as society better understands and experiences the mutual reinforcement between cultural heritage and the cooperative movement.



Photo: Denis Lukwago

Call to Action: Embedding Cooperatives in a Stand-Alone Goal on Culture

UNESCO's initiative to establish Culture as a stand-alone global goal is a historic opportunity to affirm culture as a public good. For this goal to be impactful, its indicators must include community participation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, cultural impact, and cooperative models, and be supported by enabling laws and innovative policies that foster intersectionality between cooperatives, cultural heritage and the creative industry.

Considering that cooperatives provide concrete evidence that aligns with and strengthens existing international frameworks and global processes, by

- Advancing Decent Work (SDG 8) and principles of the ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation 193 (2002),
- Safeguarding Cultural Heritage and Diversity (UNESCO 2003 and 2005 Conventions, UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001),
- Strengthening Institutions and Democratic Participation through institutions and unions of cooperatives at the local, national and international levels (SDG 16),
- Supporting Global Agendas (UN Pact for the Future and Global Digital Compact 2024; Financing for Development 2025, World Social Summit 2025),
- Embedding Education and Lifelong Learning within the DNA of the cooperative model,

- Fostering an international movement for the last 130 years and maintaining a universally acknowledged standard for cooperatives' definition, values and principles.

Member States and International partners participating in the UNESCO Mondiacult 2025 are urged to consider the following actions:

- 1) Embed cooperatives into the language and spirit of the stand-alone global goal envisioned for culture.
- 2) Facilitate, in partnership with cooperatives at the national and international level, the creation or/and strengthening of cooperatives in areas of cultural heritage as well as creative sectors.
- 3) Recognise cooperatives as essential actors in cultural policies for sustainable development, by inviting representatives of cooperatives to assist UNESCO on legal instruments such as the Conventions (2003 and 2005) and any future instruments.
- 4) Support education on cooperatives, advancing cultural literacy, democracy, diversity, and lifelong learning.
- 5) Promote, Advance and Advocate for a supportive legal and policy framework that would help communities and member states construct an enabling environment for the development of cooperatives in the cultural and creative sectors.

ICA - UNESCO MONDIACULT 2025 Official Pre-event

Information Note

ICA - UNESCO MONDIACULT 2025 – Side Event
UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development

Cooperatives in Culture for Diversity, Cultural Rights and Decent Work

26 September 2025 | 15h00 – 18h00 CET

Hybrid event organised in cooperation with CICOPA and ASETT and
hosted from Abacus Cooperative at Casa Abacus Carrer del Peu de la Creu, 4,
Ciutat Vella, Barcelona, Spain

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), together with CICOPA, Abacus cooperative, and the Arizmendiarieta Social Economy Think Tank (ASETT), is pleased to announce a special side event during UNESCO MONDIACULT UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development in Barcelona, Spain. The side event will be a prelude to the wider advocacy towards positioning cooperatives in the global discussions and programmes that present culture as an indivisible aspect of sustainable development and bolster the work of the ICA Working Group on Cooperative Cultural Heritage.

This session will spotlight cooperatives as dynamic cultural actors and indispensable

partners in building a just, inclusive, and sustainable future. With over one billion members and around 3 million cooperatives worldwide, cooperatives represent one of the world's most deeply rooted and socially embedded organisational forms, anchored in seven principles that integrate economic, social, and cultural imperatives. The proclamation of 2025 as the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives, perhaps the only such recognition extended to an enterprise-form, affirms the position of cooperative enterprises as unique, democratic and people-centred platforms of entrepreneurship that can deliver on the sustainability promise the international community has given upon itself since the 1970s.

Key Themes

- Cooperatives as innovative, equitable, and rights-based models in the cultural and creative industries, ensuring diversity of voices and ownership.
- Education as a cornerstone of cooperative identity, advancing cultural literacy, democratic participation, diversity, and lifelong learning.
- The ICA's global initiative to map cooperative heritage sites as living expressions of cultural identity, diversity, and resilience across generations.



Programme: <https://ica.coop/index.php/en/events/cooperatives-culture-diversity-cultural-rights-and-decent-work-side-event-unesco-world>

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