

ICOMOS Sustainable Development Goals Working Group

CULTURAL HERITAGE

AND THE

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

A Proposed Structural Framework
for the Cultural Heritage
Sub chapter of
Voluntary National Reviews



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*A Proposed Structural Framework
for the Cultural Heritage
Subchapter of Voluntary National
Reviews*

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Introduction

A shared structural framework for the cultural heritage subchapter of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) is necessary in order to make heritage-related contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more visible, coherent, and usable within national reporting processes. In the absence of such a framework, these contributions may face a risk of remaining fragmented, overly descriptive, or insufficiently connected to the broader SDG framework, which can make them more difficult to communicate, compare, and integrate into official review documents.

Against this background, the structural framework proposed here is intended to provide a practical and coherent way of organizing such reporting. It helps present cultural heritage in a manner that is concise, results-oriented, and compatible with the logic of VNR reporting. It supports the systematic identification of how heritage contributes to specific SDGs and targets, helps translate sector-specific experience into a language that is understandable within sustainable development policy, and strengthens the evidence base for including heritage in national SDG implementation narratives. In this way, it can improve the clarity, consistency, and policy relevance of heritage-related reporting.

The structural framework is also useful as a practical drafting tool. It helps authors organize information around governance, implementation, results, inclusion, challenges, and future steps, while encouraging the use of concrete examples and observed outcomes rather than general statements. This makes reporting more transparent and analytically robust, supports learning across countries and institutions, and facilitates dialogue among different stakeholders involved in the preparation of VNRs.

More broadly, such a framework can help ensure that cultural heritage is not treated as a marginal or purely illustrative issue, but as a cross-cutting contribution to sustainable development with social, economic, environmental, and governance dimensions. It may also serve as a useful reference for Voluntary Local Reviews and for other heritage actors seeking to align their work with the SDGs through a clear and practical reporting format.

The proposed structural framework was informed by a broad and methodologically diverse body of sources. At its core, it drew on the principal UN guidance governing the preparation of VNRs, which provided the basic reporting logic, institutional framing, and expectations concerning structure, tone, and results-oriented presentation. This foundation was complemented by analytical materials reviewing recent VNR cycles and by a targeted reading of selected national VNRs, which made it possible to assess how countries currently organize SDG narratives, present cross-cutting themes, describe institutional arrangements, and incorporate sector-specific evidence into official review documents.

In addition to this VNR-specific basis, the proposed structural framework was informed by a wider range of thematic sources relevant to the role of culture and heritage in sustainable development; governance, coordination, and participation; results-oriented SDG mapping and measurement; the use of concise practice-based case examples; equity, human rights, and the Leaving No One Behind principle; data availability, indicators, and methodological limitations; as well as forward-looking approaches to follow-up, partnerships, and future review cycles. Taken together, these materials helped ensure that the proposed structural framework is grounded not only in formal VNR methodology but also in broader scholarship and policy guidance relevant to cultural heritage as a cross-cutting contribution to sustainable development.

The ICOMOS Sustainable Development Goals Working Group developed and reviewed the proposed structural framework. It was accepted by the ICOMOS SDG WG on May 9, 2026. Its concept, content, and principal analytical development were led by Dr Andris Kairiss, Coordinator of SDG WG Task Team 3 (National Liaisons & SDGs Localizing), in consultation with Dr Naima Benkari, SDG WG Focal Point, and Olga Partina, Coordinator of SDG WG Task Team 2 (UN HLPF & Culture 2030 Goal). Within SDG WG Task Team 3, Prof. Tarek Nazel, Marianne Knutsen and Angela Lopez Sabater provided feedback during its development. Support for the visual design and wider communication of the proposed structural framework was provided by Dr Farnaz Faraji and Dr Linda Shetabi of SDG WG Task Team 9 (Communications).

General Instructions to Subchapter Developers

Purpose of the subchapter

To demonstrate how cultural heritage contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in a cross-cutting, evidence-based, and people-centered manner, in line with UN guidance on Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), and to serve, where relevant, as a practical reference for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

Intended audience

The primary audience of this document consists of those directly involved in drafting the culture-related sections of VNRs. In particular, this includes Ministries of Culture and cultural heritage authorities; National VNR Focal Points and SDG coordination units; policy teams responsible for cross-cutting thematic chapters; authors of VLRs, where relevant. The structural framework is therefore conceived as a practical drafting tool for policymakers and technical experts responsible for preparing the cultural heritage sub-chapter within national SDG reporting.

Length

Target 1,300–1,600 words, excluding boxes, figures, or tables.

Tone and style

Analytical, concise, implementation-oriented. Avoid advocacy language. Use development-policy terminology consistent with UN reporting.¹

Approach

Case-based and results-oriented, focusing on what was done and what changed, rather than abstract commitments.

Use of supporting materials

Where appropriate, the subchapter may also include limited supporting visual or documentary elements, such as images, charts, tables, or similar materials, in order to clarify evidence and improve readability.

¹ In a VNR, advocacy language refers to wording that promotes, defends, or campaigns for a position rather than reporting, analyzing, or documenting implementation. VNRs are not policy manifestos or position papers; they are accountability and learning instruments. Development-policy terminology refers to using neutral, analytical vocabulary commonly found in UN policy documents and VNRs, which focuses on processes, results, and impacts rather than persuasion.

Placement in the VNR

May appear as:

- a standalone thematic subchapter within a broader Culture chapter; or
- a boxed thematic subchapter under Policy and Enabling Environment or Cross-cutting Accelerators, etc.

The proposed Cultural Heritage subchapter is conceived as a structured contribution to a broader culture-related reporting within VNRs. In the context of the CultureGoal 2030 campaign, this structural framework may serve as a practical tool to ensure that heritage-related contributions to sustainable development are systematically articulated within comprehensive culture reporting.

The proposed structural framework may also support reporting on SDG target 11.4, which calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage by providing a results-oriented and governance-focused reporting format.

Core reference framework

- United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1) <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2025). Handbook for the preparation of voluntary national reviews: 2026 edition. <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/VNR%202026%20Handbook%20EN.pdf>

1. Role of Cultural Heritage in National Sustainable Development

(Indicative length: ~1/2 page)

Objective

Position cultural heritage within the national SDG framework as a cross-cutting enabler.

Content to Include

- Short explanation of how cultural heritage is understood nationally (tangible, intangible, living heritage, cultural practices, traditional knowledge).
- Explanation of why heritage is relevant for sustainable development outcomes, including:
 - social cohesion and identity;
 - inclusive economic development and livelihoods;
 - environmental stewardship and resilience;
 - peacebuilding, dialogue, and governance.
- Clear framing of cultural heritage as contributing to multiple SDGs simultaneously.

What to Avoid

- Historical overviews of heritage.
- Inventory-style lists of sites or traditions.
- General statements without illustrative evidence.

Recommended References

- United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1) <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/1>
- UNESCO. (2016). Culture: Urban Future: Global report on culture for sustainable urban development <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245999>

2. Governance, Stakeholders, and Implementation Arrangements

(Indicative length: ~1/2 page)

Objective

Demonstrate institutional ownership, coordination, and inclusive participation in heritage-related SDG action.

Content to Include

- Identification of lead public institutions responsible for culture/heritage within SDG implementation.
- Description of coordination mechanisms linking:
 - national authorities,
 - subnational and local governments,
 - cultural institutions,
 - communities and civil society,
 - academia and, where relevant, private actors.
- Explanation of how communities and local actors participate in:
 - design,
 - implementation,
 - follow-up of heritage-related actions.

Analytical Emphasis

- Cultural heritage as a localization mechanism for the SDGs.²
- Heritage governance as a platform for co-production and participation.

Recommended References

- United Nations Economic and Social Council, Committee of Experts on Public Administration. (2018). Principles of effective governance for sustainable development <https://publicadministration.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/old-site/Images/CEPA/booklet.pdf>
- United Nations Development Programme. (2017). Institutional and coordination mechanisms: Guidance note https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2478Institutional_Coordination_Mechanisms_GuidanceNote.pdf

² Localization of the SDGs refers to the process of translating the global goals of the 2030 Agenda into locally relevant actions, practices, and outcomes that reflect specific social, cultural, environmental, and economic contexts. In practice, heritage-related activities—such as traditional skills training, community management of historic sites, or transmission of customary environmental knowledge—translate SDG principles (e.g. inclusion, sustainability, resilience) into concrete, place-based actions. Framing cultural heritage as a localization mechanism demonstrates how SDGs are implemented beyond national policy frameworks, at local and community levels; highlights bottom-up contributions that are often not captured by national indicators; aligns with UN guidance emphasizing local ownership, participation, and context sensitivity in SDG follow-up and review.

3. Mapping Cultural Heritage Contributions to the SDGs

(Indicative length: ~2/3 - 1 page)

Objective

Provide a structured, comparable overview of how heritage-related activities contribute to SDG implementation.

For this purpose, the template Mapping Heritage Contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals may be used.

Content to Include

3.1 Priority SDGs Supported by Cultural Heritage

- Identification of SDGs most frequently addressed through heritage-related activities.
- Short explanation of national relevance and development pathways.
- Acknowledgement that contributions are context-specific and non-exhaustive.

3.2 Results-Oriented Description

Heritage contributions should be described using:

- Outputs (what was delivered);
- Outcomes (changes observed for people or communities in the short to medium term, typically within 24 months following completion of the cultural heritage-related activity);
- Equity dimensions (who participated and who benefited).

Both qualitative evidence and quantitative indicators should be used if available.

What to Avoid

- Replicating the global SDG indicator framework.
- Scoring SDGs without narrative explanation.

Recommended References

- United Nations. (2023). Global Sustainable Development Report 2023: Times of crisis, times of change: Science for accelerating transformations to sustainable development <https://sdgs.un.org/gsdr/gsdr2023>
- OECD. (2019). Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets 2019: An assessment of where OECD countries stand https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/measuring-distance-to-the-sdg-targets-2019_a8caf3fa-en/full-report.html
- ICOMOS Sustainable Development Goals Working Group. (2026, in progress). Mapping heritage contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals: Fillable template. <https://icomossdgw.com/mapping-heritage/>

4. Selected Heritage-Based Practices (Case Examples)³

(Indicative length: ~1 page; for VNRs, include 1–2 cases; for VLRs, where relevant, more detailed and context-specific cases may be included)

Objective

Illustrate heritage contributions through concise, practice-based examples.

Case Selection Criteria

- Clear contribution to SDG-related outcomes.
- Involvement of communities or local actors.
- Availability of basic output and outcome information.

Standard Case Format (recommended)

Each case should include:

1. Title, location and timeframe
2. Brief description of the heritage-related activity
3. SDGs addressed (maximum five)
4. Key outputs
5. Observed outcomes
6. Main beneficiary groups
7. Key partners involved

Length

Maximum 150–200 words per case.

Recommended References

- Labadi, Sophia, Francesca Giliberto, Ilaria Rosetti, Linda Shetabi, and Ege Yıldırım. Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals: Policy Guidance for Heritage and Development Actors. Paris: ICOMOS, 2021. <https://publ.icomos.org/publicomos>
- UNESCO. (2022). Culture in crisis: Policy guide for a resilient creative sector <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374631>
- International Labour Organization Regional Office for Africa. (2023). Promoting decent work in the African cultural and creative economy <https://www.ilo.org/publications/promoting-decent-work-african-cultural-and-creative-economy>

³ This section can be combined with the preceding section on “Mapping Cultural Heritage Contributions to the SDGs”

5. Leaving No One Behind: Equity and Inclusion

(Indicative length: ~1/2 page)

Objective

Demonstrate how heritage-related action advances equity and inclusion in line with the Leaving No One Behind principle.

Content to Include

- Description of engagement with:
 - women,
 - youth,
 - Indigenous peoples,
 - marginalized or displaced groups.
- Explanation of barriers addressed through heritage-based approaches.
- Use of qualitative or proxy evidence where disaggregated data are limited.

Recommended References

- United Nations Sustainable Development Group. (2022). Operationalizing Leaving No One Behind <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/leaving-no-one-behind-unsdg-operational-guide-un-country-teams>
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). Human Rights in the 2030 Agenda: Leave No One Behind https://bangkok.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-06/human-rights-in-the-2030-agenda_final.pdf

6. Challenges, Data Gaps, and Lessons Learned

(Indicative length: ~1/2 page)

Objective

Ensure transparency, realism, and learning orientation.

Content to Include

- Key challenges in documenting heritage contributions (data gaps, institutional fragmentation, capacity constraints).
- Methodological limitations.
- Lessons learned relevant for future SDG reporting cycles.

Recommended References

- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (n.d.). Culture <https://www.uis.unesco.org/en/culture>
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network. (2015). Data for Development: A Needs Assessment for SDG Monitoring and Statistical Capacity Development <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/data-development-needs-assessment-sdg-monitoring-and-statistical-capacity-development>

7. Outlook and Next Steps

(Indicative length: ~1/4 – 1/3 page)

Objective

Provide a forward-looking perspective aligned with SDG follow-up and review.

Content to Include

- Planned improvements in data collection, coordination, and reporting.
- Role of partnerships and capacity development.
- Relevance of heritage for future VNR cycles.

Recommended References

- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). Voluntary National Reviews. High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>
- UN-Habitat. (n.d.). Centering People in Smart Cities <https://unhabitat.org/centering-people-in-smart-cities>

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11. UNESCO. (2022). Culture in crisis: Policy guide for a resilient creative sector. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374631>
12. UN-Habitat. (n.d.). Centering People in Smart Cities. <https://unhabitat.org/programme/legacy/people-centered-smart-cities/centering-people-in-smart-cities>
13. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. (n.d.). Voluntary National Reviews. <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>

14. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2025). Handbook for the preparation of voluntary national reviews: 2026 edition. <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/VNR%202026%20Handbook%20EN.pdf>
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29. European Union. (2023). EU Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
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