

RESEARCH BRIEF #1

Assessing and Monitoring Sustainability in Cultural Organisations

How can a modular indicators framework improve sustainability in arts and cultural organisations?



Inaugural Culture for the Planet Summit, 2025: Assessing Sustainability (Ada Chan, MoCC, & Clémence Aycard, ICOM SUSTAIN) — © Zoé Berney

Key Takeaways

- A framework of 34 Key Sustainability Indicators (KSI) helps organisations assess sustainability across governance, social, and environmental dimensions.
- Its modular structure combines mandatory and optional indicators across three levels of progression, enabling organisations to build sustainability step by step.
- The framework supports strategic decision-making, benchmarking, and dialogue with funders and policy makers.
- It will be embedded in a Sustainability Management System and tested with arts and cultural organisations to generate comparable data and shared learning.

KEY TAKEAWAYS ARABIC

تقييم الاستدامة ورصدها في المنظمات الثقافية

السؤال الرئيسي: كيف يمكن لإطار عمل معياري للمؤشرات أن يعزز الاستدامة في المنظمات الفنية والثقافية؟

يدعم هذا الإطار اتخاذ القرارات الاستراتيجية، والمقارنة المعيارية، وفتح قنوات الحوار مع الممولين وصناع القرارات السياسية.

- المنظمات (KSI) يساعد إطار عمل يتكون من 34 مؤشرًا رئيسيًا للاستدامة على تقييم الاستدامة عبر أبعاد الحوكمة والبعدين الاجتماعي والبيئي.
- سيتم دمج هذا الإطار ضمن نظام لإدارة الاستدامة، واختباره مع منظمات فنية وثقافية لإنتاج بيانات قابلة للمقارنة وتعزيز التعلم المشترك.
- تجمع البنية المعيارية لإطار العمل بين مؤشرات إلزامية وأخرى اختيارية موزعة عبر ثلاثة مستويات من التطور، مما يتيح للمنظمات بناء مسار الاستدامة خطوة بخطوة.

KEY TAKEAWAYS CHINESE

评估和监测文化机构的可持续性

如何使用模块化指标框架提升艺术和文化机构的可持续性

核心要点：

- 提出一项包含34项关键可持续性指标（KSI）的框架，可帮助机构从治理、社会和环境三个维度评估其可持续性。
- 该框架的模块化结构将必选指标和可选指标分成三个层级，支持机构循序渐进地构建可持续体系。
- 该框架支持战略决策、基准测试，以及与资助者和政策制定者的对话。
- 该框架将被纳入可持续性管理体系，并通过艺术和文化机构实践验证，以生成可比数据并分享经验。

KEY TAKEAWAYS SPANISH

Evaluación y seguimiento de la sostenibilidad en las organizaciones culturales

¿Cómo puede un marco modular de indicadores reforzar la sostenibilidad de las organizaciones artísticas y culturales?

Mensajes clave:

- Un marco de 34 indicadores clave de sostenibilidad (KSI) permite evaluar la sostenibilidad en las dimensiones de gobernanza, social y ambiental.
- Su estructura modular, organizada en tres niveles, permite una implementación gradual y adaptada a las organizaciones.
- Apoya la gestión estratégica, el benchmarking y el diálogo con financiadores y responsables políticos.
- Integrado en un sistema de gestión de la sostenibilidad, será probado en organizaciones culturales para generar datos comparables y apoyar el aprendizaje sectorial.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FRENCH

Évaluation et suivi de la durabilité au sein des organisations culturelles

Comment un référentiel modulaire d'indicateurs peut-il renforcer la durabilité des organisations artistiques et culturelles?

Messages clés:

- Un référentiel de 34 indicateurs clés de durabilité (KSI) permet d'évaluer la durabilité des organisations selon des dimensions de gouvernance, sociales et environnementales.
- Sa structure modulaire, organisée en trois niveaux, permet une mise en œuvre progressive et adaptée aux organisations.
- Il constitue un outil de pilotage stratégique, facilitant la prise de décision, le benchmarking et le dialogue avec les bailleurs de fonds et les décideurs publics.
- Intégré à un système de management de la durabilité, il sera testé auprès d'organisations culturelles pour générer des données comparables et soutenir l'apprentissage sectoriel.

Why sustainability matters for arts and cultural organisations

In recent years, audiences, funders, and professionals within the cultural sector have increasingly expected arts and cultural organisations **to play an active role in the sustainability transition**. While museums, theatres, and opera houses have the potential to act as catalysts for change, they are also embedded in **systems that reproduce unsustainable practices**, since they remain “bound up with many of the forces that have led the planet to the brink of climate breakdown”¹. This tension helps explain why sustainability commitments are often difficult to translate into everyday organisational practice.

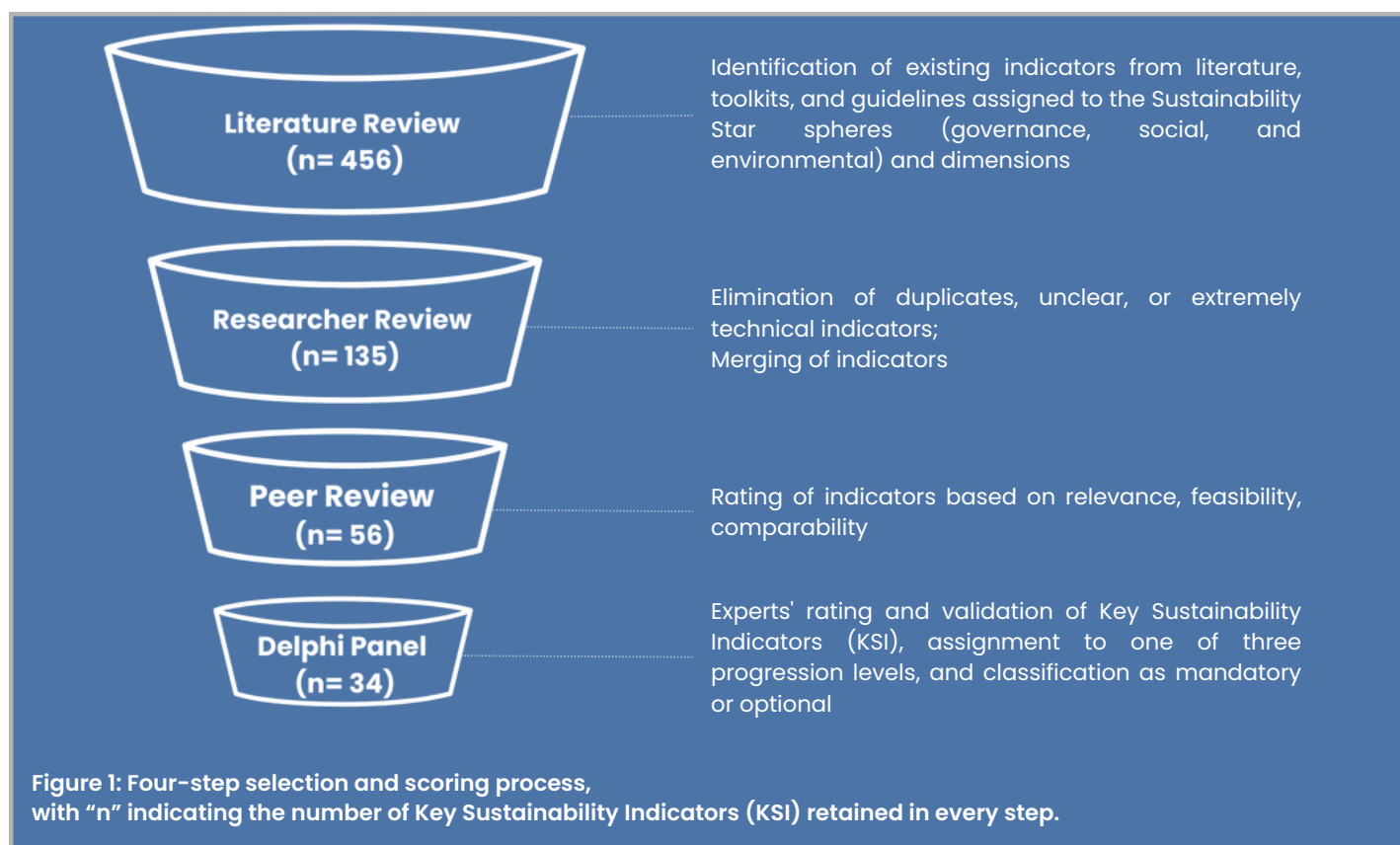
In the field of research, there is a broad consensus on what sustainability means: **ensuring a good life for all that does not cost the planet**.

From this perspective, sustainability is not only about technical improvements, but requires changes in how organisations are governed, responsibilities are distributed, and long-term strategies are defined. Consequently, before arts and cultural organisations can contribute to broader, systemic change, they must first undergo **an internal organisational shift to establish themselves as credible agents** of the sustainability transition.

This is why Culture for the Planet developed a **holistic, strategic framework for assessing and monitoring the sustainability** of arts and cultural organisations, as illustrated in the diagram below.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

A knowledge co-production approach involving four research steps:



¹ Harrison, Rodney, and Colin Sterling. 2021. *Reimagining Museums for Climate Action*. Museums for Climate Action and the UCL Institute of Archaeology. <https://framerframed.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Reimagining-Museums-for-Climate-Action-eBook.pdf>.

From shared challenges to a modular sustainability framework

Culture for the Planet designed a modular sustainability framework, where 34 Key Sustainability Indicators (KSI) are organised into three levels of progression (basic, intermediate, and advanced) and classified as mandatory or optional. Levels of progression indicate when organisations should begin collecting and reporting data for each indicator.

Ten basic indicators can capture **entry-level or foundational practices**, which are suitable for organisations at the beginning of their sustainability journey. Of these, seven are mandatory, and three are optional. 13 intermediate indicators reflect **more developed practices**, split between seven mandatory and six optional. 11 indicators represent **advanced practices**, seven of which are optional.

Key Sustainability Indicators (KSI) across levels of progression

BASIC INDICATORS: TAKE ROOT

	Governance	Social	Environmental
Mandatory	Statement of Commitment Strategic Relevance	Accessible Venue Safety	Water Consumption Energy Consumption Waste Generated
Optional	Sustainability Training Sustainability Communication	Public Transport	—

INTERMEDIATE INDICATORS: GROW

	Governance	Social	Environmental
Mandatory	Sustainability Management Sustainability Monitoring	Inclusive Hiring Local Ties	Water Efficiency Renewable Sources Waste Diversion
Optional	—	Accessible Content Diversity Representation Precarity Consumption-free Spaces	Sustainable Food Staff Mobility

ADVANCED INDICATORS: THRIVE

	Governance	Social	Environmental
Mandatory	—	Ethical Sponsorships	Procurement Policies Energy Efficiency GHG Emissions
Optional	Sustainability Standards Programming	Retention Rate Historical Responsibility Co-production Sustainability Knowledge	Biodiversity Initiatives

Rather than assuming a uniform level of readiness across cultural organisations, the resulting structure reflects **a phased system in which sustainability is understood as a progressive organisational journey**. Organisations initially engage with mandatory foundational practices, then move towards more optional, ambitious indicators as they advance. The framework, therefore, balances sector-specific relevance with flexibility and

supports decision-making over time by **taking into account organisational constraints**, which emerged during the consultation process. The 44 experts in the second Delphi round reflect diverse professional roles across arts and cultural organisations, ensuring the framework reflects multiple organisational perspectives, as illustrated in the graph below.

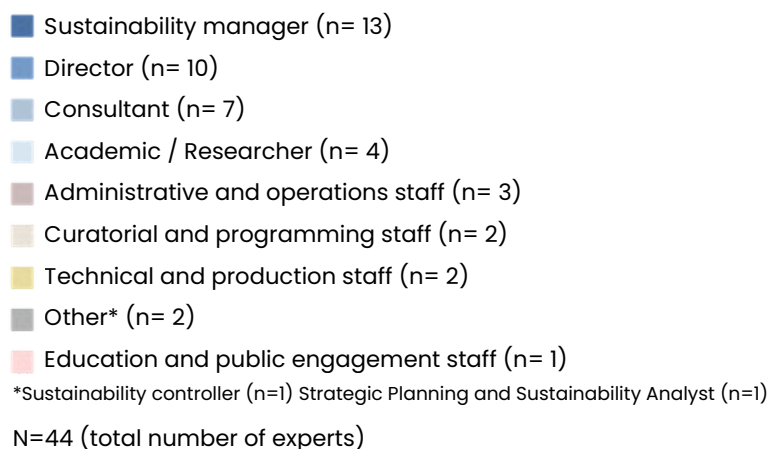


Figure 2: Roles of the Delphi panel experts within their organisations.

Three key dilemmas and how to tackle them

Arts and cultural organisations agree that sustainability matters, as experts consistently rate sustainability indicators as highly relevant. However, **while sustainability goals are widely accepted as important, many organisations struggle to**

translate them into concrete, measurable actions. Our consultation identified three recurring dilemmas that organisations face when assessing and monitoring sustainability.

1. Governance: The Integration Dilemma

In the governance sphere, experts highlighted a key dilemma: **should sustainability be managed through dedicated resources, or integrated into everyday organisational routines?** While several experts argued that dedicated staff and budgets are necessary to drive change, others stressed that sustainability can only be effective if it is embedded

in all departments, roles, and organisational processes. For instance, they warned that a dedicated sustainability budget can **“treat sustainability spending as a silo, whereas sustainability should ideally be integrated into business-as-usual operating budgets”** (consulted expert 38).

How does the framework address the Integration Dilemma?

Governance indicators reflect a progression from foundational commitments to more formalised and resource-intensive practices. For example, sustainability communication is seen as a starting point, followed by sustainability monitoring, and eventually achieving sustainability standards. This sequencing reflects an understanding of sustainability governance as a process of increasing formalisation and institutionalisation over time.

2. Social: The Responsibility Boundary

In the social sphere, experts raised questions about **how far a cultural organisation's responsibility can realistically extend, given legal frameworks, labour markets, audience behaviour, and historical legacies**. For instance, while the restitution or repatriation of objects from colonial contexts and the development of sustainable collecting

practices were seen as important issues, experts noted that these decisions are often governed by legal rules and curatorial authority, which can limit organisational autonomy. Indicators related to labour conditions revealed similar limits, as experts pointed out that salary structures are often shaped by external regulations and funding conditions.

3. Environmental: The Control Gap

In the environmental sphere, experts disagreed on **how much control cultural organisations have over sustainability measures that depend on infrastructure, location, and regulation**. For example, they explained that green spaces and biodiversity initiatives depend on building ownership, heritage protection laws, and geographic location. Climate-related indicators raised similar challenges, as measuring greenhouse gas emissions beyond direct

operations was considered difficult, especially for audience travel. Experts also expressed doubts about indicators linked to materials and supply chains. As one expert noted: **"when working with local suppliers we have often found sustainable certification to be unrealistic for smaller business to gain accreditation due to cost and time resource needed, even if they are working in an ethical/sustainable manner"** (consulted expert 20).

How does the framework address the Responsibility Boundary and Control Gap dilemmas?

Indicators that achieved broad agreement and are largely under direct organisational control or responsibility are placed at the foundational level and are often mandatory. These include social responsibilities towards staff and audiences, and environmental measures linked to directly controllable resources like water, waste, and energy. On the contrary, indicators that are important but strongly shaped by external constraints or local contexts are mainly classified as optional or advanced. In so doing, the framework prevents organisations from being penalised for factors beyond their control.

INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

ARTS AND CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS can use this framework to:

Diagnose:

Conduct an initial diagnosis to assess at what stage of their sustainability journey they are, and start collecting and monitoring data on mandatory indicators. Being flexible, the framework can be combined with existing tools.

Prioritise:

Utilise collected data to set a baseline and identify priority areas for action.

Improve:

Define strategic, realistic goals coupled with concrete actions to achieve them.

Benchmark:

Continuously learn through exchange with other arts and cultural organisations operating at similar levels of progression.

INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

FUNDERS can use this framework to:

- Evaluate:** Use shared data to understand sector-wide sustainability progress across customisable dimensions.
- Align:** Match sustainability expectations with organisational capacity, supporting differentiated pathways instead of applying uniform metrics to organisations of all sizes and contextualise collected data to set a baseline and identify priority areas for action.
- Support:** Direct funding and incentives towards realistic, phased sustainability improvements that organisations can implement and scale over time.

POLICYMAKERS can use this framework to:

- Monitor:** Track long-term sustainability progress across the arts and cultural organisations using shared indicators.
- Inform:** Use sector-wide, comparable data to develop evidence-based cultural policies.
- Design:** Develop context-sensitive policy instruments that encourage gradual institutional change, avoid penalising organisations operating under structural constraints, and maintain accountability and comparability at the sectoral level.

Next steps: testing and validating the framework

Culture for the Planet will first integrate the 34 Key Sustainability Indicators (KSI) into **a broader Sustainability Management System (SMS)**. This approach aims to support a shift from isolated indicators towards management processes that integrate sustainability into everyday governance and long-term strategy.

Once embedded in the SMS, the framework will be **tested over 12 months with Culture for the Planet Alliance Member organisations**. This testing phase will involve museums, theatres, and opera houses

of different sizes and from different regions of the world, enabling collective implementation, learning, and co-creation across the sector. **Following the testing phase, the Alliance will publish the full list of indicators, including detailed descriptions and measurement units.**

This process will generate **comparable data on current sustainability performance**, strengthening organisational learning and supporting dialogue with policymakers and funders.

Why impact measurement comes next

The framework currently focuses on what organisations can measure reliably today: inputs and outputs. Measuring long-term societal impact is complex and requires additional methods, especially for artistic production and programming. For this reason, the framework is intentionally **designed as a first step, not a final solution.**

Culture for the Planet intends to explore how outcome and impact indicators could complement the framework in the next phase of work. This will help capture how cultural organisations shape values and narratives on a finite planet, **what experts call the “superpower of cultural institutions”** (consulted expert 38), **and their role in society to “interpret current concerns for the public”** (consulted expert 33).



Yin Xiuzhen. *Washing River (detail)*, 1995. Chromogenic print. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong. By donation. [2012.1287]. © Yin Xiuzhen. Image courtesy of M+, Hong Kong

This research is part of the **MANAGE** pillar within **Culture for the Planet**, a spin-off of the research-for-action project led by the University of Lausanne (UNIL) and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW).

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Date: February 2026

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