

TEMA

# THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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*This issue of Economia della Cultura publishes the contributions from the workshop Culture Shapes Our Future: The Role of Culture in Economic, Social, Environmental, and Cultural Development, held in December 2023 at the Department of Business Studies of Roma Tre University. The workshop was organized by the Associazione per l'Economia della Cultura, the CLES, the Department of Business Studies at Roma Tre University, the Fondazione Scuola dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali, and the Master's Program in Cultural Economics and Management at Roma Tre.*

*It aimed to foster a vibrant and constructive debate on these topics, fueling the discussion with the contribution of researchers who have addressed the issues from different points of view. Additionally, a session dedicated to young scholars provided an opportunity for emerging researchers to present their latest work through a poster session, allowing for an exchange of ideas on new research directions in the field of cultural economics and management.*

*The premise of the workshop was grounded in the widely accepted notion that culture, defined in a narrow sense (functional to the production of income) or in a broad sense (in an anthropological view), influences the quality of life of communities. This perspective aligns with the multidisciplinary body of literature that has long explored culture's role in shaping sustainable development. As UNESCO stated in 2012, «the cultural dimension is indeed a transversal, cross-cutting concern that affects all the dimensions of development». And, as with environmental resources, cultural resources inherited from one generation must be made available, at least intact, to future generations so as not to compromise their ability «to meet their own needs».*

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However, this broad acknowledgment of culture's impact raises fundamental questions that remain open to debate. The first question arises: Is it sufficient to consider the transversal dimension of culture or is it perhaps necessary to consider culture as one of the specific pillars of sustainable development? Furthermore, what role should be attributed to culture within the framework of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all UN member states in 2015 to provide a comprehensive and integrated approach to sustainable development, addressing economic, social, and environmental dimensions? Should culture have an ancillary role with respect to these three dimensions as the current SDGs imply, or should culture have a specific role for which it is necessary to introduce an 18th goal? If so, what methodologies and indicators would be necessary to measure progress toward such a goal?

These questions remain at the center of discussions on cultural policy, and they were explored from multiple perspectives throughout the workshop.

One of the critical challenges in this debate is the difficulty of defining culture's impact using conventional evaluation frameworks.

The complex relationship of culture with the development of a country in all its dimensions and with the indicators so far proposed to account for it also derives from the fact that the cultural dimension is constantly changing due to various factors, including the non-marginal one of technological revolutions that, in recent times, have increasingly accelerated the way culture is produced, distributed, and consumed.

Technological innovation has historically played a significant role in shaping cultural production, distribution, and consumption, generating new cultural products and requiring new organizational forms and new professional skills to create them. The latest innovation in order of time, though still in its early stages, is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which, according to some scholars, will significantly impact certain professional profiles and bring about profound changes in the processes of cultural production. The effects of the digital revolution and the potential impacts related to the introduction and diffusion of AI were other topics discussed at the workshop.

As already written, technological changes are associated with profound changes in the needs for professional skills and management models. Our meeting did not avoid these issues, which were analyzed both individually and in relation to the training processes that will have to be activated to meet the new needs.

Another important theme that emerged in the discussions was the increasing need for robust methodologies to evaluate cultural policies and interventions. Integrating qualitative and quantitative indicators is becoming essential for determining whether policies achieve sustainability objectives across economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. The discipline of evaluation faces new challenges, requiring clearer definitions of objectives and indicators, more efficient data collection methods, and innovative methodologies that can assess the effectiveness of ongoing activities in pursuing these objectives by examining both quantitative and qualitative indicators, whether objective or subjective.

*Models and evaluation tools constitute another research area that remains open, especially regarding the analysis and evaluation of culture and its impacts on economic development and well-being, a theme closely linked to the previous one. And on this aspect, proposals and new research stimuli have emerged from the workshop. The workshop discussions reinforced the idea that assessing culture's contribution to economic growth and social well-being requires a multidimensional perspective that goes beyond traditional economic indicators.*

*The contributions that the various speakers have made to the topics, previously briefly illustrated, certainly enrich their understanding, but rather than providing definitive solutions, as often happens in research, they help to grasp their complexity by suggesting new paths of analysis and highlighting new issues that the reflection will have to address. The evolving relationship between culture, development, and sustainability requires continuous reflection, particularly as global challenges demand more integrated and adaptive policy responses.*

*In this light, the workshop was not only an opportunity to share research findings but also a platform for generating new ideas and collaborative perspectives on the role of culture in sustainable development. The papers published in this special issue reflect the richness of these discussions and provide valuable insights into the ongoing efforts to deepen our understanding of culture's multifaceted contributions to contemporary societies.*

*We believe that this workshop was a stimulating and fruitful occasion for discussion, and we hope that the contributions collected here will serve as a meaningful reference for scholars and policymakers engaged in the study and management of cultural resources.*