



# Living cultural heritage – a resource of Creative solutions for a sustainable future

## Policy brief

## *Introduction*

Activities for the safeguarding of living cultural heritage practices and traditions can make important contributions to sustainable development across multiple sectors and the aspects of cultural, social, economic, and ecological sustainability. Sustainable development strategies can also support heritage practice and transmission.

The general public often responds enthusiastically to inclusion of new sustainability dimensions in heritage projects, for example by placing a spotlight on recycling and reusing materials in heritage festivals.

Heritage sector stakeholders can help track impacts of their safeguarding work on sustainable development outcomes, such as responsible consumption, decent work, and sustainable cities and communities.

Communities, NGOs and government agencies can benefit from experimental collaborations on living heritage sustainability projects, and share funding and expertise between projects.

# LIVIND Project

The LIVIND project (September 2021 – May 2024), led by the Finnish Heritage Agency and funded in principle by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, explored the links between sustainable development and living cultural heritage. The project organised meetings and a series of webinars, and funded a research study and 20 pilot projects in the Northern Dimension region. Project partners were recruited from communities, culture sector organisations and the public and private sectors in Denmark (including Greenland and Faroe Islands), Estonia, Finland (including Åland Islands), Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, and Sweden.

# What is living cultural heritage?

Living heritage or intangible cultural heritage is part of people's everyday lives, in all our daily routines, in work, at hobbies and in times of festivities. Living heritage includes celebrations and rituals, various craft skills, dance, music, and storytelling as well as traditions related to food or nature and the universe.

## Example: Tree-beekeeping across the Polish-Lithuanian forest area (Poland & Lithuania)

This LIVIND pilot project focused on organising a collaborative Polish-Lithuanian workshop to exchange knowledge and experiences in tree-beekeeping. The tradition of sustaining nesting logs for wild bees that create their hives in trees is known and continued over generations in both countries, in the Polish Augustow forest area that continues to the Lithuanian side as the Dainava Forest and Dzūkija national park. This element of living heritage was inscribed on the UNESCO ICH Representative list in 2020 together by Poland and Belarus, but the tradition is kept also in Lithuania and Ukraine. The pilot organisers saw it as important to strengthen bilateral and multilateral contacts between the different bearer communities.

The project delivered a three-day workshop that for the first time brought participants from Poland and Lithuania to work together. The project created opportunities and connections for cooperation and mutual support. Indeed, the pilot project worked as an introduction to cooperation, as following the pilot project the organising parties achieved an EU funded cross-border Interreg project.

Find more information about the beekeeping pilot project on the [LIVIND website](#).



Picture: Bractwo Bartne.

# Key challenges

A number of key challenges were identified through the LIVIND pilot projects and the analysis of periodic reports from the project countries for the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage:

- 1. Policy fragmentation.** In spite of national and international commitments on sustainable development and heritage safeguarding, there is often little synergy between development policies and heritage policy, especially at the national level.
- 2. Insufficient awareness and research** about the potential links between living heritage and sustainable development.
- 3. Insufficient cross-sectoral collaboration** between the heritage sector and other sectors, especially at the national level. Strong local organisations supported by local government can help foster cross-sectoral links.



Picture: Aivar Ruukel.

# Policy recommendations

To fully realise the potential of living heritage to support sustainable development, the LIVIND project identified a number of steps that could be taken by policymakers and sector stakeholders:

- 1. Create greater synergy between policies and programmes for living heritage safeguarding and sustainable development** at the national level, particularly in the areas of tourism, creative industries and environmental sustainability. Look to local government for inspiration on how different development agendas could be linked. See for example: [Sustainability plan](#) for the Varėna mushroom festival (Lithuania).
- 2. Raise awareness** among communities and heritage professionals about sustainable development policies that affect their work and share practical ways in which they can contribute to the sustainable development agenda. At the local level, Indigenous communities provide inspiring examples of community-driven policies and programmes such as ethical guidelines and intellectual property strategies enabling better control over and benefit from their own heritage. See for example: [IP tools](#) for Sámi handicrafts (Sámi area in Finland, Sweden, and Norway).
- 3. Encourage intersectoral communication and collaboration** through a sustainability agenda, leveraging existing networks where possible among communities, heritage professionals, public and private sector actors in various development spheres, local government, NGOs and other organisations. See for example: [New plans](#) at the Medieval centre's summer camps for more kids to join activities (Denmark, Bornholm Island).
- 4. Collect more data** on the impact of living heritage practices on sustainable development, and on the impact of social, cultural, economic and environmental development initiatives on living heritage practices. For example, undertake qualitative and quantitative research, led by local communities, on the contribution of specific traditional handicrafts to the relevant local community's economic wellbeing and cultural identity. Use this data to develop a series of strategic priorities for funding. See for example: [Knowledge sharing and a handbook](#) to support *fåbod* farmers to organise activities for the young (Sweden).
- 5. Support targeted policies and programmes** through a range of funding opportunities to encourage experimental work and expansion of successful pilot projects. Projects could be supported by a network of experts in specialist areas (e.g. education, environmental sustainability, facilitation, business and sustainable development reporting). See for example: [Cooperation with museums](#) to add awareness about folk dance and social sustainability.



Picture: Broliai Černiauskai.

Resources and examples can be found on the LIVIND website, [www.livind.fi](http://www.livind.fi)



# Background

Living cultural heritage, including craft skills, performative arts, festivals, agricultural and further nature-related practices, and various other elements, can in many ways support ethical livelihoods and sustainable wellbeing of environment and people in communities. A major topic of international debate for several decades, sustainable development, following the now classic definition,<sup>1</sup> ensures that we meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being. Living heritage also emphasises the interconnectedness of generations through skills and knowledge that are transmitted from a generation to a generation.

In 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,<sup>2</sup> 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ensuring that sustainability remains at the forefront of political discussions, policies, and programmes. Despite the rather all-encompassing SDGs, culture is often recognised missing from planned sustainability efforts. Debate on this shortcoming has won increasing attention. The Final Declaration of the 2022 UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT 2022) affirmed the commitment “to a reinforced multilateralism that recognises

culture as a global public good with an intrinsic value to enable and drive sustainable development”.<sup>3</sup> In September 2024, the UN Pact for the Future, underscoring the pledge to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030, detailed the inclusion and role of culture as part of this commitment.<sup>4</sup>

Following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, steps have been taken to incorporate it into the existing frameworks on culture in general and living cultural heritage in particular. For instance, Operational Directives for the implementation of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage call “to recognize the importance and strengthen the role of intangible cultural heritage as a driver and guarantee of sustainable development”.<sup>5</sup> UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions explicitly links the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions and sustainable development in Article 13 and cooperation for development in Articles 14-18.<sup>6</sup> The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention) emphasises the value and potential of cultural heritage as a resource for sustainable development and addresses the sustainable use of cultural heritage specifically in Article 9, reframing heritage in relation to its value for

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<sup>1</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987. Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. n.d. “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” United Nations. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO. 2022. UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development - MONDIACULT 2022: Final Declaration. [https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/10/6.MONDIACULT\\_EN\\_DRAFT%20FINAL%20DECLARATION\\_FINAL\\_1.pdf](https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/10/6.MONDIACULT_EN_DRAFT%20FINAL%20DECLARATION_FINAL_1.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 20 September 2024. The Pact for the Future. <https://undocs.org/en/A/79/L.2> The role of culture and sports is highlighted in Action 11.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO. 2022. Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. [https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003\\_Convention\\_Basic\\_Texts-2022\\_version-EN\\_.pdf](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003_Convention_Basic_Texts-2022_version-EN_.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO. 2023. Basic Texts of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388847>.

society and advocating for an integrated approach and citizen participation.<sup>7</sup>

Although the connection between living cultural heritage and sustainable development has been recognised internationally in this way, the potential of living heritage as a resource for achieving sustainable development in the Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture countries<sup>8</sup> is yet to be fully realised. The LIVIND project, with its focus on the Northern Dimension area, thus aimed to explore some practical ways in which living heritage practice and transmission can support sustainable development and how sustainability thinking can inform living heritage safeguarding.

This policy brief is based on the analysis of LIVIND project documentation, international and national legal frameworks, broader national contexts (including periodic reports on the implementation of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage), semi-structured interviews with project participants, participant observation during online and on-site events, and autoethnography. It aims to better inform and assist policymakers on different levels, institutional stakeholders and grassroots initiatives as well as individual professionals and practitioners in their work on living cultural heritage and sustainable development.

Our research showed that while some exciting and innovative projects have been done at the local level, awareness about the link between living heritage and sustainability is low in general. Work on living heritage and sustainable development is not well integrated across different sectors and levels of government and society. This means that the impacts

of such work are uneven, and not widely known and shared, especially across sectors. Heritage stakeholders often focus on social and cultural sustainability rather than economic and environmental sustainability. Insufficient communication and collaboration, and a lack of effective monitoring and evaluation, hampers strategic planning for the future.

Greater awareness, collaboration and research can support evidence-based policymaking in this area and foster a holistic approach, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability. Further experimental and exploratory actions, based on broad individual and community participation in design, implementation, and evaluation of projects can help to develop robust and long-term strategic policy measures to support sustainable development in, with, and through living heritage practices.



Picture: Rene Jakobson.

<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe. 2005. Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>.

<sup>8</sup> Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture. n.d. "Who We Are: NDPC." Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture. Accessed October 22, 2024. <https://ndpculture.org/ndpc>.