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ARTICLE

Regenerative cultural policy: sustainable development, cultural relations, and social learning

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of cultural policy in addressing global challenges through a regenerative framework and critiques the absence of a dedicated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for culture, which has marginalised the cultural sector's potential contribution to sustainable development. It focuses on cultural policies as an aspect of culture that can support a thriving conceptualisation of life within planetary boundaries, contributing to societal, environmental and economic wellbeing of humanity in a caring approach to the more-than-human world. It argues that the current global cultural policy ecosystem, which operates from local to international levels, must evolve to support sustainable and regenerative futures by adopting a more integrated, holistic, and accountable approach. It proposes that the co-creative and reflective values inherent in cultural relations and the dynamic practice of engaging in social learning offer meaningful ways with which to engage in regenerative and reflexive cultural policy design, implementation, and evaluation to lead transformational change.

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1. Introduction

Every day, the Earth's more-than-human world is engaged in a perpetual integrated regenerative cycle of birth, growth, destruction, and renewal where death lives side by side with hope. The impact of human activities on Earth has disrupted these cycles at such a scale and speed that we have endangered our own future, as the ability of our natural ecosystems to restore and regenerate themselves is seriously compromised. The 2020s decade is considered decisive to actively course correct the negative human effects on climate change and globally we are falling short of meeting key deadlines; the estimated overshoot of human consumption of our home planet resources is 1.7 the amount of Earth's current capacity (Global Footprint Network 2024). The 2023 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) report already notes that some future climate changes are unavoidable, or even irreversible. A sustainable future is not looking bright as there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to take action.

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation are urgent threats to humanity's livelihoods and ways of life, but populations face many other intersecting challenges such as poverty and economic inequality, discrimination, limited rights and freedoms, political instability and social unrest, war, and ill health. Current global efforts to support humanity's collective journey to

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tackle these challenges are encapsulated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In March 2025, the United Nations (UN) will discuss and agree on a review of the 17 SDGs, against a bleak backdrop where only 17% of the SDGs are on track (UN 2024b). While culture has been recognised as transversally important for achieving all the SDGs, its potential to accelerate progress remains underutilised, both in that there is no standalone or accountability for the cultural sector, nor there is inclusion of cultural experts, training, or resources to address cultural value obstacles in meeting the current SDGs. This omission has led to a disconnect between the acknowledged importance of culture and the cultural sector, pragmatics of domestic and international public policy, programming, targets, and indicators, which fail to adequately prioritise, fund or evaluate culture-driven efforts.

Culture and cultural policy are key for the protection of the future of humanity and the planet. The cultural policy ecosystem on all levels, local to global, has a unique role in creating the capacity to be regenerative by establishing, implementing, and evaluating policies that create conditions for imagination, creativity, and creative expressions to flourish. We agree with Stephenson (2023, v) that 'culture is simultaneously a cause of the [poly]crisis, a constraint on change, an exemplar of solutions and a creative force for transition'. The challenges of humanity's proclivity to equate creation with expansion, and often then destruction, exploitation and extraction with devasting consequences for future human survival, cannot be successfully addressed without excavating, exalting, and embracing the critical role that culture and its often critical culturally expressive friend, the arts, can play in discussions around sustainability and regeneration. Culture can be a key to transforming hearts, minds, and systems in a way that allows for rethinking and redesigning relationships and action that is regenerative rather than exploitative and destructive, or it can be a mobilizing force to keep the status quo or return to a perceived glorified past of human dominion. We propose that the co-creative and reflective values inherent in cultural relations and the dynamic practice of engaging in social learning offer meaningful ways with which to engage in regenerative and reflexive cultural policy design, implementation, and evaluation to lead transformational change.

It is impossible to conceptualise humanity without culture, yet nature is often excluded or treated as a separate realm, over which humanity claims supremacy. For a critique of modernity's framing of this dichotomy see Latour (1993). This is how much of humanity understands its positioning, and we have individually and collectively developed ways of thinking, doing, along with its material embodiments (Stephenson 2023), that are naturally and humanely disconnected, exploitative, and extractive (Sassen 2014). In contrast, David Abram's (1996) concept of 'the more-than-human world' expresses the interconnectedness of humanity (with its tangible and intangible culture), as one with itself and with nature and all that constitutes the world beyond it, as an active, living matrix. Thus, we are keen to adopt this holistic view also for the field of cultural policy. The recent COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of the humbling realization that there is so much we do not know about our biology and how it interacts with the rest of the planetary ecosystem and 'highlighted the inequities within and between societies connected to resources, knowledge and cultural identity' (Figueira and Fullman 2021, 13). COVID-19 was a major setback, halting, and in some cases reversing, progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), however it also showed humanity the importance of the connection to nature and the arts in their lives, and that by collaborating, sharing, learning, and harnessing our collective intelligence, we can find solutions to even the most challenging problems.

We see humanity as one with itself and with nature. Thus, we believe that culture, arts, heritage, creative and cultural sectors, their practices, policies and management, including international cultural relations, need to consider the more-than-human world, and beyond sustaining the status quo, need to be a force for change, transitioning for what we could call regenerative futures (Warden 2021). The ecological dimensions and efforts of the aforementioned sectors need to be understood beyond the greening or sustainability of their own operations and economic activities, services and products. How these sectors design programmes, elevate their evaluation, and learn from their impact and scaling, can

be an important leverage point intervention (Meadows 1999) to inspire and affect change, as we argued in Figueira and Fullman (2021). A viable future for all requires the rejuvenation of cultural policy to holistically offer a supportive policy framework for the rethinking, designing and implementation of ways of thinking, doing and having that care for more than humanity.

We are calling for regenerative cultural policy, defined by the editors of this special issue, as incorporating the potential of public policy to revitalise the cultural sector through a holistic approach to culture and development focused on interrelationships (Dâmaso and Rex 2025). In this article we focus on cultural policies as an aspect of culture that can support a thriving conceptualisation of life within planetary boundaries, contributing to societal, environmental and economic wellbeing of humanity in a caring approach to the more-than-human world. In this conceptualisation of cultural policies, we also include those pertaining to (international) cultural relations, as we feel that although important, the international/domestic, external/internal divides of international/national public policies are porous and that interstitial spaces are productive sites for policy and practice innovation. We view cultural relations as work in the broad area of culture to foster cooperative relationships and support the development of friendly relations between individuals, communities, and peoples across and within borders. This is achieved through educational, societal, arts, and cultural engagement, exchanges, capacity building, and mutual knowledge and understanding (Figueira and Fullman 2021). The article is structured as follows: in the next section we provide a short discussion on our framing concepts and provide a short methodological note; in the third section, we look into the design of a regenerative future, supported by design thinking, and noting the importance of placemaking and caring approaches; in the fourth section, we consider the importance of an SDG for culture and elaborate on ways forward. In the final section, we develop our ideas for the creation of a regenerative cultural policy and practice for the ecological age, using a cultural relations approach and social learning theory and tools.

2. Framing concepts and methodological note

Development, sustainability, and regeneration are framing concepts for this article. They can be conceptual minefields: complex, politically charged, multivalent. We provide here a short discussion on how we view and use the concepts.

For the purpose of our article, we situate our note on human development within the field of development economics, which traditionally seeks to address the causes of poverty and inequality and formulate policies to reduce them, with a particular focus on lower-income countries. Amartya Sen's work on human capabilities has much contributed to the development of the field of human development. In his 1999 seminal book *Development as Freedom*, he elaborates on the capability approach framework, which shifted the focus from traditional economic indicators like gross national product to a broader assessment of human wellbeing and influenced the United Nations' Human Development Index. Sen (1999) noted that our individual freedom of agency is constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities we have, and expanding that freedom is what development is/should be: '[e]xpansion of freedom is [. . .] both the primary end and as the principal means of development' (Sen 1999, xii). In his writings, from a perspective of ethical fairness, he argues that preserving the environment for future generations, i.e. sustainability, is a critical component of achieving social justice and equitable development, and part of the enhancement of human capabilities. Further, he (Sen 2014) notes that the concern with ecosystems needs to go beyond the extent that they affect our own lives: humans have freedom to think about what responsibilities they have (for example responsibility to other species, because we have the 'power to make a difference' as taught by Gautama Buddha (Mahāthera 2012)) and an interest in their own quality of life can help shed light on the demands of sustainable development and on the content and relevance of environmental issues. Sen (2014) is critical of contemporary environmental thinking for being single-focused instead of being multi-directional, e.g. by focusing on carbon emissions and not paying so much attention to other externalities, such as the use of nuclear energy. This is an interesting

perspective, worth noting for future discussion on how cultural policy in its engagement with ecology and sustainable development has also been influenced by single issue thinking. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the power of making a difference through social learning and a cultural relations approach.

The concept of sustainable development was popularised by the 1987 Brundtland Report and by the 1992 Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio, Brazil. The report defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland, 1987). Sustainability is the goal of sustainable development and is often presented in three key pillars (for a discussion of conceptual origins see Purvis, Mao, and Robinson 2018): environmental (preserving and protecting the natural environment), social (focusing on social inclusion and the well-being of people and communities) and economic (creating a balance between economic growth, resource efficiency, social equity and financial stability), with culture being the often quoted but not formally recognised fourth pillar (Hawkes 2001). Sustainability involves reflecting on and taking action to conserve, preserve, and restore environments, habitats, and resources for future generations. It emphasises the need to dynamically balance current use with the capacity for renewal, fostering awareness of the impacts we have on our surroundings and highlighting humanity's role as stewards of the planet. This concept calls for awareness of limits and limitations and a focus on harmony and balance, challenging the idea of human centrality within the broader ecological system. Ultimately, what is human development (beyond biology) is a cultural construct, and we need to continue questioning its meanings. It is crucial to address both the relationships among humans – by ending exploitation and inequality at personal, community, national and international levels – and the interactions between humans and the non-human world – by ending extractivist and destructive behaviours. Considering these relationships are not just biological but also cultural, the role of individuals and organisations in the arts, heritage, creative industries, policy and education is vital in facilitating dialogue, rethinking, and action on these critical issues (see Mensah 2025; Weil and Elmúdesi 2025 – both in this issue).

Regeneration, in the field of cultural policy and practice, is often used in relation to urban regeneration, and linked models of culture and regeneration (culture-led regeneration, cultural regeneration, and culture and regeneration). In this article, we draw from agriculture (permaculture) and systems thinking: we focus on being regenerative, which is used to characterised systems that are sustainable and regenerative in opposition to being destructive (Capra 1996). Further, we believe that we should be aiming not for restoring, but allowing for 'birthing' of possibilities that respond to challenges and opportunities in the relationships of humanity with itself and its contexts, the more-than-human world. For several decades, global governance has sought to guide humanity on a development path that emphasises sustainability, aiming to moved us beyond mere economic growth. However, if we accept the current body of scientific knowledge – which we believe is essential for productive progress – we must recognise that humanity faces a trajectory of self-destruction if current consumption levels persist unchanged. Therefore, we need to act to make the life of humanity sustainable – and this is how we understand sustainability in a restrictive way. However, for that to be feasible, it is necessary to redesign our societies with a commitment to ensuring that new, diverse, and creative expressive life is possible: thus the need for regenerative design, as we discuss in section 3.

This article is a follow-up of previous work by the authors (Figueira 2022, 2023; Figueira and Fullman 2016, 2020, 2021) in which we reflect on cultural policy, practice and education, international cultural relations, and the ecological crisis. We are educators, scholars, and consultants, working inter and post-disciplinarily, caring to make a better world for all. For this piece, we use a range of published sources, from international organisations reports to the work of academic colleagues and consultants. We have prioritised articulating the rationale and potential for bringing together cultural policy, cultural relations, and social learning theory to orient and guide a regenerative ecological future and thus have not presented specific case examples. Many of the

sources we cite will offer the reader the possibility to expand on examples, and our future work will explore practical examples in depth.

3. Designing a regenerative future

To continue to thrive, humanity needs to collectively imagine and design a future that ensures the ability of agency on a global, national, and local scale to make choices and respond to yet unexperienced or predicted changes. This requires the design of regenerative policies, which includes cultural policy, and focuses on a holistic ecosystem recognizing interrelationships between the arts and design thinking, considering place and context, and using caring cultural relations and social learning approaches. In this section, we elaborate on how design thinking is an appropriate method to activate the potential of humanity to collectively solve its problems.

Design thinking is about value creation through problem solving and it creates space for ideation, systems thinking, and empathy; it offers a way to cross the 'say-do gap' with wise experimentation (IIPP Forum 2024). Design, being a non-linear iterative process, is apt to be flexible and attuned with users' needs and their challenges, allowing for solutions to be prototyped and tested. Wahl (2016, 136) notes: 'If we define design in its broadest sense, as *human intentionality expressed through interactions and relationships*, it becomes clear that any change affects human intentions will redirect the entire design landscape downstream from that shift in intentionality. [. . .] Design expresses *and* creates culture!' This highlights the importance of culture and participation in design conversations. If the conversations follow the principles of social learning, as explored in section 5, the partnerships that they allow for will enable the necessary transition to a regenerative future.

There are limitations to what can be designed, and what policies can tackle, due to the complex nature of the challenges and the uncertainty we face in terms of our knowledge and what works as solutions in different cases and in terms of their interactions. Social learning approaches clearly engage with the boundaries of the knowledge of the participants in the processes and thus allow for a productive way to tackle uncertainty and move forward collectively (as we discuss in section 5). Further, design needs to carefully engage with place and local context to enable productive transformative action with deep long-term impact potential. Because systems are complex and our ignorance is unescapable, designing and developing policy in 'a systems perspective requires humility and precaution. It means working at a smaller scale [. . .] before generalizing to systems at a larger scale' (Orr in Wahl 2016, 14). In cultural policy studies, placemaking with a focus on community-based cultural assets and collaborative approaches is thus a preferable approach to older urban regeneration frameworks often focused exclusively on economic regeneration. A narrow economic understanding of what regeneration is, is insufficient to overcome the challenges we need to tackle understanding humanity in a more-than-human world. We see examples of this in the contemporary backlash against over tourism: the capitalist economy needs to be replaced by circular economies that consider people and planet beyond profit (for related discussions in this Special Issue, see Brandellero and Naclerio 2025; Duxbury, Vinagre de Castro, and Silva 2025).

The emphasis on design thinking and placemaking is evident in the conversations critical to creating regenerative cultural policy. The Royal Society of Arts proposes eight design principles for a regenerative future (Warden 2021): start with place and context; seek different perspectives; build capacity and reciprocity; take a nested systems view of success and consequence; design for circularity and circulation; create space for emergence; design from a hopeful vision of the future; and work on the inside as well as the outside. This considered approach and others, such as the World Systems Model and the Three Horizons Framework proposed by the International Futures Forum (2024), are important examples of different methods, approaches and theories that can be used for regenerative frameworks using a plug-and-play principle. According to this principle, you seek to integrate elements by running different theories through each other to form a cohesive approach (E. Wenger-Trayner 2013).

Design is an integrator: it synthesises imagination. One of our most profound insights as arts and cultural managers, scholars, and teachers is that imagination is a renewable resource. Cultural policy has the potential to nurture or hinder that resource: as a nurturer, policies invest in people, giving them the freedom and agency to culturally express themselves without unnecessary limitations during periods of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of care (The Care Collective 2020) emerged as a guiding paradigm for addressing change in our interconnected world, emphasizing the need to create conditions that allow people, non-human entities, and the planet to thrive. Design must be imbued by a caring approach which integrates environmental, social, and economic converns as the educational and expressive ingredients needed to feed and nurture imagination are best created within circles of care leading to the ability to heal trauma in community. We further advocate that design thinking with a caring approach should be linked to cultural relations work (as discussed in Figueira and Fullman 2021), to create strategic interventions able to address the ecological crisis and facilitate a sustainable, inclusive, global society.

Now that we established the importance of design thinking in imagining our future and designing policies for that future, we analyse how culture and cultural policy are key for unlocking that future.

4. Towards and beyond an SDG for culture

Culture is what provides the fertile ground for the imagination to design that future where we all can thrive in a more than-human world. As Kagan (2015, 29) puts it '[s]ustainability is about reinventing worlds; it is a cultural project. Cultural (and arts) organisations are bearers of "spaces of possibilities" towards sustainable futures'. The problems of our times have solutions but putting them in practice is not always easy, often not because of technicalities but because of how we think and the values we uphold, how we see the world and how we choose to respond. We need to change our ways of life, and we can do this through the arts, heritage and the cultural and creative sectors thought large. These creative playgrounds a key place for imagining, for 'living the questions' of the present and future (Wahl 2016), as much work at the intersection of arts, ecology and social justice demonstrates. Those involved in futures' design and implementation, as artists, managers, policy makers, cultural and creative professionals in general, have a duality to work with: while working in sectors generated by innovation and imagination, these professionals and sectors are also themselves immersed in existing ways of thinking and doing that need to be re-examined. Thus, the importance of policies that consider and address the interrelationships between the arts, heritage, and the cultural and creative sectors with other sectors alongside intentionsl implementation that sustains the ability to respond to new challenges and opportunities for human and ecological development.

4.1. Towards an SDG for culture?

The preamble to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development begins by describing itself as 'a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity' seeking to 'strengthen universal peace in larger freedom' (UN (2015), preamble) implemented through collaborative partnerships between member countries and other (presumably private and civil society) stakeholders. With the primary goal of the eradication of poverty, the establishment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed to at the United Nations in September 2015 pledged to 'leave no one behind'. However, culture was left off as the often referred to but unofficially recognised 'fourth pillar of development'. As a result, culture defined both in its anthropological sense as ways of being and in terms of its expressions, both of meaning and in industry, has existed in these conversations as a chameleon changing its colours to survive by establishing relationships within and between other goals inspired by economic (creating a balance between economic growth, resource efficiency, social equity and financial stability), social (focusing on social inclusion and the well-being of people

and communities), and environmental (preserving and protecting the natural environment) dimensions of development.

The UN has sounded the alarm that the world is falling far short of reaching its 2030 Agenda and goals. This is a critical time to mobilise and enact transformative change with participation by the cultural sector as a critical lynchpin to transformation rather than continuing to exist on the periphery. We argue that the exclusion of culture as a standalone SDG has limited its potential to fully contribute to development solutions and to be held accountable to the same standards as other sectors, thereby diminishing its capacity to drive progress toward sustainable outcomes. We also assert that the success of all the SDGs has been impoverished from the beginning by not recognising fully the need to address cultural obstacles in order to achieve each individual goal's objectives.

Current progress on official recognition of the role of culture in the context of the SDGs is limited. At the UN Summit of the Future, which brought leaders together to forge a new international consensus in September 2024, the adopted Pact for the Future reminds us that our deeply interconnected challenges can only be addressed collectively: 'through strong and sustained international cooperation guided by trust and solidarity for the benefit of all and harnessing the power of those who can contribute from all sectors and generations' (UN 2024a, 1). The document lists actions and Action 11 notes culture: 'We will protect and promote culture and sport as integral components of sustainable development' (UN 2024a, 11). This reference falls short of the expectations for the cultural sector that for a long-time has been fighting for a culture standalone SDG. From a limited and short-sighted perspective, this might appear as a (minor) win for culture, not much a victory for the arts, and primarily a success for the sports sector – which, in any case, we have always considered part of culture. However, it is crucial that all sectors – whether 'culture', the arts, heritage, cultural and creative industries, or sports – gain recognition in the international arenas where meta-narratives and policy agendas are shaped. This recognition has the potential to trickle down, drawing attention and resources to these sectors at international, national, and local levels. The key lies in fostering collaborations across boundaries – whether real or imagined – between sectors, organisations, and communities.

The perpetual (mis)perception of poverty and inequitable investment in arts and culture comparative to other policy priorities has resulted in a global cultural sector that is comparatively falling behind in terms of greening when environmental values fall outside the core mission or objective and are not mandated. There still exists a cultural divide of exceptionalism within the arts and cultural and creative industries (CCIs) that they should not have to be accountable to certain policies, including environmental and development, which fall outside their core business model or mission. Meanwhile, the CCIs and sports sectors, which are estimated to have an annual revenue of almost 5 trillion dollars (UNESCO (2022) and Global Institute of Sport 2024), represent significant sources of collaboration and competition, social and cultural identities, and have the potential to inspire and influence millions of people worldwide, but at present are not meaningfully included in the baseline current sustainability conversation or goals. Without the integration of culture and sport, or CCIs, into sustainable development goals and actions and environmental policies on the national and local scales, we are crippling the accountability of these powerhouse forces for change and making it unnecessarily harder to evolve beyond sustainability to a regenerative approach.

4.2. Beyond an SDG for culture

Cultural policy provides a valuable framework to explore how cultural environments, cultural and human rights, and the intersections of arts, culture, and development impact humanity's ability to shape its collective and individual future. At all levels – from local to global – the cultural policy ecosystem plays a unique role in creating the capacity to be regenerative by designing, implementing, and evaluating policies that nurture imagination, creativity, and creative expression.

Contemporary mainstream visions of transition to a better future are anchored in sustainable development and the SDGs, which only in limited ways consider cultural aspects, as they are strongly skewed towards economic success. Baltà Portolés's (2023) doctoral work concludes that the reluctance of governments to acknowledge cultural diversity, due to potential problems at domestic level, coupled with a preference for measurable and quantifiable targets, has led to the marginalization of culture in this sort of international policies. Baltà questions whether development can ever be truly sustainable given the economic superstructure that underpins it. In economic studies there are alternatives being developed, such as doughnut economics, circular economy that points to de-growth, post-growth, post-capitalism economics that do tie in with the idea of regeneration. However, none of this is going to happen overnight, we are talking about a complex process of change that includes: transformation of systems, adjustments of doing, realisation of radical ideas, discarding of ideologies, development of shared ideologies, institutions, and practices (Stephenson 2023).

The urgency to tackle the ecological crisis requires that policy at all levels and settings incorporates a sustainable and regenerative dimension. Those policies are not only government policies but also those by other groups and organisations, and their statement of principles, values and orientations that can be impactful for the more-than-human world. Inspired by the question: how could cultural policy interventions using a regenerative approach contribute to the rejuvenation and resilience of the planet, people, prosperity, peace, and partnerships? we return again to Baltà Portolés (2023): he outlines six propositions for revising cultural policy in light of sustainability, adaptation, and regeneration. These propositions emphasise the need for cultural policy to broaden its scope, integrate cultural aspects into governance processes, and address the tensions between permanence and change. He argues that cultural policy should enable the negotiation of cultural dynamism while ensuring that planetary boundaries are respected. He also highlights the importance of providing spaces for multiple narratives and diverse cultural expressions, which can help align cultural policy with sustainability goals. The propositions call for a more ecosystemic approach to cultural policy, recognizing the interdependence between culture and other areas of social life.

However, Isar (Budziszewska et al. 2024) and others have cautioned that to define culture as encompassing all the challenges of the human condition is too broad, too expansive to be translatable into policies. Further, he calls for putting culture 'back in its place' and deriving a more clearly defined significance of culture policy objectives. We agree that the overlaps and flows between culture, referring to our ways of life and identities, with narrower public policies and economic sectors, as in the cultural and creative sectors, the arts, or the heritage sector, can be a complex assemblage in which to intervene. We endorse the International Cultural Relations Research Alliance (Budziszewska et al. 2024) conclusion that these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive: it is possible to establish a standalone SDG of culture to safeguard spaces for creativity as a vehicle for articulating sustainable development, while recognizing culture at the core of people's identity and essence, through which the concept of sustainable development is understood, interpreted, and implemented.

We want to add to this debate by suggesting regenerative and sustainable cultural policies and practices build on a social learning approach and capability, as the advancement we are seeing is not enough to respond in ambition, scope or speed to what is required, even in the conservative conceptualisation of what culture can do for sustainable development, as currently set by the SDG targets. We are driven by the belief that '[c]ulture is fundamental to the transformative changes that are needed to avert the worst impacts of a destabilising planet and to create a more hopeful and just future' (Stephenson 2023, 10), or even just to actually have a future for humanity.

Cultural policy is a site of collective agency crucial in leading transformative change not only to avoid the most dire predictions of human extinction but to create conditions that provide agency for innovation and cultural expression. Agency is here defined as the regenerative ability of actors in the system to make choices. Even as cultural policy, like all policy, is constrained in scope by its contexts and is not a top priority for many governments, because of culture's importance in the human 'DNA', its potential multiplier effect can be considerable. Cultural policies can support the maintenance of

status quo or they can drive change through generations – it is through a cultural relations and social learning approach that we can better discuss a range of perspectives, coordinate the evolution of diverse voices, and align actions.

Developing regenerative cultural policies requires new ways of thinking and doing policy and policymaking can be conceived as social learning and policy change as learning – while power and conflict remain also important vectors. Heclo (1974) sees much political interaction as a process of social learning expressed through policy. Considering learning at a broad level of analysis of the process, the state navigates uncertainty and responds to it on behalf of society. A more detailed analysis reveals the importance of identifying who is involved in learning. The process of social learning may be confined within the state – limited to officials and experts, making it state-centric – or it may involve wider participation, which is often shaped by the specific context. Learning can also focus on drawing insights from past experiences or from policy interventions in different settings. While our discussion here only scratches the surface of learning in policymaking (for more, see Bennet and Howlett 1992), it is important to acknowledge its complexities. These nuances highlight the value of adopting a social learning perspective, particularly when addressing complex challenges that require collaborative efforts across diverse participants.

Cultural policy and practice can facilitate the transition to regenerative cultures, and we elaborate on our vision in the next section. Furthermore, we argue that the lack of elevating the importance of cultural policy and neglecting to cultivate the practice of cultural relations aided and abetted by interdisciplinary social learning has handicapped the world's ability to create conditions for regenerative practice and policies.

5. Creating a regenerative cultural policy and practice: the potential of social learning through cultural relations

In our previous work (Figueira and Fullman 2020, 2021), we have argued that cultural relations work implies a more reciprocal approach oriented by caring, learning, and sharing and characterised by: multiple interactions, deep listening, mutual respect, and participants willing to be vulnerable, to be influenced and changed as individuals and societies in order to create trust. We also asserted that cultural relations must acknowledge power relations and seek equity and fairness to address collective challenges through 'heart work' that is process based and reflective, and not just hard work which is outcome oriented (Figueira and Fullman 2021). Couched in a commitment to long-term relations, this approach can allow for a co-creation of solutions that can be adapted to various contexts. Developing regenerative cultural policies requires new ways of thinking and doing policy (as illustrated by Dâmaso 2025 in this issue) and we now extend this approach of cultural relations further to encompass the potential of social learning (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020), to orient the design and implementation of cultural policies for the ecological age.

The creation of regenerative systems requires a 'shift in the way we think about ourselves, our relationships with one another and life as a whole' (Wahl 2016, 50). We propose that actors engaged in policymaking and implementation need to develop social learning (Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner 2020, 2021) framework skills to enable responsive policy by ensuring effectiveness and adequate support and an ability to navigate uncertainty. This includes the intentional development of imagination, engagement, and alignment across a context of intervention, through the creation of inclusive spaces for engagement and systems convening leadership, and to demonstrate impact by encouraging the use of value-creation stories. A cultural relations approach coupled with social learning and value creation frameworks provides a roadmap for moving cultural policy from the periphery to take its rightful place at the table to co-create and co-participate in solutions for a more-than-human world. In the next sub-sections, we detail the theory and how it translates in practice: first a brief presentation of the social learning paradigm, then we move on to the description and application of the social learning capability and systems convening leadership to cultural policy and

finish with a theoretical section on the value-creation framework for evaluating the impact of cultural work.

5.1. The social learning paradigm

The global challenges we face today, can only be solved by working together, at multiple levels, towards a new imagined future to ensure the possibility of a sustainable cosmopolitan and inclusive human society on planet Earth, that cares for all and the planet (Figueira and Fullman 2020). Social learning, unlike artificial intelligence (AI) which provides a simulated synthesis of knowledge, serves working together dynamically in a way that allows for human vulnerability and a human rate of understanding. This type of learning further fosters an individual process of becoming and whole-person meaning making through their interaction with others and the broader social landscape (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2021). Social learning capability can be seen as the learning foundation of human co-existence (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2014) and highlights how the social nature of a human shapes how they learn at different scales, generating different modes of identification. Cultural policy and international cultural relations are essentially situated in the relatedness and connectedness of humanity, and the negotiation of the frameworks, policies, strategies, and activities that serve it benefit from a negotiated peer-to-peer horizontal approach, which we see as aligning with the social learning paradigm. Cultural relations, in its proven ability to facilitate and support social transformation over time, provides social learning spaces and communities of practice a field of engagement and value system to build trust, work through vulnerabilities, and navigate emotional conflicts and cultural differences.

We perceive that the preponderance of the transmission of knowledge paradigm has often stifled innovation and humanity needs new solutions for the emerging emergencies it is facing, as is the case of the ecological crisis. Social learning theory, which provides an arena to question and explore the boundaries or knowledge through imagination, is thus an effective tool to enable the continuous conversation and learning required to respond to the uncertainty and ambiguity attached to our efforts of tackling global challenges. The principles of social learning, particularly in its looser form of social learning spaces, are particularly apt to unlocking and operationalising imagination, allowing for engagement to happen, and can be even more effective when guided by caring cultural relations work.

The current theorisation of social learning by Beverly and Etienne Wenger-Trayner (2020) foresees different and variable levels of participation. Social learning spaces can be viewed as the smallest setting in which people can learn with and from each other, engaging uncertainty around practice, in pursuit of making a difference. They are the building block for the communities of practice (CoPs), the more well-known concept of the Wenger-Trayner's theorisation, which can be defined as an established 'repertoire of practice and a regime of competence by which members recognise each other in terms of their ability to engage in their practice' (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020, 31). Communities of practice (CoPs) can stop being social learning spaces, if the focus on 'defending' the regime of practice stifles innovation and inclusion. The notion of CoPs arose from the study of apprenticeships, where newcomers are brought in to become masters of a craft/profession, outlining a trajectory from the periphery to the centre in terms of competence.

From our perspective, the concept of peripheral participation and the process of welcoming members into a social learning space or community of practice to solve shared problems is very important. If we apply this concept to current SDG debates and action, interdisciplinary social learning spaces inclusive of the arts and culture could provide an opportunity for culture to move from the periphery into a goal while also providing valuable insight and solutions to move the other SDGs forward with a regenerative lens. This has happened in the lead up to the UN Summit of the Future, mentioned previously, in the form of the 2024 UN Civil Society conference ImPact Coalitions.

Finally, it is important to note that social learning itself is not an antidote for the human centric conceptualisation of our world that has led to humanity imagining itself as a closed system, separate

from nature, but the building of social learning capability can, as we explain next, be effective in negotiating and scaling the 'do as I do' into 'do as we do' and have an important role in shifting, spreading and embedding new behaviours, sustaining them over time, and providing an environment of reflection and thus regenerative learning.

5.2. Social learning capability and systems convening

The design, implementation, and evaluation of regenerative cultural policies can use a social learning approach to rethink the positionality of humanity and its capacity to develop and resource policy frameworks, strategies, and activities, which are engaged and aligned also at a broader systemic level, to support thriving and adaptable communities attentive to their context and able to navigate uncertainty.

Social learning capability is defined by Beverly and Etienne Wenger-Trayner (2023) as the learning foundation of human co-existence. To position our learning, they theorise the interplay between the social landscape and identity as three modes of identification – imagination, engagement, and alignment – which can well serve policy work. Engagement provides the most immediate relation to the larger context by working on, debating, and reflecting on issues. Imagination allows us to construct an image of the context/landscape, of its past and future scenarios, it helps us understand who we are in it, exploring relations of identification: Are you like others and do you develop the same practices? This use of the concept of imagination by the B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2014) can be a source of innovation (e.g. through aspirations, visions of possible futures). We also advocate that imagination, with the right supportive educational and cultural policies, is a renewable resource. Alignment creates coordination and enables our engagement to be effective in the time and space in which we operate, but it should be noted that it implies a two-way process of coordinating enterprises, perspectives, interpretations, and contexts so that action has the effects we expect (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2014) and in this regard is very compatible with the mutuality inherent in cultural relations.

Cross boundary, interdisciplinary, work is important to enable expanding the social learning capability to achieve the regenerative futures for humanity and the planet that only working together can enable. Systems convening work (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2021) offers a practical framework for interdisciplinary collaboration. Systems conveners craft 'convening calls', which are invitational narratives to bring people to work together; they earn legitimacy to work across all types of boundaries by building relationships and networking – and these boundaries are not just existing in the landscape of practice, such as professional or institutional, they are also in people's identities; they cultivate agency in those with which they interact, using social learning to develop capacity for people (individually or collectively) to be heard and have their perspectives taken into account – this is developed through the ability to learn from and with each other how to make a difference that matters to those involved; they strategise how to deal with established hierarchies and power; they work over the long run and across competing agendas finding ways to keep articulating the value of what they are doing to different audiences. Many in the cultural field perform this type of weaving work, and this theorisation can empower them and make the importance of their role and their impact more evident.

5.3. Collecting and telling value-creation stories

In a regenerative cultural policy cycle, learning is systemically embedded and seeks to identify and communicate value arising from interventions at different levels and for a variety of stakeholders, thus enhancing effectiveness, transparency, and accountability. Collecting and telling those stories about the value created is crucial.

Value creation is a perspective on learning that emphasises the ability to make a difference (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2020). The current theory accounts for eight types of values

that you can trace when participating in an intervention – these are important tools to build the narratives of what you do: the value-creation stories. Four values are basic, which include: immediate ('What is your experience?'), potential ('What you get out of it?'), applied ('How this (could) change(d) what I do?'), realised ('What (could) happen(ed) as a result?') with four additional values: enabling ('What makes it possible?'), strategic ('Conversations with stakeholders'), orienting ('Interact with broader landscape') and transformative ('Broader deeper effects'). Across the value cycles there are flows and loops and these help in identifying effect and contribution data to illustrate your value-creation story, which potentially can branch into other interventions/stories in the landscape. The value-creation framework allows an operationalisation of social learning; in this way learning is reflexive, flexible, and adaptable and can be used with other methods of monitoring and evaluation.

Social learning theory is a good tool to enable the continuous conversation and learning required to tackle the uncertainty and ambiguity attached to our efforts of tackling global challenges. The principles of social learning, particularly in its looser form of social learning spaces, are particularly apt to unlocking and operationalising imagination, allowing for engagement to happen which can also be guided by caring cultural relations work. Questioning and exploring the boundaries of knowledge, through imagination, to produce a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of theory-practice is intrinsic to social learning. One should note however that social learning theory, as proposed by Beverly and Etienne Wenger-Trayner, is not intrinsically about social transformation (Etienne Wenger-Trayner, pers. comm., August 2, 2024), but it can be compatible with theories that are (such as for example Freire's revolutionary theory (Freire 1970, 1974)). Social learning theory can be combined with other theories with a 'plug-and-play' process through which theories negotiate their focus and theoretical commitments to find their complementarity (or their compatibilities) (E. Wenger-Trayner 2013), and the understanding of their manifestation in practice. Social learning theory thus offers a dynamic human-centric model for learning in community that combined with cultural relations can also allow for healing in community prompting us to imagine how cultural policy, cultural relations, and social learning can come together to provide a safe environment to tackle the sensitive issues of climate change and regenerative development.

6. Conclusion: reimagining a regenerative cultural policy ecosystem

We are currently living in a world that is less than a decade away from experiencing the projected devastating effects of the majority of Earth's natural population living an extractivist human-central existence; but it is not quite too late. The power to change the world rests in all of us working together. As famously noted by Jane Goodall 'What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make' (JGIC 2024). In conclusion, we imagine a regenerative future in a more-than-human world that allows for interrelated, diverse relationships grounded in caring and mutual trust, where the significance of culture and the arts and cultural sector is fully recognised and enlisted to support restorative, innovative and accountable solutions beyond sustainability.

However, a future that nurtures and respects cultural diversity, freedom of expression, cultural rights, and the agency to innovate and create is impossible without reconsidering how cultural policy interventions on the international, national, and local scale, in relation to the larger policy ecosystem, contribute to or hinder the rejuvenation and resilience of the planet, people, prosperity, peace and partnerships. Current conversations around the SDGs provide a practical opportunity with which to consider and apply how regenerative cultural policy interventions can contribute to reimagining our future using design thinking, and a caring cultural relations approach through social learning theory practices. We acknowledge that a multitude of practical and structural problems remain which inhibit the solutions to humanity's challenges but are inspired by Margaret Mead's classic call to action: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'. Our thoughtful collaborative

contribution to the discussion of how culture and cultural policy can facilitate the transition to regenerative futures in this article include the following considerations and recommendations:

(1) The co-creative and reflective values inherent in cultural relations and the dynamic practice of engaging in social learning offer meaningful ways with which to engage in regenerative and reflexive cultural policy design, implementation, and evaluation to lead transformational change.
(2) The cultural policy ecosystem on all levels, local to global, has a unique role in creating the capacity to be regenerative by designing, implementing, and evaluating policies that create conditions for imagination, creativity, and creative expressions to flourish.
(3) Design thinking offers a participatory process of intentionality that can include representative diverse stakeholders but needs to carefully engage with place and local context to enable productive and long-term transformative action that re-examines existing ways of problem solving.
(4) The achievement of sustainable indicators has been impoverished from the beginning by the exclusion of culture as an SDG which prevents the arts and cultural sectors from fully participating in development solutions and holding them accountable to the same sustainability standards as other sectors. A more inclusive profile of culture in the broader sustainable development and SDGs debate is needed.
(5) A cultural relations approach, coupled with social learning and value creation frameworks, provides a roadmap for moving cultural policy from the periphery to take its rightful place at the table to co-create and co-participate in solutions for a more-than-human world.
(6) Cultural relations provides social learning spaces and communities of practice a practical approach and value system to building trust, working through vulnerabilities, navigating emotional conflicts, and cultural differences as actors move from the periphery into full agency within cooperative spaces.
(7) Social learning theory offers a dynamic human-centric model for learning in community that combined with cultural relations can also allow for healing in community.

We believe and advocate that imagination, with the right supportive educational and cultural policies, is a renewable resource, however, elevating the importance and participation of cultural policy in designing and creating a future that allows this uniquely human gift, and its partner of cultural and creative expression, to flourish is crucial. We offer that cultural relations with its proven ability to facilitate and support social transformation over time and navigate emotional conflicts and cultural differences, coupled with social learning theory, provides us with concrete tools in a safe environment to tackle the sensitive issue of global challenges towards the pursuit of a regenerative future.

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