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Culture and sustainability in international Capital of Culture programmes' macro-level agendas: an ecosystemic and buen vivir perspective

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This paper analyses from an ecosystemic and buen vivir perspective the ways in which international Capital of Culture programmes, as international cultural policy actors, approach and frame the relationship between culture and sustainability in their official macro-level agendas. The article focuses on the world's two oldest Capital of Culture titles, the European and the Ibero-American. Both titles mention sustainability or sustainable development in their agendas, but previous research has not analysed how exactly they understand sustainability and its relation to culture. As the CoC programmes relate to both local and global policy contexts, they provide an insightful case for studying how policy emphases may be integrated into and influenced by such cultural programmes. The frame analysis method was used to identify how the titles make sense; select, name and categorise; and tell stories of the relationship between culture and sustainability and relevant ecosystemic connections and interdependences. The concept of buen vivir, based on the lifestyles and philosophies of Latin American Indigenous peoples, provided a critical non-Western lens for the analysis. It enriched the ecosystemic analysis with the principles of biocentrism, plurality, glocality, and interrelatedness of more-than-human life. The findings indicate that the European Capital of Culture sees culture as a driver of lasting local and regional cultural, economic, and social—but not environmental—legacy, whereas the IACoC considers culture an enabler of sustainable development, as understood in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through integral and transversal cultural policies. Both titles addressed sustainability-related issues, but a critical analysis showed that their visions of a sustainable change were based on anthropocentric and Western notions of development. The article argues that more transformative sustainability approaches would require a conscious reframing of the titles' sustainability approaches, which would mean questioning hegemonic sustainable development discourses and openness to alternative conceptions. The paper proposes mindset-related and concrete steps towards more impactful sustainability thinking and action in the context of CoCs and cultural policies, as well as a non-anthropocentric reconceptualisation of a CoC ecosystem.

KEYWORDS

European Capital of Culture, Ibero-American Capital of Culture, buen vivir, cultural policy, sustainability, sustainable development, ecosystemic approach, frame analysis

Introduction

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) and the Ibero-American Capital of Cultures (IACoC) are the two oldest international Capital of Culture (CoC) titles, founded in 1985 and 1991 respectively. Initially started as celebrations of arts and culture, they aimed to highlight local and regional cultural richness and diversity and bring the people in their regions closer together (Council of the European Communities, 1985; Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas, 1991; Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas, NA(a)). During the past decades, new objectives have emerged alongside the original ones. The titles are now seen as catalysts for wider urban or societal regeneration. In the 2000s, mentions of sustainability/sustainable development have started to surface in their agendas, but their approaches to sustainability and its connections with culture have not been studied.

In international cultural policy contexts, the role of culture in sustainability has been debated for decades, but the outcomes of these debates have been criticised for their lack of clarity and focus (e.g., Isar, 2017; Throsby, 2017; Wiktor-Mach, 2018), as well as for their anthropocentrism (Pykkönen, 2024). As international CoC programmes mediate between the international, regional, and local policy levels, as well as different sectors, they provide an interesting case for studying how sustainability-related policy approaches may be integrated into or influenced by such cultural programmes. This article aims to analyse how the macro-level strategies, criteria, and guidelines of the ECoC and IACoC address and frame the role of culture in relation to sustainability. The primary research question is broken into methodological sub-questions to steer the focus towards relevant aspects of “framing” (see the chapter “Data and methods”). The data consists of the titles’ official documents, which are analysed with the frame analysis method.

The ECoC and IACoC were chosen for the analysis because they are the longest-running international CoCs and provide perspectives from different cultural policy contexts and continents. The macro level refers to the official international level of the titles. Even though CoC programmes are centred on city-led (i.e., meso-level) projects, the role of the macro level is significant, because it guides the operations of candidate cities and selected CoCs through selection criteria, guidelines, and monitoring, for example.

I address the relationship between culture and sustainability from an ecosystemic viewpoint, which means paying attention to the various interconnections and interdependences enabling or hindering sustainability transformations within and across the micro, meso, and macro levels of the cultural ecosystem (CE) and between the CE and other areas of society and nature (Pekkarinen, 2025; see also de Bernard et al., 2021). An ecosystemic approach is particularly helpful for an analysis of CoCs, which operate across the different levels of the CE and aim at not only cultural but also broader and cross-sector impact. The components of a CoC ecosystem are pictured in Figure 1. I use the commonly used term “level” for clarity, but I do not mean it as a hierarchical concept; rather, I view the different parts as equally important, overlapping, interconnected, and interdependent dimensions. I also view the CE as interrelated

with the more-than-human world, although such viewpoint is typically missing from dominant policy discussions. Compared to frameworks such as cultural economies or industries, an ecosystemic viewpoint enables a more pluralistic and comprehensive way to approach the sustainability role and contributions of cultural activity (Holden, 2015; Barker, 2019; de Bernard et al., 2021; Pekkarinen, 2025). It can also help shift the anthropocentric and Eurocentric policy approaches towards more pluralistic understandings, particularly when informed by alternative frameworks, as this paper aims to do. In addition to studying how the titles align and connect culture with dominant notions of sustainable development and the different “pillars” of sustainability (usually ecological, social, and economic, with a cultural pillar sometimes included), I lean on the Latin American indigenous peoples’ concept of *buen vivir* (“good living”) for an alternative approach and a critical view (e.g., Gudynas, 2011; Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2016; Chassagne, 2021).

ECoC and IACoC: the two oldest international CoC titles

Based on Green’s (2017) categorisation, the ECoC and IACoC are both international titles (the other categories are national, regional, and independent titles), i.e., they are owned and led by international or intergovernmental organisations of governments or cities, and they designate cities from different countries as title holders. They are the two oldest of the globally existing 11 international titles and a total of almost 30 titles.¹ Under the different titles, more than 300 cities in over 100 countries have been designated CoCs (Green, 2017).

While the ECoC and IACoC share the international scope, they differ from one another in many ways (Table 1). A central difference concerns their background organisations and mandates. The ECoC has operated with a legal mandate as an official European Union (EU) action since 1999 (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 1999; Garcia and Cox, 2013), whereas the IACoC is owned by an international non-governmental organisation, the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities, known as the UCCI (Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas), and operates without a legal mandate. While the EU is a union of countries, the UCCI unites 29 capital and major cities of Ibero-America (Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas, NA(b)). The ECoC is managed by the European Commission (EC), and the IACoC by the UCCI’s Committee of Culture (CC), which holds annual meetings.²

Culture and sustainability: a critical view

The role of culture in sustainability has been an ongoing debate in international cultural policy during the past decades. Often such

1 The number is approximate and based on Green’s (2017) listing, complemented by the author.

2 Except 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, and 2000 when the CC met twice per year.

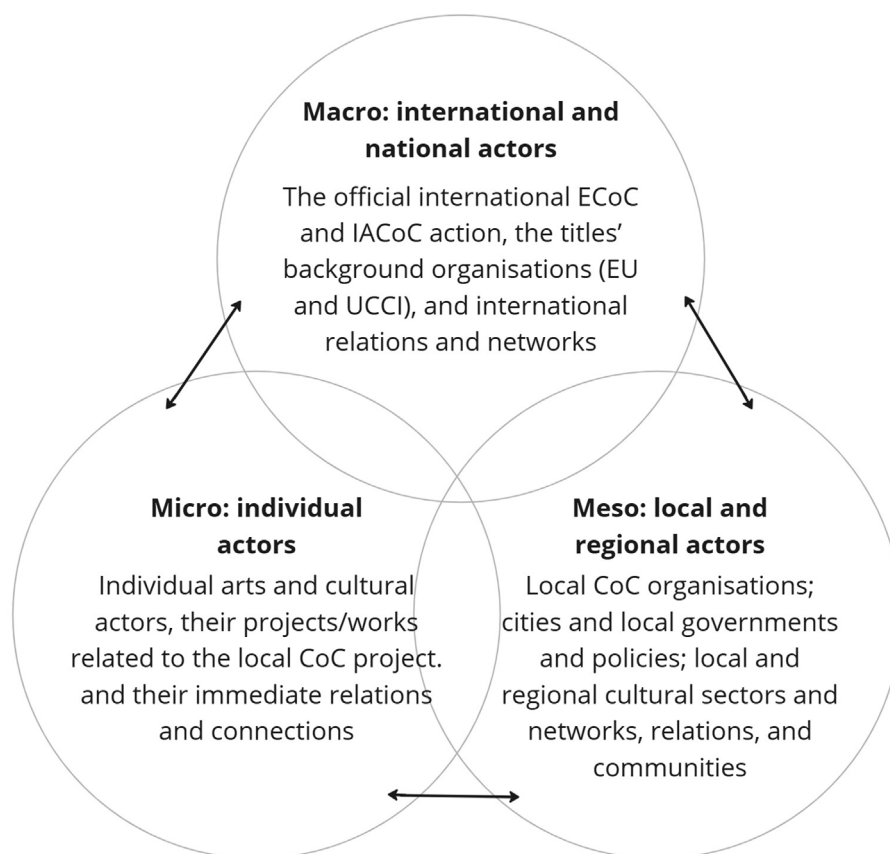


FIGURE 1

CoC ecosystem in the context of the ECoC and IACoC. The overlapping of the circles reflects the unclear divisions and inherent interrelations between them (e.g., meso-level actors participate in macro-level organisations and networks and micro-level actors form part of meso-level communities), while the arrows represent the continuous interconnections and interactions between them.

discussions have focused on sustainable development, which can be understood as a more specific, development-focused application of sustainability (Dobson, 1999; Dessein et al., 2015; Throsby, 2017). Most of the discussion has revolved around the agendas and goals of the UN—in recent years, mainly the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in it. Some organisations (particularly UNESCO and United Cities and Local Governments, UCLG), policy actors, cultural sector operators, and researchers have argued that the role of culture is insufficiently recognised in international sustainable development agendas, which are based on the traditional idea of the three pillars of sustainable development: environmental, economic, and social (United Nations, 1987). Advocacy for the inclusion of culture in these agendas has typically focused on recognising culture as the fourth pillar or having at least one SDG explicitly related to culture.

However, previous research has noted that policy attempts to link culture more firmly with sustainable development have lacked clarity, focus, and operability (Isar, 2017; Throsby, 2017; Wiktor-Mach, 2018). This has been attributed to the broadness of sustainability issues, which extend beyond the traditionally understood scope of cultural policies (Duxbury et al., 2017; Isar, 2017), namely, culture as artistic expressions and cultural sectors (i.e., the “narrower” understanding of culture in contrast to the

“wider” sense of culture as ways of life). On another note, when the demarcation has been clearer, the role of culture has typically been justified with economic aspects, while the environmental dimension has often been ignored or underemphasised (Isar, 2017; Pyykkönen, 2024; Pyykkönen and De Beukelaer, 2025).

Based on the work of several authors, three different sustainability roles have been outlined for culture: culture *in* (as an independent fourth pillar alongside the environmental, social, and economic ones), *for* (as a driver and mediator between the three pillars), and *as* (as a fundamental foundation and enabler) (Soini and Dessein, 2016). Aligning with the culture *as* sustainability approach, some authors have noted that sustainability crises and transformations are rooted in culture (Clammer, 2016; Stephenson, 2023)—in the sense of ways of life—and that a shift is necessary in cultural policies to perceive sustainability as part of their domain, even if it requires rethinking dominant approaches to both culture and sustainability (Pyykkönen, 2024). Duxbury et al. (2017) also challenge cultural policies to go beyond their traditional domain by outlining possible strategic lines for cultural policies in sustainable development: one of the paths suggests fostering global ecological citizenship to acknowledge sustainability as a common global challenge. This path urges cultural policies to rethink their domain of activity because ecological citizenship requires a transition from merely national interests towards a sense of global

TABLE 1 Central organisational and operational differences between the ECoC and the IACoC.

Aspect of organisation	ECoC	IACoC
Background organisation	European Union	Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (UCCI)
Background organisation formed by	Nation states	Capital and other major cities
Managed by	European Commission (EC)	Cultural Committee (CC) of the UCCI
Legal mandate	Yes	No
Openness of information	Open	Partly open
First title year	1985 (Athens)	1991 (Bogotá)
Cities eligible to apply	All cities in EU Member States, candidate and potential candidate countries	UCCI member cities
Order of cities holding the title	Countries holding the title based on a rotational calendar	Not predefined but based on: • Vice-presidency regions • The city's own expression of interest • A national or city-specific anniversary or celebration
Selection of title holders	Based on a national competition between candidate cities	Based on an expression of interest by a member city and a proposal to the UCCI, usually linked to a national or city-specific anniversary or celebration
Bidding and preparation schedule	Call for applications: at least 6 years before the title year; official designation announced: at least 4 years before the title year	Designation: at least 2 years before the title year Note: this was first decided in 1991 and reestablished in 2018 (Comité de Cultura de la UCCI, 1991 ; Comité de Cultura de la UCCI, 2018), but on some occasions, preparation times have been much shorter
Final selection	A recommendation is issued by a panel of independent experts; the final designation is made by the Commission	The CC makes the nomination; formally accepted at the UCCI General Assembly
Funding	Public (city, regional, national) and private funding, the Melina Mercouri Prize of €1.5 million from the Creative Europe programme, funds from other EU programmes, own income (e.g., ticket sales); the average operating budget between 2007 and 2017 was around €60 million (Katsarova, 2019)	Cities' own funding and a proposed funding of up to €100,000 for the programme of each IACoC title holder, collected by the UCCI from member cities and regions and possible other funders (Comité de Cultura de la UCCI, 2018)
Title holders per year	2–3 (usually two, but every 3 years three, as EU candidate or potential candidate countries are also eligible to apply)	1
Title period	1 year	1 year

belonging and citizenship (see also [Stevenson, 2003](#); [Duxbury et al., 2017](#)).

Such a shift in cultural policy would require unlearning dominant Western and anthropocentric mindsets which define how culture and sustainability are understood and approached in international policy contexts. Dominant policy approaches are focused on sustainable development, which, viewed through a post-development lens, is but an alteration of Western ideals of growth-oriented development and progress ([Agostino, 2012](#); [Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2019](#); [Kothari et al., 2019](#); [Sachs, 2019](#); [Demaria et al., 2023](#)). To steer away from development ideology, I refrain from using “sustainable development” and instead opt for the term “sustainability” or, when referring to a necessary change, “sustainability transformation” ([Siivonen et al., 2022](#); [Stephenson, 2023](#)). I consider these more appropriate and inclusive concepts with the ability to transcend anthropocentric and growth-oriented

connotations (e.g., [Dobson, 1999](#)). However, superficial terminology fixes are not enough. Many critical authors have argued for the need for alternative, particularly Indigenous and Southern, ontological and epistemic perspectives to challenge predominant conceptions of (sustainable) development (e.g., [Escobar, 1992](#); [Gudynas, 2011](#); [Mies and Shiva, 2014](#); [Acosta, 2015](#)). The concept of *buen vivir* (“good living”, used in Ecuador)—also known as *vivir bien* (“living well”, used in Bolivia)—represents one such alternative.

Buen vivir and an ecosystemic approach to culture and sustainability

With roots in the Ecuadorian Kichwa concept of *sumak kawsay* (and other similar concepts of other Latin American Indigenous

peoples, such as the Aymara concept of *suma qamaña*),³ *buen vivir* has gained ground in political and academic debates in Latin America and beyond since the early 2000s. It provides a critical response and alternative to development ideology, including sustainable development (e.g., Gudynas, 2011; Cubillo Guevara et al., 2014; Vanhulst, 2015). Instead of representing one coherent line of thought or a single philosophy, *buen vivir* is a contested concept that draws on the lifestyles and philosophies of various Andean Indigenous peoples or, as Gudynas (2015) puts it, “incorporates some concepts and sensibilities of some indigenous groups, as each one has a specific cultural background” (p. 203). It has also been influenced by Latin American Indigenous movements, organisations, and intellectuals, political and social movements and actors, as well as by academics from Latin America and other parts of the world (Cubillo Guevara et al., 2014; Le Quang, 2020).

Three main lines of thought have been identified in *buen vivir* thinking, with some similarities but also contradictions between them: the indigenist and “pachamamist”, the socialist, and the ecologist and post-developmental stream (Cubillo Guevara et al., 2014; Le Quang, 2020). The central philosophy shared by these streams is a way of life based on harmony with oneself (identity), society (equity), and nature (sustainability) (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2016; Cubillo Guevara and Hidalgo Capitán, 2019; Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2019; Vanhulst et al., 2020). The principles of biocentrism and plurality, and a critical stance towards development ideology are also shared by the different streams (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2016; Le Quang, 2020).

At a political level, the most notable examples are from Ecuador and Bolivia, where *buen vivir/vivir bien* was included in the countries’ constitutions in 2008 and 2009 respectively (e.g., Vanhulst et al., 2020). In the Bolivian case, *vivir bien* was approached as an ethical and moral principle, which highlighted multiculturalism and plurality, while the Ecuadorian constitution understood *buen vivir* as a set of rights, including the rights of nature (Gudynas, 2011; Berros, 2021). However, both processes and their outcomes have included conflicts and controversies related to, for example, interpretations and adaptations of *buen vivir/vivir bien* (Unceta Satrustegui, 2020; Vanhulst et al., 2020; García-García, 2022).

Several authors, particularly those representing the ecologist-post-developmental stream (Vanhulst et al., 2020), have pointed out that *buen vivir* shares similarities with other alternative worldviews such as *ubuntu* and *swaraj*, degrowth, deep ecology, and even Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* or “good life”⁴ (Kothari et al., 2014; Acosta, 2015; Gudynas, 2017; Unceta Satrustegui, 2020; Beling et al., 2021). Although some authors consider making such connections a deviation from *sumak kawsay* (e.g., Oviedo, 2014), others argue that synergies between *buen vivir* and other transition discourses are helpful and may hold transformative potential globally (Vanhulst

et al., 2020; Beling et al., 2021). This paper aligns with the latter view, as I discuss the concept in the context of international cultural and sustainability policy. However, all discussions of *buen vivir*, including global ones, must continue to acknowledge the fundamental and continuing role of Indigenous political and social actors and intellectuals, who brought *sumak kawsay* to political and academic debates in the 1990s (Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2020; Beling et al., 2021), as well as related realities and struggles in local contexts (Altmann, 2020).

Here, I lean on the shared core ideas and principles of the concept, as well as on the ecologist-post-developmental stream, which García-García (2025) describes as follows: “the construction of the society of *buen vivir* is an ecological, post-developmental, decolonial, post-capitalist and feminist project” (p. 17). I consider *buen vivir* a potentially transformative approach to rethink what culture means for sustainability and *vice versa* for four principal interconnected reasons.

First, *buen vivir* is based on the principle of biocentrism, which refers to a harmonious relationship with nature and views humans and nature not as separated but as interrelated parts of the same whole, perceiving nature as an entity with intrinsic rights (Gudynas, 2015; Vanhulst et al., 2020; Chassagne, 2021; García-García, 2025). This perspective challenges the anthropocentric mindset that separates culture from nature and views nature as an object and resource to be extracted and exploited for human benefit. It does not perceive nature as a resource but highlights relations and reciprocity between humans and nature (Huanacuni, 2010). This provides an opportunity to rethink the role of culture not in the “development” of the different pillars but in sustainability and the necessary transformations. Instead of trying to fit culture into the pillar model of anthropocentric sustainable development, *buen vivir* helps perceive the fundamental role of culture in sustainability and question the separation of the pillars (including the tendency to ignore culture) altogether. *Buen vivir* can thus urge cultural policies to embrace culture-nature reciprocity, which could lead to visions of global cultural and ecological citizenship (Duxbury et al., 2017). Moreover, particularly leaning on the translation of *sumak kawsay* as “life in fullness” (see Footnote 3), *buen vivir* can help rethink the fullness of life as sufficiency and harmony with nature rather than as limitless growth with endless desires that are never satisfied.

Second, *buen vivir* is based on plurality, which, according to Chassagne (2021), has two contexts: the plurality of being (linked to biocentrism), i.e., the recognition of and respect for all forms of life, their rights, and their interconnections, and the plurality of knowledge and vision, i.e., the non-hierarchical recognition of different epistemologies and cosmologies. *Buen vivir* rejects the dichotomies typical of Western modernity and development ideology (e.g., advanced-primitive, developed-underdeveloped, society-nature) and the perception of the world as one (Macas, 2010). Instead of one ideology to be spread globally, it proposes a “pluriverse” which recognises and respects the diversity, plurality, and relationality of worldviews, knowledge, and cultural values—or the existence of multiple *buenos vivires* (Acosta, 2010; Acosta, 2015; Escobar, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Vanhulst, 2015; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, 2017; Demaria et al., 2023). *Buen vivir* also does not propose a clear or single

3 Some authors have noted that a more precise translation for the Kichwa and Aymara terms *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña* would be “vida en plenitud” (“life in fullness”) (Huanacuni, 2010; Macas, 2010; Maldonado, 2014).

4 However, Gudynas (2015) and Vanhulst (2015), for example, have pointed out that the roots of the concept are not related to the Aristotelian “good life”.

economic model. It opposes neoliberalism, economic inequality, anthropocentrism, and the hegemony of capitalism and instead advocates economies based on principles such as solidarity, relationality, responsibility, community, sufficiency, decommodification of nature, and social, economic, and environmental justice (García-García, 2025). A pluralist approach could help cultural policies and CoC programmes to non-hierarchically recognise and encourage diverse worldviews, cultural and artistic expressions, and visions of culture and sustainability. As some authors have noted, avoiding vagueness (García-García, 2025) requires fostering a shared understanding of central principles (e.g., Chassagne, 2021).

Third, the “glocal” reach of buen vivir (Beling et al., 2021) makes it particularly relevant for CoCs, which are centred on local city-level projects but also deeply connected to global contexts. As such, CoC projects hold the potential to transcend nationalist interests and engage in and with both local and global dialogue and communities with a pluralistic mindset. Chassagne (2021), for instance, argues that buen vivir is a plural alternative to sustainable development that enables thinking globally and acting locally: it enables a shared global understanding of core principles and the direction of change, encourages a local bottom-up construction of “good living” (Escobar, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Acosta, 2015; Vanhulst, 2015), and helps acknowledge how the local and global contexts mutually influence one another.

Fourth, the biocentric and pluralistic principles are linked to the perception of different forms and areas of life as interrelated and interdependent (Huanacuni, 2010; Maldonado, 2014; Vanhulst, 2015). This aligns with and enriches the ecosystemic approach (Pekkarinen, 2025), which I use as a theoretical and methodological framing to analyse the relationship between culture and sustainability. This approach draws on systems thinking (Capra, 1997; Meadows, 2008), deep ecology (Naess, 1973; Naess, 1984), and planetary wellbeing (Kortetmäki et al., 2021; Koistinen et al., 2024), emphasising the interconnectedness of all living things and systems of life, eco-/biocentrism, and stewardship of more-than-human life. Connecting with Morton’s (2016) notion of *dark ecology*, the ecosystemic approach may urge us to cultivate ecological awareness of the coexistence between humans and non-humans and the interdependences between things and events at and across different scales—and to embrace the difficult, uncomfortable, uncertain, and contradictory thoughts and feelings such awareness may evoke (Morton, 2016). In this study, the ecosystemic approach means a focus on the CoC titles’ approaches to the various interconnections, interdependences, relations, and exchanges promoting or hindering sustainability at and across the macro, meso, and micro levels of the cultural ecosystem (CE) and between the CE and other areas of the social and natural world (Holden, 2015; Barker, 2019; de Bernard et al., 2021; Pekkarinen, 2025).

From the viewpoint of arts and culture, buen vivir helps embrace the profound interconnectedness between the “wider” and “narrower” conceptions of culture and the relevance of both for cultural policy. It can also support more pluralistic and inclusive perceptions and valuations of arts, aesthetics, artists, and cultural work. Huanacuni (2010), for example, notes that cultural identity

“emerges from a profound relation with the environment, with Mother Earth, with the place that we inhabit”⁵ and that ways of life, languages, dances, music, and clothing, among other things, are born from this relationship. Through a buen vivir lens, arts and culture can thus be seen as profoundly connected to nature, holding the potential to offer different perspectives and foster awareness of the human-nature relationship and more-than-human coexistence.

Data and methods

Source data

The analysis included official documents of both the ECoC and the IACoC, focusing on their objectives and criteria, application guidelines, operating principles, mentions of achieved results, and linkages with other international programmes and policy documents. The analysis of the ECoC focused on: 1) the 2014 Decision of the European Parliament and the Council regarding the ECoC action, which forms the formal and legal basis of the ECoC action (hereinafter “the ECoC Decision”), establishes its foundations and purpose, and outlines its objectives, access to the title, the application procedure, the selection criteria and procedure, designation, monitoring, and evaluation principles, cooperation between designated cities, and other practicalities; and 2) the current guide for cities preparing to bid for the title (hereinafter “the Guide”), which clarifies the selection criteria and the application, selection, and designation process, discusses the possibilities and challenges of the title, and elaborates on the meaning of legacy, thus complementing the Decision. These documents were chosen because they were the currently valid documents from 2020 to 2033. Moreover, sustainability has only gained a stronger role in these most recent versions of the documents.

To study the IACoC, I analysed the minutes of the 32nd, 33rd, and 34th meetings of the UCCI Cultural Committee (CC), organised in 2017, 2018, and 2019 respectively. They were chosen as the most relevant documents because they marked a change in the sustainability emphases of the UCCI and its CC. In addition, they discussed the implementation of a procedure manual (*manual de procedimiento*), containing the criteria and guidelines for IACoC applicants. The final manual was not available, but I included the requirements for IACoC candidate cities listed in the conclusions of the 33rd meeting minutes before the formal acceptance by the UCCI executive board.⁶ In addition, I analysed parts of the UCCI 2018 General Assembly (GA) minutes concerning culture, as they discussed the union’s new sustainability aims and focus areas, including regarding its cultural activities. As an initiative of a non-governmental organisation operating without a legal basis, the IACoC has no legal document like the ECoC Decision outlining its formal key principles. The analysed IACoC documents were in

⁵ Translated by the author.

⁶ The board accepted the procedure manual in April 2019, but according to the 34th meeting minutes, some points still needed clarification. My request to UCCI to see the final manual was declined.

Spanish, and all direct quotations of them are the author's translations.

The documents of the two titles differed from each other in, for example, their language, format, style, and frequency of publication (the ECoC Decision is valid for several years, whereas the UCCI CC meets annually). In addition, while the ECoC documents solely focus on the ECoC, the IACoC documents also discuss the UCCI's other cultural issues. To overcome the limitations caused by these differences, I 1) included only those parts of the UCCI documents that directly or indirectly concerned the IACoC in the analysis and 2) analysed the data using the frame analysis method, which enabled a focus on the aspects, issues, phenomena, and relations connected to matters (implicitly or explicitly) related to sustainability, sustainable development, or *buen vivir*.

Frame analysis

Originally developed by sociologist Erving Goffman, frame analysis focuses on how definitions of situations are built in specific contexts (Goffman, 1974). According to Goffman (1974), “frames” are situational (i.e., determined by the particular situations and social circumstances in which realities are perceived) and culturally influenced definitions of reality. Although initially meant for analysing everyday situations, the method has also been used to analyse public policies and political communication, for example.

Drawing on and further elaborating the policy-focused frame analysis developed by Schön and Rein, Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) propose an approach that focuses on the “work that framing does” by paying attention to: (1) sense-making, i.e., how actors make sense of and understand situations; (2) selecting, naming, and categorising, i.e., which aspects are included, excluded, emphasised, and downsized, and how issues are named and put into categories; and (3) storytelling, i.e., how elements are combined to form a coherent whole, and how problems and solutions are outlined (Van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). They stress that frames are not static but evolving, formed through a dynamic process of frame construction, and therefore talk about “framing” instead of “frames”.

Leaning on Van Hulst and Yanow's approach, I analysed how the ECoC and the IACoC interpret and construct meanings concerning the relationship between culture and sustainability through a “work of framing”. I complemented their approach by adding an ecosystemic perspective and analysed the role given to ecosystemic activity and connections within and beyond the CE. Table 2 summarises the areas considered in the analysis, including the methodological sub-questions which guided the focus of each step.

Using the ATLAS.ti tool, I first searched and coded explicit mentions of “sustainable”, “sustainable development”, “sustainability”, and the verb “sustain” to identify how the concepts were used. Quantitative results were not relevant, especially because of the differences in the data. Instead, I focused on qualitative aspects: the concepts used and the aspects and issues they were connected to.

In addition to the exact concepts, I analysed implicit mentions of issues relevant to sustainability and *buen vivir*. By that, I mean that I close read and coded the documents to identify how they discussed the relationship with nature and the titles' aspired long-term

contributions to cultural, ecological, social, or economic aspects and their interrelations without explicitly using the concept of sustainability/sustainable development. I first coded segments referring to expected/desired sustainable impacts; long-term urban/regional planning; cultural, ecological, economic, and social priorities or principles; and negative impacts (to identify whether potential negative impacts of culture or the CoC title had been acknowledged). I also coded mentions of agendas, documents, etc., that accompanied the explicit and implicit references to sustainability to understand which external or broader frameworks guided the titles' understandings of culture and sustainability. In addition, I identified mentions of ecosystemic agencies and relations and their linkages with sustainability matters. I then further categorised the data to gain deeper insights, for example, into the aspects emphasised in the aims/objectives and selection criteria, as well as into the sustainability-related needs/problems and proposed responses/solutions. Excerpts of the coding tables are presented in Supplementary Tables 1–3. For a critical view, I analysed whether the texts aligned with, challenged, or critiqued dominant sustainable development discourses or proposed alternative approaches, such as bio-/ecocentrism or other principles promoted by *buen vivir*. The analysis involved several rounds of revisiting the original data, coded segments, and conclusions drawn, as well as redefining the codes and categories along the way.

Framing of culture and sustainability in the ECoC and the IACoC

Sense-making

Both the ECoC and the IACoC refer to their background organisations (EU/EC and UCCI), as well as international treaties and agendas in their operating principles and aims. These form a framework within which the titles make sense of sustainability and set goals related to it.

The ECoC Decision aligns with the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, European Union, 2016), the European agenda for culture in a globalising world (Commission of the European Communities, 2007), and the Creative Europe Programme (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2013), all of which refer to sustainable development in some way. The TFEU mentions the promotion of sustainable development and environmental protection; the European agenda for culture in a globalising world notes that the Member States are committed to strengthening the cultural pillar in global governance and sustainable development; and the Regulation concerning the Creative Europe Programme mentions a commitment to the UN SDGs, to the climate action and goals outlined in the Paris Agreement, and the European Green Deal. In addition, the ECoC Decision refers to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), which discusses “sustainable development for communities, peoples and nations”, links culture and cultural policy to development policy, and emphasises cultural diversity as the precondition for sustainable development. Aligning with these documents, the ECoC indirectly supports their

TABLE 2 Use of frame analysis in this research.

Area of framing	Methodological sub-questions	Ecosystemic perspective
Sense-making	In what kind of cultural policy context do the titles make sense of culture and sustainability? How does the policy framework influence the sense-making process?	Which CE levels and actors are included/excluded, emphasised/undermined in the sustainability discussions? What roles are assigned to CE actors and levels in sustainability problems and solutions?
Selecting, naming, and categorising	Which sustainability-related aspects, issues, or dimensions are selected as relevant or worthy of attention, and which are ignored or underemphasised? How are sustainability issues explicitly and implicitly named and/or categorised?	What kinds of interrelations within and beyond the CE are connected to sustainability issues, and what is ignored?
Storytelling	Which sustainability-related issues are framed as problematic? What kinds of solutions do the CoC titles propose to the identified problems?	

sustainable development and environmental commitments as well. However, the ECoC documents do not directly mention sustainable development, climate change, or environmental protection.

The IACoC documents, on the other hand, refer to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 21 action plan for sustainable development several times and align the title's sustainability aims with these agendas. They highlight culture as a pillar of sustainable development and critique the insufficient recognition of culture in international agendas. For example, the proposed IACoC selection criteria mention that selected cities must be committed to the local implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 21. The UCCI's 2018 GA minutes state that "culture is a dimension of sustainable development and, due to its transformative nature, indispensable for the success of the 2030 Agenda" and the UCCI CC's 32nd meeting minutes note that international agreements like the 2030 Agenda and the New Urban Agenda do not sufficiently recognise culture "as an opportunity for and pillar of inclusive and sustainable development". The IACoC thus aligns with the UN agendas' notions of sustainable development and the pillar model of sustainability while emphasising that culture should be included as a self-standing pillar. The IACoC documents tend to use the terms "development" and "sustainable development" interchangeably, which points to an understanding of sustainability that is deeply linked to the idea of development.

Selecting, naming, categorising

Both titles mention sustainability explicitly but in different ways. The ECoC addresses sustainability in the sense of a long-lasting impact or legacy. Regarding the selection criteria, the ECoC Decision notes that candidate cities' cultural strategies should include "plans for *sustaining* the cultural activities beyond the year of the title" and emphasises the creation of "new and *sustainable* opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural activities". Applications should have "a *sustainable* commitment from the local, regional and national authorities".

The ECoC categorises the desired sustainable impact into cultural, economic, and social impacts. The Decision emphasises the title as "first and foremost a cultural initiative", and the Guide refers to social and economic impacts as "positive side benefits that show how culture impacts can go beyond culture

itself". The desired cultural impacts include enhancing cultural and artistic diversity (particularly with a European and international dimension); strengthening intercultural and international artistic exchange, networking and mutual understanding; promoting both heritage and traditional artforms and new cultural expressions; cherishing artistic and cultural quality; enhancing cultural participation and improving accessibility to culture; strengthening the capacity and competitiveness of the cultural and creative sectors; increasing investments in culture; and developing a long-term cultural strategy. In addition, the Guide lists positive cultural legacies reported by previous ECoCs. These include citizens' enhanced engagement with the city's cultural offerings, developed cultural offerings, and new skills, opportunities, and connections gained by artists and cultural organisations.

In both documents, economic impacts refer to an enhanced European and international profile and reputation, increased tourism, and "general city development". Overall, the ECoC's desired impact is strongly linked to local development ("economic, cultural, and social development", "urban development", "general development", "culture-led development", "long-term development"), but its specific meaning is not explained. The aspired social impacts include social inclusion, enhanced and equal participation opportunities, a strengthened sense of belonging to a common cultural area among European citizens, and increased citizen self-esteem and pride in their city.

What is notable is the lack of environmental considerations. Environment is only mentioned once in the ECoC Decision as an example of a sector with which title cities could develop links.

Meanwhile, the IACoC documents directly connect their sustainability aims and priorities with the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 21. All documents explicitly note that culture must be recognised as a dimension or pillar of sustainable development and that culture should be better integrated into international sustainable development agendas and policies. The requirements for the selection of IACoCs (33rd meeting minutes) include two explicit mentions of sustainability: firstly, each IACoC city should commit to implementing the SDGs and Agenda 21 at the local level, and secondly, an "environmental sustainability perspective" should be included in the candidate's cultural activities and administration. The GA minutes explicitly mention that culture and the UCCI's cultural

work are related to the SDGs, particularly to the goals 4, 8, 11, 12, 16, and 17.

Implicitly, the IACoC documents highlight impacts related to cultural and social sustainability but also mention environmental and economic aspects. The aspired cultural impacts include an improved recognition of regional cultural diversity, strengthened cultural rights, enhanced Ibero-American identity and mutual understanding, improved cultural heritage protection and recovery, new investments in culture and local cultural policies, and a recognition of the transversal potential of culture in public policies. The desired social impacts include enhanced citizen participation and local identities, lower levels of violence and crime, strengthened equality, and societal wellbeing and happiness. Although the GA minutes identify the “recognition of the economic and social value of culture” as a priority for the union’s cultural activities, and the proposed criteria mention giving “impetus to the diversity of creative and collaborative economies”, economic impacts are less prevalent than in the ECoC documents.

Unlike the ECoC, the IACoC also considers environmental aspects. In addition to the already-mentioned explicit reference to environmental sustainability, the conclusions of the 33rd meeting note that cultural policy must be developed in harmony with the environment, and the GA minutes state that the UCCI’s cultural work is based on the values of peace, diversity, solidarity, and shared care for people and the planet.

Neither title mentions issues such as working conditions in culture, the sustainability of cultural production and consumption, the plurality of worldviews and cultural values, or alternatives to development priorities.

Storytelling

Both the ECoC and the IACoC present arts and culture in general, and the CoC title in particular, as solutions to local and regional issues and as drivers of positive impacts. While they share many similarities in their aims, their sustainability-related problem formulations and proposed solutions also include significant differences.

The ECoC is connected to sustainability problems and solutions through two kinds of stories. Firstly, the title is presented as an opportunity for cities to create sustainable solutions to their local cultural, social, and economic (but not environmental) problems. These issues are not further specified, as the ECoC highlights a local bottom-up definition of problems and solutions. To generate sustainable solutions, cities are expected to co-design their project with a wide range of citizens and culture sector actors and through cross-sector cooperation so that it fits the unique local context and addresses diverse local needs. While doing so, cities must also comply with the official ECoC criteria. International, particularly European, connections are necessary to ensure that the project enriches the local cultural scene and creates lasting connections between the local context, Europe, and beyond.

The second storyline is more cautionary. It warns that problems with the planning, management, and administration

of the title may hinder the realisation of sustainable cultural, economic, and social impacts or lead to negative outcomes for the cities and local populations. The ECoC Decision notes that the action has also been “highly challenging” and not all cities have been successful in “capitalising on the potential”. The Guide explains that such problems occur because cities “meet challenges they are not well prepared to face”. The mentioned challenges include governance, political interference, or a weak European/international dimension, and a lack of a cultural development strategy, legacy planning, clear objectives, monitoring, or experience. The proposed response is for ECoC cities to undertake careful planning, preparation, strategy-building, financing, decision-making, legacy-building, and evaluation measures that consider both the ECoC criteria and the local context. The Guide explains that a successful ECoC with a sustainable legacy requires long-term work; lasting cross-party commitment; the necessary physical (cultural) infrastructure; local, European, international and cross-sector connections; openness towards Europe and the rest of the world; and investments in culture, among other things. It is highlighted that the ECoC title must be embedded in the city’s long-term cultural policy strategy and overall city strategy to enable a sustained legacy.

The IACoC is also connected to two different kinds of stories about sustainability problems and solutions. According to the first story, the title provides designated cities with an opportunity to identify and address local sustainable development challenges by developing local cultural policies and strengthening the transversal and integral role of culture and cultural rights in public policies. Title holders are expected to identify environmental, social, and economic problems and solutions in local contexts, aligning with the 2030 Agenda. In addition to general references to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, some specific social problems are mentioned, including urban and gender-based violence, crime and insecurity in cities, and societal inequalities. The proposed general measures for IACoCs to address local issues include investing in cultural policies, programmes, and activities; fostering gender equality and citizen participation; considering environmental sustainability; engaging in cross-sector cooperation; and sharing experiences and mutually supporting one another among the UCCI member cities. As a more concrete measure, it is suggested that part of the IACoC budget should be allocated to activities related to Agenda 21 and the SDGs.

The second story is more critical and global in scale. It presents the insufficient recognition of culture in international sustainable development policies and agendas as a problem which hinders the achievement of the SDGs. It proposes the IACoC as part of the solution, as it helps strengthen the role of culture and establish culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development by giving international visibility to local experiences and examples of the transformative potential of culture. The story thus suggests that local-level solutions can contribute to the tackling of global problems through the UCCI’s international advocacy and cooperation.

Neither title raises problems related to unsustainable lifestyles, the negative contributions of culture, or the need for cultural transformations.

Role of ecosystemic actors and relations

In their sustainability approaches, the official documents of both titles highlight the role and responsibility of the meso level (i.e., the city level of local policies, decision-making, and CoC organisations) for the overall successful management of CoC projects. This is hardly surprising, given the city-led nature of CoCs. In addition, the macro level is assigned a protagonist role in the IACoC, which highlights international advocacy by the UCCI and its CC, as well as the UCCI's participation in international networks of cities such as the UCLG and Mercociudades. In the ECoC, the macro level plays an important role, too, but more as a supporter and guide of the meso level. The micro-level agency of citizens and arts and culture sector actors is highlighted more in the ECoC than in the IACoC. For example, the Guide notes that the “broad and active participation” of citizens is an important indicator of the success of an ECoC and its legacy. The IACoC also mentions citizen participation in its criteria but does not elaborate on what that means. Moreover, the participation of local cultural operators is not mentioned. Overall, the role of the micro level is not as clear or strong as that of the meso and macro levels.

Ecosystemic interconnections and interdependences are referred to in many ways in the titles' sustainability discussions. Connections between the meso and macro levels are highlighted in both titles. The macro level guides (but does not determine⁷) the operations and decision-making of the meso level through means such as the official criteria, guidelines, and monitoring (the last is mentioned particularly in the ECoC). Macro-level guidance in sustainability issues is stronger in the IACoC, as nominated cities are required to adapt the SDGs to local contexts. The meso level also influences the macro level by bringing local examples, experiences, evidence, and solutions to international dialogue, and by engaging in and enabling international cooperation and exchange. While both titles deem international cooperation between cities crucial, it is even more emphasised in the IACoC. Firstly, the IACoC designation is considered more a mutual project of the member cities collaborating in the UCCI CC than an individual responsibility of each city. The CC minutes specifically note that the title is based on cooperation and reciprocity rather than competition (in contrast to the open competition model in the ECoC). Secondly, as the UCCI is constituted by cities, the meso and macro levels are deeply entangled. The UCCI CC forms a macro-level setting in which meso-level actors (representatives of local governments) engage in exchange, co-learning, and co-development.

In the ECoC, meso-micro-level interdependences are highlighted alongside the meso-macro-level ones: the meso level creates conditions and opportunities for the micro level, but it also depends on the participation of the micro level in the creation of cultural content and a sustainable legacy. Exchanges and connections between individual arts and culture sector actors and

citizens from different countries are also emphasised. In the case of the IACoC, the role of meso-micro-level interconnections is unclear.

Regarding connections beyond the CE, both titles deem cross-sector cooperation necessary to achieve sustainable impacts. The ECoC mentions cooperation between the cultural and creative sectors and education, research, environment, territorial planning, tourism, and social services, as well as between the public, private, and third sectors. The interrelations between culture and nature are not touched upon. The IACoC also highlights cross-sector connections and considers it necessary to move away from sectoral thinking towards cooperation between cultural policies and other public policies. This would help strengthen the transversal role of culture and establish the role of culture in sustainable development agendas and goals. Unlike the ECoC, the IACoC documents consider interconnections with the natural environment, as they mention the development of cultural policies in harmony with the environment and include an environmental sustainability perspective in the criteria. However, this relationship, its more specific meaning, and coexistence with other priorities are not elaborated on.

Summarised framings and critical reflections

Some key differences were identified in the “works of framing” of the two titles (Table 3). For the ECoC, culture is related to sustainability in the sense that it can contribute to urban/local/regional development and generate positive and long-lasting impacts in different areas of human life. The role of the ECoC is to harness the transformative potential of culture and cultural policy through various interconnections at and between the hyperlocal, local, regional, national, and international levels, both within the cultural and creative sectors and across sectors, to bring about sustainable (i.e., long-lasting) cultural, economic, and social (but not environmental) impacts. The absence of environmental considerations could mean that environmental issues were considered of little relevance to the cultural project or to the EU's priorities at the time of drafting the current Decision, or that they are disregarded due to contradictions with urban development aims. In its mentions of sustainability, the ECoC mostly understands culture as arts and cultural expressions, the cultural and creative sectors, and cultural heritage but it also refers to the wider understanding of culture when discussing goals such as fostering the richness and diversity of cultures in the Member States and strengthening intercultural dialogue and a sense of belonging to a common cultural space. The ECoC considers culture to have a role *for* sustainability (contributing to economic, cultural, and social aims and balancing between them) and *in* sustainability (highlighting the conditions and capacity of the cultural sector and the promotion of cultural diversity and heritage). To simplify and summarise, the ECoC's central guiding frame is culture-led urban development. Within that frame, culture is harnessed for the local and regional creation of a sustainable (or long-lasting) cultural, economic, and social legacy.

For the IACoC, culture plays a role as an enabler of sustainable development (as understood in UN agendas) locally and globally. The way in which the IACoC aims to contribute to sustainable development is by strengthening cultural policies and the transversal role of culture in other areas of public policy and by establishing

⁷ For example, the bid books of some designated cities have highlighted ecological sustainability, human-nature relationship, and climate change related issues, even though the macro level does not require engagement with such matters (e.g., Tartu 2024, 2020; Oulu2026, 2021; Trenčín 2026, 2021).

TABLE 3 Framing of culture and sustainability in the ECoC and the IACoC.

Aspect of framing	ECoC	IACoC
International framework guiding the sense-making	EU, UNESCO	UN 2030 Agenda and Agenda 21
Central sustainability concept	Lasting legacy, sustainable urban development	Sustainable development
Selecting, naming, categorising	• Sustainable means long-lasting • Economic, cultural, and social impacts and urban/local development highlighted • Environmental aspects ignored	• Sustainable means in line with the SDGs • Cultural and social issues highlighted • Mentions environmental sustainability and harmony with the environment • Individual mentions of economic impact
Storytelling	Story 1: Cities and regions have economic, cultural, and social challenges, which the ECoC can help solve by providing long-lasting culture-led solutions with the participation of local citizens Story 2: The ECoC may lead to negative or unsustainable outcomes if cities are not committed to the title, prepared to face multiple challenges, willing to engage with diverse local actors and realities, or ready to follow the provided criteria. Following the criteria and recommendations helps overcome this risk	Story 1: The IACoC designation is an opportunity for local governments to identify and address local sustainable development challenges through the development of local cultural policies, the strengthening of the transversal and integral role of culture in public policies, and investments in culture Story 2: Culture is insufficiently recognised in the SDGs, which hinders their achievement, but the IACoC can contribute to strengthening the integral role of culture by highlighting examples from local Ibero-American governments and contexts
Critical sustainability stance	Inward-looking: steered towards title holders' operations and the official criteria and guidelines	Outward-looking: steered towards international sustainable development policies
Central ecosystemic roles and relations	• meso level of plays the most central role • micro-level agency also emphasised • meso-macro and meso-micro interconnections and interdependences highlighted • interconnections between different sectors and areas of human life deemed necessary • anthropocentrism prevails; connections with nature ignored	• meso and macro levels play the most central role • meso-macro interconnections and interdependences particularly highlighted • interconnections between different sectors and areas of society deemed essential • considers human-nature connections and harmony with the environment but emphasises human interconnections over more-than-human ones
Macro-level guidance in sustainability	Weak	Stronger
Conception of the role of culture in sustainability	Culture for sustainable urban/regional development; culture in sustainable urban/regional development	Culture for the SDGs, culture in the SDGs

culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. This aim is based on the belief that the achievement of the SDGs depends on culture. Examples and experiences from local IACoC projects are considered to inspire and contribute to a better international recognition of this essential role of culture. Overall, the crucial role of local governments in achieving the SDGs is highlighted, and the IACoC is presented as an opportunity to emphasise the transformative potential of culture at the local government level. The principal focus is on the interconnections between (local) cultural policies and (international) sustainable development policies. Both the narrower (arts, cultural management, creative economies) and wider (cultural rights, cultural diversity, plurality) understandings of culture are discussed as belonging to the domain of cultural policy and its role in sustainable development. Culture is assigned a role *for* sustainable development, which is evident in the mentions of the transversal policy role of culture in the achievement of the SDGs and in urban development and planning policies. In addition, the IACoC documents explicitly note that culture must be

recognised as a pillar of sustainable development, which highlights culture's role *in* sustainable development. Although the IACoC talks about the essential and integral role of culture in the SDGs and the importance of seeing culture "not only as a tool but also as the centre of transformation towards a society of greater wellbeing and happiness", which hints at an understanding of culture *as* sustainability, this idea is not addressed more profoundly to propose sustainability transformations led by cultural transformations (see [Stephenson, 2023](#)). To sum up, the guiding frame of the IACoC is sustainable development, and the role of culture is to enable and drive sustainable development through integral and transversal cultural policies.

A critical analysis based on the concept of *buen vivir* found limited transformative sustainability potential in the titles' current approaches. The ECoC documents do not show any signs of adopting an active role in sustainability policies or discussions. The macro level of the ECoC takes a development-focused anthropocentric stance: environmental sustainability or human-

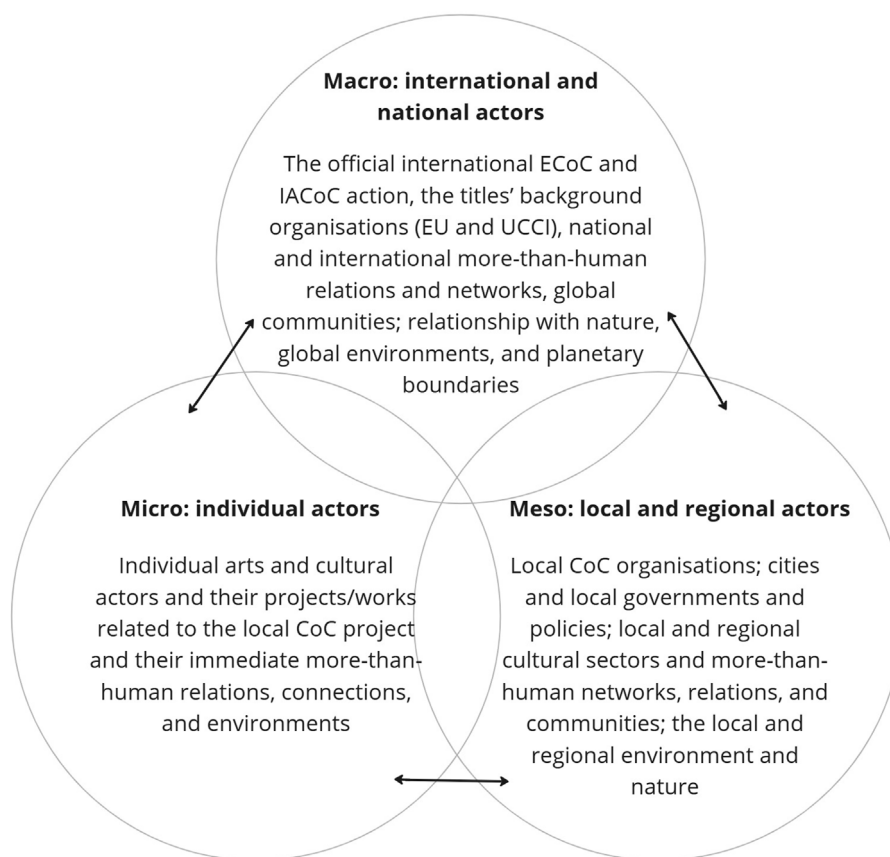


FIGURE 2
A reconceptualisation of a CoC ecosystem from a non-anthropocentric perspective.

nature interconnections are not even mentioned. This only works to reinforce the separation between culture and nature, and the prioritisation of human and economic development aims over nature. The critical sustainability-related notions that can be identified at the macro level of the ECoC concern the programme itself, showing a self-critical attitude and acknowledgment of the title's potential negative impacts. However, this critique is only indirectly related to sustainability, as it refers to aspects that hinder the titles' lasting legacy or lead to negative impacts but does not connect the desired impacts with either dominant or alternative sustainability discussions.

The idea of cultural policies based on plurality, inclusivity, and harmony with nature presented in the IACoC documents represents a refreshing viewpoint that could begin to challenge Western- and anthropocentric notions in both cultural and sustainable development policies. In particular, the connection of cultural policy with nature is a perspective too often missing from international cultural policy discussions about sustainability. While the 2030 Agenda also mentions harmony with nature (which is proposed to be actualised simultaneously with economic growth), the linking of it to cultural policy is what is particularly interesting in the IACoC documents. Moreover, the IACoC documents' critical stance on the insufficient recognition of culture in the SDGs shows active agency in sustainability debates, including a willingness to participate in international cultural

advocacy and contribute to the strengthening of sustainability agendas through culture and the CoC title. However, more fundamental cultural transformations or any alternative frameworks that would allow more profound and critical development of these ideas are not mentioned. Even the stances that could begin to challenge dominant cultural and sustainability policies fail to do so because they align with dominant development ideals instead of providing transformative viewpoints.

From a *buen vivir* perspective, both titles' ecosystemic thinking is limited, as their celebration of diversity and agency lacks a recognition of plurality, including alternative worldviews and sustainability conceptions, and they only consider human interconnections. *Buen vivir* invites rethinking the CoC ecosystem and perceiving the more-than-human world as part of it rather than as something external to it (Figure 2; see also Palasz et al., 2025).

Concluding reflections

This paper set out to study how the ECoC and the IACoC addressed and framed the role of culture in relation to sustainability. Both titles were found to address sustainability problems and propose solutions to them, but their approaches differed. While the ECoC discusses generating a sustainable local cultural, social, and economic legacy and long-term city development, the IACoC

focuses on implementing the SDGs at the local level and strengthening the role of culture in international policy agendas. In their sustainability approaches, the macro level of the ECoC appears as inward-looking (or self-critical) and offers only weak guidance to the meso level in sustainability issues, whereas the macro level of the IACoC seems more outward-looking (focused on international agendas and impact) and guides the city level more strongly towards a sustainable development focus. The macro level of the ECoC thus takes a passive stance on sustainability-related aims and assigns responsibility for problem definition and solving to the meso level, whereas the IACoC macro level takes a more active role but appears to leave no room for bottom-up conceptions of sustainability.

An analysis through a *buen vivir* lens showed that development ideology was the underlying ideological frame influencing the framing of culture and sustainability in both titles. Instead of encouraging or even recognising alternative approaches or future visions, their desired “change” remains within and validates this dominant anthropocentric framework. The natural environment remains an object, and culture separated from nature. Even the promising aspects—such as the IACoC’s notion of cultural policies based on plurality, inclusivity, and harmony with nature; the ECoC’s emphasis on active social participation; and both titles’ “glocal” approach and celebration of cultural diversity and mutual understanding—are limited by their uncritical attitude towards Western- and anthropocentric mindsets.

The pursuit of more transformative sustainability thinking and action, and more-than-human perceptions of culture and cultural policy would require an active and mindful stance, as well as a conscious *reframing* of the titles’ macro-level sustainability approaches. This would mean questioning hegemonic sustainable development discourses and openness to alternative viewpoints, particularly ecosystemic and biocentric ones. Combined with *buen vivir* and the idea of global ecological citizenship, ecosystemic thinking could help embrace the “glocality” inherent in CoC schemes, connect local and global more-than-human realities, and encourage engagement in both local and global thinking and stewardship.

In more practical terms, the macro level of the CoC titles could more consciously encourage transformative meso-level approaches through the titles’ criteria, guidelines, and monitoring and participate in international debates with a more critical attitude, consciously challenging accustomed standpoints. For example, the official criteria could require applicant cities to emphasise respect for planetary boundaries, foster a harmonious coexistence in the more-than-human world, or make ecological priorities the central focus. They could even encourage experiments on implementing the rights of nature in local contexts or constructing local culture-led utopias (see Acosta, 2010; Acosta, 2011) in which dominant worldviews and conceptions were allowed to be challenged. However, the macro level should not dictate the process or end results; i.e., the CoC projects should be developed locally with a bottom-up approach but based on a set of shared principles. A change could start with the integration of alternative concepts, emphases, and viewpoints into the CoC title’s macro-level agendas and strategies, which could then be adapted to local projects and international discussions.

As essentially cultural and artistic programmes, the two titles currently miss the opportunity to emphasise the transformative potential of the arts in sustainability ambitions and ecological reconstruction (see BIOS, 2019). Underscoring the arts as meaningful spaces for reflecting and engaging with massive issues

that are difficult to grasp, such as the climate crisis or biodiversity loss (“hyperobjects”, Morton, 2016), CoCs could promote artistic thinking, methods, and viewpoints as possibilities to go beyond ordinary ways of thinking and seeing towards awareness and responsibility. With a push coming from the macro level, such an understanding of the arts could be more easily embraced at and across different levels and sectors and among the various actors involved in the projects.

What is also necessary is to embrace a more critical approach to culture, acknowledging that culture(s) can also prevent sustainable change. CoCs should therefore recognise the wider notion of culture as part of their agenda, alongside and in connection with the traditionally understood domain of cultural policy. For example, the macro-level guidelines could encourage critical and plural local reflections on arts, creative expressions, cultural sectors, heritage, and cultural production and consumption, as well as lifestyles, value systems, worldviews, and the human-nature relationship.

Now is the time for cultural policies and CoC titles to critically rethink their approach to culture and sustainability, as the ongoing period of the ECoC action will come to an end in 2033, and the UN Sustainable Development Agenda in 2030 (without having achieved the 17 SDGs). It remains to be seen whether the ECoC and IACoC choose to take a more proactive and critical approach or continue to align with dominant development goals.

This paper has focused on the macro-level framings of the ECoC and IACoC, and it does not address the sustainability actions or approaches of CoC projects in local contexts. It remains for future research to explore how the official criteria are interpreted and adapted—or perhaps challenged—in CoC cities and among local culture sector actors and citizens. For example, the two cities holding the ECoC title in 2026 would provide interesting cases to study: the bid book of Trenčín, Slovakia, highlights ecological sustainability and environmental protection as central principles of the project (Trenčín 2026, 2021), and the main theme of Oulu, Finland, is “Cultural Climate Change”, which is described as a cultural shift, as well as one that also connects with social issues and the “actual climate change” (Oulu2026, 2021). Less information is available about local IACoC projects (e.g., the application documents or programme plans are not publicly available), but it would be insightful to study how the macro-level emphases on sustainable development and the SDGs have actualised at the meso and micro levels since 2017. Research on the sustainability approaches of other CoC titles would also be helpful to understand what kinds of framings of and approaches to culture and sustainability emerge from different contexts.

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Data availability statement

The dataset consists of public documents, listed at the end of the article. Any further enquiries should be directed to jenni.m.pekkarinen@jyu.fi.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Supplementary material

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