Volume 2—Trends, Contexts, Pathways

Funding Culture for a Changing World

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Foreword
by the Nordic Culture Fund

Art and culture are fundamental to our ability to understand, develop and imagine the world. They open up spaces for experimentation and dialogue, and connect us with each other and the world around us. The power of art and culture lies in their ability to create meaning, think beyond the established, and find a language for what has not yet been articulated

At the Nordic Culture Fund, this understanding lies at the heart of our work. Since the establishment in 1966, our core objective has been to advance cultural cooperation both within and beyond the Nordic Region. This mission is guided by the conviction that cultural cooperation is essential to addressing shared challenges and to building cohesion and trust across borders.

A global perspective is therefore not an addition to the Fund's mandate, but an integral part of it. Yet it had not previously been explored as systematically as through Globus, the Fund's thematic initiative from 2020 to 2025, dedicated to expanding Nordic cultural cooperation and rethinking its relevance in a changing global context.

What began as an open exploration of internationalisation in the arts developed into a laboratory for new methods, relationships and funding practices. Globus invited us to think beyond the transnational and towards the translocal: towards collaborations that connect specific places, communities and realities across borders. It also challenged us to rethink the position of the Nordics in the world—not as a fixed identity be promoted, but as a region continuously developed through dialogue, honest exchanges, and a shared sense of global interdependence.

Funding Culture for a Changing World is a two-volume series that unfolds and builds on this learning journey—one that has been crucial for the Fund's own development and that we hope will contribute to wider conversations among cultural funders, policymakers, artists and cultural organisations.

To support this reflection, Elena Polivtseva, an independent researcher and policy expert, was commissioned to lead the work. Bringing a broad European perspective on cultural policy and funding practices, she has examined the Globus journey with critical distance, situating its learning beyond the Fund itself and identifying insights with relevance to the wider cultural funding community.

Together, the two volumes point to a central insight: funding culture today requires open-ended, trust-based and long-term approaches that allow collaborations to evolve in response to changing realities. It means recognising uncertainty not as an obstacle, but as a condition of cultural practice and meaningful cooperation. It also calls on funders to engage not only as distributors of resources, but as partners, learners, conveners and catalysts for constant structural development.

The Nordic Culture Fund's strategy for 2026–2030 underlines the need to rethink funding models and structures, strengthen cooperation and coordination, and develop a more holistic approach to the cultural ecosystem. The experience of Globus has helped give practical substance to these ambitions.

We share these two publications as an invitation to join us on our journey to explore the future of cultural funding. Not to arrive at a perfect model, but to remain curious, to share both best practices and difficult lessons, and to strengthen collaboration across funding landscapes. In times of uncertainty, we need new alliances and a willingness to experiment with new ways of working. In doing so, we can help ensure that cross-border collaboration remains one of the ways we continue to imagine and build a shared future.

Copenhagen, May 2026

Kristin Danielsen,
CEO of the Nordic Culture Fund

Introduction

Supporting culture and art is no easy task today. Shrinking public resources, changing demographics, geopolitical instability, the climate crisis, and rapid digital transformation compel cultural policymakers and funders to question traditional approaches to supporting artists and cultural institutions. Funders have always sought to be strategic in their investments, responding both to broader political priorities and to the needs of the cultural sector. Yet, as new challenges arise and resources diminish, questions about how to invest in the most future-proof and relevant ways have become increasingly urgent. This concerns not only priorities and areas of investment, but also funding models and the types of relationships funders build with their beneficiaries.

Cross-border collaboration is a particularly complex area, situated at the intersection of several shifting policy domains—cultural policy, international relations, environmental sustainability, global security, justice, human rights, migration, and more. This complexity calls not only for redefining modalities of support, but also for rethinking the purpose, rationale, and value of cultural collaboration across borders.

Observing challenges and change is useful, but adopting an exclusively poly-crisis lens without recognising opportunities risks limiting the innovation of funding programmes. Many experiments have emerged in the funding landscape in Europe and beyond in recent years, and learning from them can be both practically valuable and inspiring.

One such experiment has been the Nordic Culture Fund's programme Globus, a multi-year thematic initiative running from 2020 to 2025. It aimed to expand Nordic cultural collaboration beyond the region and connect it with

global contexts, marking a shift from primarily intra-Nordic cooperation toward partnerships involving artists and cultural practitioners worldwide, anchored in the Nordic region. The programme experimented with trust-based, flexible funding, long-term relationship-building, and learning-oriented support, while testing new approaches to cross-border cultural collaboration.

The story of Globus is important—as a learning journey, as an experiment, and as an example of a funder translating values such as trust and reciprocity into practice. The Nordic Culture Fund has decided to turn the entire journey into a collective learning parcours—not only through internal evaluations, but also through a process open to everyone in the field interested in the continuous improvement of cultural funding practices. This learning journey has resulted in the series of publications *Funding Culture for a Changing World*, consisting of two volumes: Volume 1—*Learning from the Globus Experiment*, and the present one—Volume 2—*Trends, Contexts, Pathways.*

This series aims to reflect on the current context for global cultural collaborations, collect and reflect upon the learning points of the Globus journey and other innovative funding practices, and imagine pathways for the further development of future-proof funding strategies for culture.

Volume 1 focuses specifically on drawing key insights from the Nordic Culture Fund's funding experiment *Globus* (2020–2025), by summarising its main results and learning points.

Volume 2, *Trends, Contexts, Pathways* (the present document), reflects on current policy trends in Europe affecting cross-border cultural work and, drawing on insights from other funders, explores innovative practices and initiatives in the field. If today's funding priorities may no longer be relevant in tomorrow's reality, where should the focus lie? How can funders address some of the most pressing tensions—between continuity and innovation, between trust in beneficiaries and accountability and transparency, and between the urgency to be more strategic and the need to preserve space for artistic autonomy and experimentation? The report maps key policy trends and developments in Europe, presents sector needs related to cross-border collaboration—identified through surveys and interviews—and explores five examples of piloting and practising innovative funding modalities. While the report does not present ready-made solutions, it connects signals from policy contexts and sector developments, and draws lessons from funders who have piloted innovative ways of supporting the cultural sector.

The series aims to contribute to the Nordic Culture Fund's reflections about the next chapters of its history. At the same time, it serves as a source of inspiration and knowledge for the wider funding community seeking more effective ways to support, sustain, and celebrate cross-border cultural practices in the world as it stands today. We invite you to explore both volumes, which are autonomous publications but are best read together—as their conclusions and insights are informed through the shared methodology applied to the entire research journey.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of Volume 2 of the '*Funding Culture for a Changing World*' series includes the following steps:

1. Mapping the cultural sector needs related to cross-border collaborations in the current global context though beneficiary survey and semi-structured beneficiary Interviews
2. Desk research on policy trends and developments in Europe
3. Case studies, involving desk research and interviews
4. Consolidating and synthesising the knowledge collected into the analytical report

While the publications draw broader conclusions about the arts field in the Nordic region and Europe, these should be interpreted with caution. The insights are based on a relatively specific group of practitioners—primarily based in the Nordic region, engaged in international work, and already experienced in securing public funding. All participants have benefited from at least one grant and have undertaken, or are in the process of undertaking, cross-border projects. This context inevitably shapes the perspectives reflected in the analysis.

Summary—Framing the Moment

This is the second Volume in the Series *Funding Culture for a Changing World*. Drawing on the Nordic Culture Fund's Globus programme (2020–2025), along with wider European policy analysis and case studies of innovative funding practices, the report identifies both structural pressures constraining international cultural collaboration and emerging pathways for more resilient, fair, and future oriented funding models.

The report stems from the observation that the space for supporting cross-border cultural collaboration is becoming increasingly restricted, while cultural funders are facing a growing range of challenges and seeking more strategic and future-proof forms of support. Geopolitical instability, democratic erosion, climate crisis, shrinking public budgets, restrictive migration policies, and declining international cooperation are reshaping the conditions in which artists, cultural organisations, and funders operate.

At the same time, these pressures make cultural collaboration across borders more necessary than ever. In this context, culture remains one of the few spaces where dialogue, imagination, solidarity, and collective learning can still be sustained across differences.

The report highlights five key trends in cross-border cultural collaboration and identifies several pathways for funders to support culture in this context:

1. A central concern is the shrinking space for cross-border cultural collaboration. Public support for international cultural cooperation remains fragmented and uncertain, while national priorities and border regimes are gaining weight. Visa restrictions, geopolitical risks, passport inequalities, and unclear future EU funding mechanisms threaten the continuity of global cultural partnerships. Although the EU continues to affirm international cultural relations as a priority, the practical meaning of European cultural leadership remains underdefined.

2. Fairness and sustainable working conditions have become major priorities in the cultural sector. Across Europe, new charters, codes, and policy reforms seek to improve the status of artists and cultural workers. Yet fair practice in international collaboration remains complex. Economic realities, institutional capacities, labour standards, and cultural expectations differ widely across contexts. Funders have a key role in enabling this process by supporting time for relationship-building, ethical dialogue, fair remuneration, and practical tools for addressing frictions, power imbalances, and inequalities.

3. Culture's relationship to democracy is receiving renewed policy attention. Cultural participation, access, and inclusion are increasingly framed as essential to democratic resilience. However, many policies focused on cultural participation remain short-term, targeted, and underfunded. Cross-border collaboration can strengthen this agenda by connecting local communities to global questions and by expanding cultural participation beyond national frameworks.

4. Artistic freedom is under growing pressure. Censorship, funding constraints, administrative barriers, public controversy, and self-censorship are affecting artists across Europe and globally. Social engagement and political awareness within the arts field have made cultural expression more visible, while social polarisation has made it more contested and vulnerable to backlash. Protecting artistic freedom demands cross-border resilient infrastructure, including solidarity networks, legal and advisory support, safe spaces for dialogue, and funding models that accept risk.

5. Cultural organisations are increasingly asked to reduce their environmental impact, but sustainability requirements are often introduced through reporting obligations without dedicated resources, realistic timelines, or coherent strategies. There is a limited understanding of sustainability as both a structural priority and a working methodology within the arts. The cultural sector can help reimagine sustainability through artistic practice, Indigenous and community-based knowledge, slower production rhythms, and climate justice-oriented collaboration.

The following pathways emerge for supporting culture in a fractured world:

- Cross-border cultural collaboration as a shared global infrastructure: Cross-border collaboration sustains human connection in a fragmented world while addressing shared global challenges through local contexts. Funders should support it through long-term infrastructures of trust, dialogue, and solidarity beyond the exchange of cultural products.

- From cultural diplomacy to bottom-up translocality: cultural collaboration should move from state-led diplomacy to community-driven, translocal exchange rooted in shared concerns. Funders enable this by supporting locally grounded, practice-led co-creation across contexts.

- Learning from funding experiments as an ongoing practice: funding should act as a continuous learning process, generating knowledge on collaboration, impact, and innovation. Ongoing reflection and exchange help evolve funding practices over time.

- Practising trust in funding relationships: rigid funding models limit collaboration in uncertain environments, while trust-based approaches enable flexibility and adaptation. Sustainable partnerships depend on mutual trust and long-term continuity.

- Collaboration among funders as structural change: lasting change requires coordination across funders to scale innovation and reduce fragmentation. A strong ecosystem aligns efforts while maintaining diversity of approaches.

- Rethinking regionality as self-transformation, not as self-positioning: regional identity should evolve through global engagement, fostering mutual learning and openness to change. Relevance lies in shaping one's role within global interdependence.

- Artistic freedom, autonomy, and experimentation: artistic freedom is essential yet increasingly under pressure in polarised contexts. Funders must support risk-taking and create conditions for experimentation and critical dialogue.

- Fairness as relational practice: fairness depends on context, negotiation, and mutual understanding across partners. Without sufficient resources, commitments to fair practice risk remaining symbolic.

- Ecological sustainability beyond compliance: sustainability should reshape cultural practices beyond compliance, integrating diverse ecological knowledge. Funding must support slower, locally rooted work and prioritise climate justice.

Ultimately, cultural funding today is not only about enabling artistic production. It is about sustaining the conditions for dialogue, imagination, democratic disagreement, ethical collaboration, and collective futures. In a world where borders are hardening and public space is narrowing, cross-border cultural collaboration remains essential infrastructure for a more connected, plural, and resilient society.

Global context for cultural collaborations

This chapter provides a brief snapshot of the realities in which cross-border cultural collaborations unfold today, drawing on existing data on global security, development and cooperation, migration, climate policy, and global cultural policy debates. Moreover, with a focus on Europe, it reflects on recent cultural policy developments at both EU and national levels, highlighting key areas of discussion such as funding, fair practice, artistic freedom, culture's role in democracy, and the climate crisis. For each area, the chapter identifies signals and implications for cultural funders, outlining the opportunities and challenges these trends present and how they might be addressed through funding.

One of the most pronounced features of today's global context is geopolitical instability. According to studies, the world may be currently experiencing one of the most divided periods since the end of the Cold War[1]. Experts now identify state-based armed conflict as the most significant risk facing humanity, rising from eighth to first place within a single year[2]. This perception reflects a troubling reality: there are currently more than eighty armed conflicts worldwide[3]. Conflicts produce humanitarian crises, forced displacement, and human rights violations, while also destabilising international governance structures and generating major economic shocks.

Meanwhile, the climate crisis has not abated, and global efforts to address it remain insufficient. Progress toward the goals of the Paris Agreement continues to lag significantly, with none of the 45 key indicators currently on track to meet the 1.5°C targets by the end of this decade[4]. The outcomes of COP30, held in Brazil in November 2025, underscored these shortcomings: adaptation finance commitments remain weak and postponed to 2035, accountability mechanisms remain vague, and the final agreement lacks a clear roadmap for phasing out fossil fuels[5].

Wars and natural disasters, combined with economic instability, are also contributing to rising levels of forced displacement, which have doubled globally over the past decade[6]. Yet Europe has recently seen a decline in irregular arrivals and asylum applications, with figures of irregular crossings at the external

1 Whiting, K. (2025) *7 charts that explain the global inflection points of 2025, so far*. World Economic Forum, 5 August. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/08/inflection-points-7-global-shifts-defining-2025-so-far-in-charts/ (Accessed: 15 March 2026).
2 World Economic Forum (2025) The Global Risks Report 2025. 20th edn. Geneva: World Economic Forum.
3 Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (2026) *War WATCH: Explore armed conflicts and civilian harm*. Available at: https://warwatch.ch/explore/ (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
4 World Resources Institute (2025) *The state of climate action in 2025: 10 key findings*. Available at: https://www.wri.org/insights/climate-action-progress-1-5-degrees-c-2025 (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
5 Climate Action Network (2025) *COP30 takes a hopeful step towards justice, but does not go far enough*. Climate Action Network International, 22 November. Available at: https://climatenetwork.org/2025/11/22/cop30-takes-a-hopeful-step-towards-justice-but-does-not-go-far-enough/ (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
6 European Commission (n.d.) *Forced displacement*. Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Available at: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/forced-displacement_en (Accessed: 18 March 2026).

borders of the EU falling by 38 percent in 2024, compared to 2023[7]. This trend is largely attributed to increasingly restrictive migration policies worldwide, including strengthened border controls and the growing externalisation of asylum processing. These trends are likely to intensify as the global political landscape continues to shift. The first consequences of the 'mega election year' of 2024—the largest global election cycle since the introduction of universal suffrage[8]—became visible in 2025. Many elections strengthened populist and anti-establishment political forces. In Europe, this trend has contributed to a noticeable shift toward right-wing politics, with the European Parliament becoming more polarised and right-leaning than ever before.

Alongside these developments, multilateral cooperation is also under pressure. Significant reductions in international aid, from the dismantling of USAID to cuts across Switzerland, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, signal a broader retreat from global engagement at a time of increasing instability[9].

Democratic governance is also facing sustained erosion. Global indices show that democracy has been in decline for more than a decade. The latest edition of the *Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index* indicates that the democratic downturn that began around 2007 continues[10]. According to other international assessments, autocracies now outnumber democracies worldwide for the first time in two decades[11].

Global cultural policy debates have also been evolving. In October 2025, the international cultural policy community gathered in Barcelona for the MONDIACULT conference, reaffirming the commitment to culture as a 'global public good' and advocating for its recognition as a standalone goal of

7 International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (2025) ICMPD Migration Outlook 2025. Vienna: ICMPD.
8 Economist Intelligence Unit (2025) Democracy Index 2024: What's wrong with representative democracy? London: Economist Intelligence Unit, pp. 24-25.
9 Polivtseva, E., Montalto, V. and Kirjazovaite, L. (2025) Cultural policy in 2025: Pressures and promises in a divided world. Culture Policy Room. Available at: https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/cultural-policy-in-2025-pressures-and-promises-in-a-divided-world (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
10 Economist Intelligence Unit (2025) Democracy Index 2024: What's wrong with representative democracy? London: Economist Intelligence Unit..
11 V-Dem Institute (2025) *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization*. Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

sustainable development[12]. Later that year, the European Commission adopted a new comprehensive strategy for culture—the *Culture Compass*—replacing the *2018 New Agenda for Culture*. With its motto '*Europe for Culture—Culture for Europe*', the strategy seeks to rebalance attention between the instrumental value of culture (in areas such as health, economic development, social cohesion, democracy, and international relations) and its intrinsic value—addressing internal challenges within the cultural sector, including working conditions, the implications of artificial intelligence, and sustainable funding for culture[13]. Finally, as part of the ongoing preparation of the EU's future budget framework 2028—2034, the European Commission has proposed a new programme merging Creative Europe and the CERV programme—Citizenship, Equality, Rights, and Values—*AgoraEU*, with a doubled budget and a broader scope bringing together culture, media, and other civil society sectors working on equality, rights, and justice[14].

These policy developments are unfolding against the backdrop of significant shifts in national and local cultural budgets across Europe—including cuts in countries such as Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, and more. At the same time, concerns about artistic freedom are growing across Europe and beyond, with increasing cases of censorship, public controversies, and a widening discourse around self-censorship in the context of democratic erosion[15].

12 UNESCO (2025) *MONDIACULT 2025 Outcome Document: World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/09/EN_MONDIACULT_Outcome_Document%20Final%2027.09.25.pdf?hub=171169 (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
13 European Commission. A Culture Compass for Europe. COM (2025) 785 final, 12 November 2025. Brussels
14 European Commission, 2025. Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818. COM(2025) 550 final.
15 Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.

1. Shrinking space for cross-border collaboration

Practitioners increasingly report a shrinking space for cross-border cultural collaboration, occurring alongside a broader inward turn in cultural policy and a general decline in public cultural funding[16]. While comprehensive data on trends in international cultural support remain limited, testimonies from the field, including as part of this study, consistently point to reduced opportunities and growing competition for funding when it comes to cross-border collaborations, especially involving countries outside Europe.

Transnational cultural relations might be losing momentum within cultural policy priorities, amidst a growing emphasis on domestic concerns and protective policy approaches. Many governments are prioritising the expansion of cultural access for their populations, seeking to make culture accessible to as many citizens rather than perceived as an elitist resource. While this has been historically one of the main missions of many national cultural ministries, it seems that in present times—as we will discuss below—it is often pursued through a particularly strong local focus.

The local farming can certainly be positive in its care for the local communities and their needs. At the same time, this lens is also often accompanied by the overall protective narratives—centred on safeguarding cultural heritage, preserving cultural assets, seeing culture as a security pillar, and protecting it from technological disruptions. At the European level, this protective tendency can be seen in the discourse of the future programme AgoraEU, merging culture and democracy-related policy areas. The rationale of the European Commission's AgoraEU proposal is framed through the language of defending and safeguarding European values, which are considered to be under attack[17]. While these are legitimate objectives, the resulting narrative emphasises preservation, protection, and internal resilience, leaving less space for outward-looking engagement and global cultural curiosity. In this framing,

16 This has been repeatedly discussed during interviews as part of this research, and is documented in several studies; for example, see: Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience; E. Polivtseva, "The New International—Against All Odds", IETM, Brussels, January 2025.
17 European Commission, 2025. Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028–2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818. COM(2025) 550 final.

the world appears less as a space of shared inquiry and exchange, and more as a landscape requiring caution, navigation, and self-protection.

The fading focus on bottom-up international cultural collaboration is not merely discursive. Public funding for international cooperation has long been fragmented[18], and the absence of stable structural support undermines the sustainability of global partnerships. A recent UNESCO report examining the implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2021–2024) highlights persistent inequalities in global cultural mobility. While 96% of developed countries support outward mobility of artists and cultural professionals, only 38% facilitate inward mobility from developing countries—a decline from 53% in the previous reporting period (2017–2020). This imbalance persists alongside what the report describes as a growing 'visa wall', which continues to restrict and hinder global artistic collaboration[19].

Additional uncertainty about the future of global cultural collaboration arises from the ongoing negotiations on the EU budget for 2028–2035. Within the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), culture does not appear prominently within the future *Global Europe* instrument, whereas the current Global Europe programme includes a dedicated cultural component. At the same time, it remains unclear to what extent the proposed *AgoraEU* will remain open to non-associated countries. Under current Creative Europe, specific calls enabled participation from partners based outside the 41 Creative Europe country pool through co-financing mechanisms with other EU instruments. Whether this flexibility will be maintained under AgoraEU remains uncertain, as the current wording of the Council Presidency's position stipulates that participation by partners from non-associated countries should be permitted only when 'strictly necessary' and that they should 'bear the costs of their participation'[20]. More broadly, the potential synergies between *Global Europe* and *AgoraEU* remain vaguely defined, raising doubts about whether international

18 Nordic Culture Fund,Globus, Dimension 04, Enabling Change Through Transnational Art Practices, https://globus.nordiskkulturfond.org/dimension/change-through-transnational-art-practices (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
19 UNESCO 2026, Re|shaping policies for creativity: we share, we act, we build, Paris 2026.
20 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 'AgoraEU' programme for the period 2028-2034, and repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/692 and (EU) 2021/818—Presidency compromise text.

cultural cooperation will receive sufficient support, and whether it is valued and seen as a priority at all.

At the same time, the EU's new cultural strategy—the *Culture Compass*—positions international cultural relations as one of its four strategic priorities. The strategy frames the EU as a '*global leader in culture and creativity*', rooted in mutual understanding and anchored in European values. It also proposes strengthening a value-driven approach to international cultural relations and recognises cultural diversity as continuously evolving.

However, the tangible impact of these ambitions will depend on implementation measures, the scale and stability of financial support. As one of the measures to advance in this domain, the strategy commits to updating the EU *Strategy on International Cultural Relations* (2016)[21]. Yes, while the *Culture Compass* articulates an ambition for European cultural leadership, it does not yet clearly define what such leadership entails in practice or how this next phase of international cultural relations should unfold. The continued reliance on the concept of '*soft power*'—questioned by the European Parliament in its 2022 report[22]—further reflects this ambiguity.

What European cultural leadership should mean in practice remains an open and increasingly urgent question. This is particularly evident at a time when geopolitical narratives about Europe are being actively reshaped by other global actors. For example, the United States' *National Security Strategy* (2025) advances its own interpretation of '*European Greatness*', emphasising national identities and historical narratives and implicitly challenging the notion of (cultural) European unity[23]. In this evolving geopolitical landscape, Europe has yet to articulate a strong and coherent cultural vision of its global role.

21 European Commission. A Culture Compass for Europe. COM (2025) 785 final, 12 November 2025. Brussels
22 The report stated: '*It is crucial to overcome the conventional conversation exclusively framed around the use of culture as a "soft power" tool to influence through attractiveness. This framework in fact does not reflect the current theories and practices of ICR, which focus on the relational process and outcome of cultural relations and are based on building trust between people, recognising power relations and seeking equity and fairness in order to address collective challenges.*'
23 The White House (2025) *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: The White House.

Therefore, international cultural collaboration is likely to face even more barriers, as the national lens is increasingly overweighting the value of translocal connections and the perception of '*the global as borderless – the world as a united whole*', as was articulated by the Nordic Culture Fund in the context of Globus (see Volume 1—*Learning from the Globus Experiment*). This funding programme has revealed that there is an enormous interest and expertise within the arts field when it comes to translocal collaboration. Translocality within Globus project prioritised long-term relationships between localities that face similar pressures, as well as Indigenous territories across continents, diasporic communities, similar natural ecosystems, rural areas, and more. In these projects, cultural practice has become a bridge between dispersed places, going beyond the imposed constructs of national borders. This perspective recognises that global challenges, such as climate change, extractivism, migration, censorship or technological transformation, are always experienced locally, but never in isolation.

However, it seems today that a genuine political interest for such an approach might be reducing. Migration policies across Europe have tightened, while geopolitical tensions increasingly shape international partnerships and mobility. As national and regional borders regain significance in global politics, the national dimension is becoming more prominent within the relationship between global, national, and local cultural dynamics. Even when cultural organisations and funders encourage cross-border collaboration, practical obstacles—linked to national borders—remain: visa restrictions, passport hierarchies, and geopolitical risks increasingly shape who can participate in international exchange. In this environment, the world is increasingly perceived as fragmented and antagonistic, where borders function not only as political realities but also as infrastructures of protection and control.

Signals for funders

— Maintaining support for cross-border cultural collaboration becomes more challenging but more urgent, as the broader environment becomes more fragile and uncertain.

— Systematic analysis of the current landscape of international cultural support is needed in order to identify structural gaps, evolving trends, and areas where intervention is most necessary.

— Promoting and facilitating international partnerships now involves greater uncertainties, requiring more flexible and adaptive funding approaches.

— Translocal collaboration is becoming more difficult as national borders regain practical and political significance, shaping mobility, identities, and geopolitical alignments.

— There is an urgent need for clearly articulated values guiding Europe's international cultural relations, particularly at a moment when Europe's identity, autonomy, and global role are being actively renegotiated, both inside and outside the EU.

2. Fairness and artists' working conditions across borders

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous policy initiatives and sector-led efforts—in Europe and beyond—have emerged to improve labour standards in the cultural sector. Several countries have introduced regulatory or policy reforms aimed at strengthening the professional status and working conditions of artists and cultural workers. These include the *Art work certificate* reform in Belgium, the *Fairness process* in Austria, legislation regulating the status of the artist in Spain, Portugal, and Romania, and pilot initiatives exploring basic income for artists in Ireland, among others.

Already before the pandemic, alongside regulatory measures, a growing number of '*soft instruments*' have been introduced across Europe, including codes, charters, and guidelines promoting fair practice in the cultural sector. Examples include the *Fair Practice Code* in the Netherlands, the *Juist is Juist* initiative in Belgium, and the *Ethics Charter* in Luxembourg. Denmark is currently developing its own *Fair Practice Culture* framework. At the global level, the issue has also gained prominence, culminating in the *Fair Culture Charter* launched by the German UNESCO Commission in 2024. More broadly, the sector itself is increasingly articulating shared principles around fair collaboration, ethical conduct, and responsible working relations. These developments are closely linked to ongoing debates within the cultural field concerning professional ethics, power relations, inclusivity, and gender equality.

At the EU level, the European Commission is currently developing an *Artists' Charter,* one of the flagship initiatives under the *Culture Compass*. The Charter aims to outline fundamental principles, guidance, and commitments for fair working conditions in the cultural and creative sectors, while potentially strengthening compliance and accountability, particularly among recipients of EU cultural funding[24]. The Charter can potentially provide an important reference point for aligning expectations across the sector regarding what fair practice entails and how it can be implemented through collective commitments.

24 European Commission. A Culture Compass for Europe. COM (2025) 785 final, 12 November 2025. Brussels

There are indications that the future EU cultural programme, *AgoraEU*, could be linked to this Charter through a conditionality mechanism, requiring beneficiaries to demonstrate compliance with its principles. Such an approach was proposed by the European Parliament in its 2023 resolution on the status of artists[25], and the European Commission has not excluded this possibility in its official response. However, while the future Charter may help articulate shared standards within the European cultural and creative sectors, it is unlikely to comprehensively address the complexities of international cultural collaboration, particularly with partners based outside countries associated with the current Creative Europe. Overall, relatively few existing initiatives provide comprehensive practical guidance on building equitable international or global partnerships.

Cultural, economic, and institutional contexts vary widely across the world, meaning that the interpretation and implementation of fair practice can take very different forms. Experiences across global collaborations suggest that fairness is not a fixed standard but an evolving process—one that involves negotiation, experimentation, adjustment, and continuous dialogue. Ultimately, fairness is deeply relational: it depends on the actors involved, the context in which collaboration unfolds, and the goals and nature of the project[26]. At the same time, practitioners involved in Globus highlighted the need for clearer roadmaps and practical guidance that can support fair negotiation practices, raise awareness of power asymmetries, and provide mechanisms for addressing ethical or sensitive issues—both at the outset of collaborations and as they evolve. When such guidance is not in place, uncertainties and risk of global collaborations become more acute.

Another structural challenge is that the push for fair working conditions often unfolds against the backdrop of shrinking cultural budgets. According to a recent UNESCO study (2026), public funding for culture in the Global North has declined over the past two decades[27], and as noted above, cultural

25 European Parliament resolution of 21 November 2023 with recommendations to the Commission on an EU framework for the social and professional situation of artists and workers in the cultural and creative sectors (2023/2051(INL)).
26 Myat Thwe, P., Brennert, K., & Enyatseng, T., "Connecting the dots: Fair arts practice in contexts", IETM, Brussels, February 2026.
27 UNESCO 2026, Re|shaping policies for creativity: we share, we act, we build, Paris 2026.

budgets continue to shrink across Europe. This creates a paradox: improving labour conditions generally requires greater financial resources. As a result, commitments to fair practice may remain largely symbolic unless they are matched with adequate funding, or they may come at the cost of reducing the scale, number, or accessibility of funded projects. Ongoing 'mentality shifts' related to fair practice may also happen at different paces across the globe, potentially complicating future collaborations.

These developments reveal a growing tension between rising expectations for fair practice and the conditions in which cultural work takes place. While new charters, regulations, and ethical frameworks aim to improve working conditions, they often lack practical guidance for navigating complex international collaborations, where power asymmetries, differing standards, and unequal resources shape what fairness can mean in practice. At the same time, efforts to strengthen labour conditions unfold amid shrinking cultural budgets, creating a structural paradox: fairer working conditions require more resources, yet funding is declining. Without additional support, fair practice risks remaining symbolic, or leading to fewer and smaller projects. The central challenge is therefore not only to define fairness, but to create the financial and structural conditions that make equitable collaboration realistically achievable.

Signals for funders

— Fair practice and improved working conditions are becoming central expectations across the cultural sector. These shifts are driven both by evolving policy frameworks and by changes in working culture in the sector, which increasingly reinforce one another.

— Progress remains uneven across Europe and globally. Differences in policy development, resources, and labour standards can create asymmetries in expectations and practices, potentially complicating international cultural collaborations.

— There are still few practical frameworks for fair practice in global cultural cooperation. Key questions remain unresolved, including how to distribute resources across partners, interpret 'fair pay' across different economic contexts, share responsibilities, and distribute risks within partnerships.

— While shared principles are increasingly articulated, translating them into practice remains complex. Funders can play an important role in facilitating dialogue, experimentation, and the development of practical approaches to fair collaboration.

— Fair practice and sustainability within partnerships depend on the time for relationships to develop, for trust to be built, and for mutual understanding to emerge. Availability of this time depends largely on the funding structures in place. Practising fairness requires trust-based funding models.

— Shrinking resources create a structural tension. As awareness of fair working conditions grows, both funders and practitioners may need to explore new modes of cultural production that are slower, more attentive to labour conditions, and more embedded in local communities and collaborative processes.

— Rather than defining fairness themselves, funders can create enabling conditions. This includes supporting spaces for collective inquiry, negotiation, and relationship-building, elements that are often absent from short-term, output-driven funding structures.

3. Culture and democracy: a renewed focus

As democratic erosion becomes increasingly visible across Europe and recognised at the political level, the role of culture in responding to these challenges is gaining renewed recognition. Over recent years, the relationship between culture and democracy has steadily moved up the policy agenda—from EU-commissioned research collecting evidence on the role of culture in strengthening democracy[28], to the *EU Work Plan for Culture 2023—2026*, where 'Culture for the people: enhancing cultural participation and the role of culture in society appears' as one of priority themes[29].

A perspective centred on the role of culture to protect democracy in times of security threats is reflected in the the *Declaration on the necessity of culture and media as a safeguard for our European democracies* (2025), adopted in the framework of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU, signed by all EU Member States except Hungary, as well as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine. The declaration reflects a heightened sense of urgency and moves beyond discussing the value of culture to asserting its *necessity* for democratic resilience. It also articulates one of the first explicit links between culture, democracy, and security, arguing that Europe's security ultimately depends on the resilience of its democratic values and identity, within which heritage and cultural diversity play a central role[30].

The EU's new strategic framework for culture, the *Culture Compass* also strongly acknowledges culture's role for democracy. It outlines initiatives to improve access to culture, particularly for young people, and refers to the newly launched EU's strategy for protecting and strengthening democracy—the *European Democracy Shield*. Artistic freedom is indeed recognised as a relevant component of democratic resilience in the *Democracy Shield*, but only briefly

28 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Hammonds, W., Culture and democracy, the evidence – How citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion – Lessons from international research, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/39199.
29 Council of the European Union (2022) *Council Resolution on the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026*. Official Journal of the European Union, C 466, 7 December.
30 The Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Declaration on the necessity of culture as media as safeguards of our European democracies.

and yet again with a reference to the *Culture Compass*[31]. The relationship between these two frameworks remains somewhat unclear, and it is not yet evident how they will work together to meaningfully integrate artistic freedom into broader democratic policies.

Another key EU-level development linking culture with democratic priorities is the already mentioned Commission's proposal to merge Creative Europe with the CERV Programme within the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034). The proposed programme, *AgoraEU*, would combine culture, media, and civil society initiatives within a broader framework centred on EU values and democratic resilience. In this framing, culture is primarily emphasised for its contribution to identity, participation, citizenship, equality, and non-discrimination.

Alongside this policy shift, access to culture and cultural participation have become prominent priorities across Europe. An analysis of the national political parties currently represented in the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education shows that promoting '*access to culture for all*' is one of the few areas of consensus across political groups[32].

However, the definition of who constitutes '*all*' and what is meant by '*culture*' varies widely across political ideologies and is reflected in diverse policy approaches and interventions. In practice, attention to participation often translates into targeted initiatives rather than systemic strategies. Many programmes focus on specific sectors—such as museums, libraries, or heritage sites—or on particular groups, most commonly young people, older populations, and persons with disabilities[33]. While these initiatives are valuable, they rarely amount to comprehensive frameworks capable of strengthening long-term cultural participation and cultural democracy.

31 JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies. JOIN/2025/791 final
32 Polivtseva, E., 2024. Culture after the EU elections: what to expect. Culture Policy Room, 1 October. Available at: https://www.culturepolicyroom.eu/insights/culture-after-the-eu-elections-what-to-expect (Accessed 18 March 2026).
33 Ibid

Several recent national initiatives illustrate how governments are seeking to widen cultural participation. In 2025, Denmark launched a '*Kulturpas*' (Culture Pass) scheme aimed at young people disengaged from education or employment. Eligible participants receive a digital card worth DKK 1,000 per year, which can be used to access cultural, sports, and community activities[34]. In Luxembourg, support for the *Kulturpass* programme, which provides individuals and families facing economic hardship with affordable access to cultural events, has reportedly increased[35]. In Iceland, the parliament adopted a *Parliamentary Resolution on an Action Plan for Enhancing Children's Culture* (2024–2028). The plan aims to strengthen policy coordination in the field of children's culture, expand access to arts, culture, and arts education for young people, and consolidate initiatives such as the *Art for All* project and the Children's Cultural Fund[36]. Moreover, Spain has introduced its *Cultural Rights Plan* (2025–2030), presented in July 2025. The plan includes 146 measures backed by €79.3 million in funding through 2027, supporting cultural projects with social impact, professional associations and unions, and cultural cooperation initiatives in rural areas[37].

In France, the government has prioritised improving cultural access in rural areas through the *Culture and Rurality Plan*, which allocates €100 million over three years. One of its key measures is the nationwide rollout of the '*Culture Pass for all*', previously tested in the Grand Est region. The plan was announced in July 2024 by the Minister of Culture and will be implemented across the entire territory.[38] However, the roll out of the Culture Pass programme in rural areas does not include additional funding, and the Culture Pass programme as

34 DFS (Dansk Folkeoplysnings Samråd), 2024. Guide til kulturpasset. Available at: https://dfs.dk/nyheder/ nyheder/guide-til-kulturpasset/ (Accessed 18 March 2026).
35 Chronicle.lu (2025) '2025 to be Dedicated to Access to Culture and Strengthening the Sector', Chronicle.lu. Available at: https://www.chronicle.lu/category/culture/53038-2025-to-be-dedicated-to-access-to-culture-and-strengthening-the-sector (Accessed: 18 March 2028).
36 Alþingi (2023). Þingsályktun um aðgerðaáætlun um eflingu barnamenningar 2024–2028. Available at: https://www.althingi.is/altext/153/s/1840.html (Accessed: 18 March 2028)
37 Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (2025) 'Presentación del Plan de Derechos Culturales', Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 8 July. Available at: https://www.cultura.gob.es/en/actualidad/2025/07/250708-presentacion-plan-derechos-culturales (Accessed: 18 March 2028).
38 Ministère de la Culture (2026) Plan Culture et Ruralité: la ministre de la Culture, Rachida Dati, annonce la généralisation de l'expérimentation du pass Culture pour tous. Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 15 January. Available at: https://www.culture.gouv.fr/presse/communiques-de-presse/plan-culture-et-ruralite-la-ministre-de-la-culture-rachida-dati-annonce-la-generalisation-de-l-experimentation-du-pass-culture-pour-tous (Accessed: 18 March 2026).

such, which has been supporting young people's access to cultural activities, has been reduced by €43 million in 2026[39].

This final example highlights a broader paradox. While cultural participation and inclusion are increasingly emphasised in policy discourse, these ambitions often unfold in a context of shrinking cultural budgets. In some cases, resources are simply reallocated between programmes; in others, cuts to infrastructure and long-term support undermine the conditions necessary for meaningful participation. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the government has promoted Arts Everywhere, a £270 million flagship investment programme supporting arts venues, museums, libraries, and heritage organisations across England. Yet, as Campaign for the Arts notes, overall public spending trends point in the opposite direction: by 2029, government spending per citizen on culture, media, and sport is projected to be more than one-third lower in real terms than in 2010, deepening the current 32% decline. Local authorities, the largest public funders of culture, heritage, and libraries in England, have already reduced their investment by almost half since 2010[40].

Similar patterns can be observed elsewhere in Europe, including Nordic countries. In Sweden, cuts to regional cultural funding have affected study associations that maintain essential cultural infrastructure, including rehearsal spaces, music houses, and community cultural centres[41]. In Finland, recent budget reductions have affected grants for national arts communities, investments in cultural facilities, support for film and audiovisual culture, as well as funding for international cooperation and intercultural dialogue[42].

39 Sénat, Commission des finances 2025, *Projet de loi de finances pour 2026 : Culture*. Rapport général n° 139 (2025–2026), tome III, annexe 7. Paris: Available at: https://www.senat.fr/rap/l25-139-37/l25-139-3710.html (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
40 Campaign for the Arts, 2025. What did the 2025 Spending Review mean for the arts? 12 June. Available at: https://www.campaignforthearts.org/news/what-did-the-2025-spending-review-mean-for-the-arts/ (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
41 Maclachlan, E. & Gustavfsson, E., 2024. Budget Cuts Threaten the Future of Sweden and Finland's Cultural Sector. Reset! network, 12 November.] Available at: https://reset-network.eu/budget-cuts-threaten-the-future-of-sweden-and-finlands-cultural-sector/ (Accessed: 18 March 2026).
42 Ministry of Education and Culture, 2024. EUR 8.45 billion budget proposal for the Ministry of Education and Culture for 2025. Available at: https://okm.fi/en/-/eur-8.45-billion-budget-proposal-for-the-ministry-of-education-and-culture-for-2025 (Accessed: 18 March 2026).

Recent research also points out that the growing policy emphasis on inclusion, diversity, and accessibility is not always accompanied by adequate resources, governance frameworks, or implementation strategies. For example, organisations are increasingly expected to provide accessibility measures such as disability support without receiving additional funding to do so. As a result, cultural participation policies often remain fragmented and project-based rather than embedded in long-term strategies that strengthen the sector's overall capacity to engage diverse communities[43].

Funding scarcity and precarity have negative consequences for cultural participation, access, and the broader relationship between culture and democracy. When the arts sector becomes financially unstable, careers in this field become less accessible to people from less privileged backgrounds. As a result, individuals from working-class and ethnic minority communities are less likely to enter the sector, as it is increasingly perceived as an unsustainable career path. A professional cultural sector that lacks social diversity will, in turn, struggle to create spaces where those same communities can participate as audiences, engage meaningfully, and see their experiences and perspectives represented. It is therefore essential that the connection between sustainable working conditions in the arts and the public's right to engage with cultural life is recognised both in policy frameworks and within the sector itself.

At the same time, financial pressures can push cultural organisations towards market-driven activities, prioritising projects with mass appeal over slower, long-term engagement with underrepresented communities. Such engagement typically requires significant investment in mediation, education, research, and sometimes cross-sectoral collaboration. It also rarely produces immediate or easily measurable outcomes, making it more difficult to sustain under conditions of financial scarcity.

As a result, cultural participation policies often take the form of targeted outreach initiatives aimed at specific 'underserved' groups, rather than structural investment in cultural ecosystems, mediation, and cultural education—areas that remain underfunded. This approach can lead to fragmented or short-term

43 Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.

interventions in contexts that require both pre-project trust-building and long-term, sustained relationships. Where efforts to broaden audiences are not accompanied by meaningful long-term engagement, interactions can also become fragile: cultural content and values may be misunderstood, and initiatives may encounter resistance or backlash (as discussed in the next section).

These developments reveal a growing gap between ambition and capacity. While culture is increasingly framed as essential to democratic resilience, the conditions needed for meaningful cultural participation are often weakened by shrinking and unstable funding. Policies tend to rely on short-term, targeted initiatives rather than sustained investment in cultural ecosystems, mediation, and long-term engagement. As a result, cultural participation becomes fragmented and difficult to sustain. Culture is thus expected to strengthen democracy at a moment when the structural capacity of the cultural sector to do so is being eroded.

Signals for funders

— Priorities of cultural participation have been predominantly framed through local access. While this reflects legitimate policy priorities—to engage as many citizens locally as possible, it may also reinforce a perceived divide between local engagement and international collaboration.

— There is an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the local and the global through the lens of participation, access, and cultural democracy, rather than through the narrower frameworks of cultural diplomacy and soft power. International collaboration should not be understood solely as the circulation of finished cultural products across borders. Instead, it can be conceived as an extension of the participatory cultural models increasingly promoted at national and local levels—adding a dimension of transcultural dialogue and enabling local communities to engage with global themes.

— Translocal approaches offer a promising alternative model to enhancing cultural participation. By connecting local contexts across different places, translocal collaboration can foster slower, more meaningful, and more durable partnerships. Translocal collaboration may provide a valuable framework for future cultural programmes, allowing local engagement and international cooperation to reinforce rather than compete with each other.

4. Artistic freedom under pressure

Across Europe and beyond, civic space is shrinking, with direct and indirect consequences for cultural actors. While formal government censorship has increased in some contexts, pressures on artistic expression today often take more subtle forms. These include growing social polarisation, administrative constraints, funding pressures, and heightened public scrutiny.

A recent study by the Performing Arts Coalition (PAC)—*Beyond Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience*—confirms trends long documented by organisations such as Freemuse and the Council of Europe. Artistic expression is under increasing pressure not only globally but also across Europe, including in countries where freedoms were previously considered secure. Among the 261 performing arts professionals surveyed—mostly based in Europe—nearly half consider artistic freedom to be endangered. One third reported having experienced government censorship in the recent past. In most cases, however, this censorship did not take the form of explicit bans but appeared through more indirect mechanisms, such as funding cuts, changing policy priorities, administrative complexity, or procedural exclusions[44].

As practitioners interviewed as part of this research reflected, restrictions emerging in the Global North may also have global ripple effects. International partnerships often provide essential support for artistic freedom in contexts where civic space is even more fragile. For this reason, practitioners increasingly emphasise the need for sustained and collective conversations about how artistic freedom can be protected in increasingly contested environments.

Another trend is the growing prevalence of self-censorship. According to the PAC study, 37 percent of respondents reported self-censoring their work in recent years, while another 30 percent acknowledged that such practices exist within the broader artistic community. Self-censorship often emerges in relation to funding structures and institutional relationships. Projects are not abandoned because they lack artistic value, but because they lack a sufficiently safe environment in which they can be realised. This does not

44 Ibid.

necessarily mean that artists stop expressing themselves entirely, but it does mean that anticipating potential reactions from audiences, political actors, or administrators increasingly becomes part of the creative process itself[45].

As noted in the Freemuse *State of Artistic Freedom Report* (2025), censorship no longer always needs to be systematically imposed if artists begin to censor themselves as a matter of survival[46]. Self-censorship therefore represents a particularly complex challenge: it is difficult to measure, as it is often hidden and the instances in which practitioners self-censor are not widely discussed. It might even be that there is no shared understanding among artists and cultural workers of what self-censorship means—for instance, for some, the need to adjust language in funding applications may be a long-standing and natural practice, while for others it may signal pressure. Understanding self-censorship requires safe environments in which artists can openly discuss pressures, exchange knowledge about rights and protections, and build solidarity networks.

Self-censorship is also linked to the widely discussed trend of social polarisation that places additional strain on the cultural sector. Social dynamics are increasingly shaping the environment for artistic expression. Research conducted by the Council for Culture in the Netherlands, which established a Committee on Artistic Freedom to investigate the issue, highlights how pressure on artistic expression increasingly arises from what it calls the *'horizontal axis'* between art and society. On this axis, artists' freedom to create intersects with citizens' freedom to criticise, oppose, or mobilise against artistic works. Such tensions have always existed, but the Council identifies a significant shift in recent years. Social pressure is now often amplified by polarised public debate, social media dynamics, and the rapid circulation of decontextualised images or fragments of artistic work online. Artistic works that once existed within a clear context—for example in theatre spaces or exhibitions—can now be circulated widely without explanation, generating backlash among audiences who may never have encountered the work directly[47].

45 Performing Arts Coalition 2026, Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom, and Democratic Resilience.
46 Freemuse, 2025. The State of Artistic Freedom 2025.
47 Council for Culture 2026, Making (without) pressure. Artistic freedom as a democratic foundation.

Artists are not immune to polarisation either. They are part of the societies in which they live, and therefore cannot remain immune to the divisions that shape public life. Contemporary art often aligns more naturally with progressive outlooks, which can sometimes lead more conservative audiences to feel excluded or alienated from the cultural field[48].

These developments unfold alongside broader changes within the arts themselves. Compared with a few decades ago—even if still criticised for being elitist and homogeneous—the arts have become more socially engaged, participatory, and politically aware. As the report points out, they also reflect a wider diversity of voices and identities[49]. As discussed in the previous section, public policies have also encouraged this shift by emphasising accessibility, participation, and the social relevance of the arts. As a result, art has moved closer to society, seeking to involve communities more directly in cultural production and dialogue.

However, this increased proximity also makes artistic expression more visible and contested—communities do not always welcome the content they are faced with. As the Cultural Council notes, artistic freedom today is shaped by a structural paradox: art seeks to reduce the distance between itself and society, yet this very proximity increases the likelihood of social pressure, controversy, and backlash.

As other research points out, in the context of growing polarisation and intolerance, some cultural practitioners therefore view international collaboration as a space of solidarity, where artists can connect with like-minded peers across borders. While such spaces are valuable, they may also risk becoming forms of temporary escape from local conflicts rather than opportunities to develop the skills and resilience needed to engage with contested public debates at home[50].

This raises an important question for cultural policy: what kinds of cross-border collaboration can help artists not only find safe spaces, but also strengthen their capacity to engage with disagreement and controversy within their local communities?

48 ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 E. Polivtseva, "The New International—Against All Odds", IETM, Brussels, January 2025.

Signals for funders:

— Artistic autonomy cannot be treated as a standalone 'topic' or just one of many policy priorities. It is a core condition of cultural life. Artistic freedom should be actively supported, protected, and practised, not only as a *right* of artists but also as a shared *responsibility* of policy-makers, society and across the cultural sector.

— Resilience infrastructures are increasingly necessary. These may include solidarity networks, legal and advisory support, safe spaces for dialogue, and mechanisms to monitor and discuss emerging pressures on artistic freedom. Such infrastructures can be built at the local level, but as the erosion of democracy has increasingly become a global matter, building cross-border resilience is urgent too.

— Cultural policy should support spaces for democratic disagreement. The arts can function as arenas where diverse perspectives confront each other constructively, helping societies navigate disagreement rather than suppress it.

— Cross-border collaboration should not become for artists merely a safe escape from polarised societies. Instead, international partnerships can help equip artists and institutions to engage more confidently with contested debates in their own societies.

— Funders can support initiatives that foster dialogue across ideological divides, including residencies, debate platforms, and collaborative projects that bring together artists, communities, and audiences with different perspectives.

— Supporting artistic freedom in the current context therefore requires longer time horizons, greater trust, and a willingness to engage with risk. Strengthening the capacity of the cultural sector to navigate disagreement and controversy may ultimately be one of the most important contributions cultural policy can make to democratic resilience.

5. Ecological sustainability: commitments, backlash, policy gaps

Ecological sustainability remains a stated priority in many cultural policy frameworks in Europe. Cultural organisations are increasingly expected to contribute to the green transition by reducing their environmental footprint and integrating sustainability into their operations and artistic practices[51]. In some regions, including in the Nordic countries, concrete policy tools have begun to emerge to guide this process.

At the same time, the broader political context has become more complex. In recent years, observers have increasingly referred to a 'greenlash'—a growing resistance to, or fatigue with, sustainability policies. In several parts of the world, climate action is stagnating or even being rolled back. This dynamic is visible at the global level. Beyond the persistent slow implementation of the Paris Agreement, recent developments indicate explicit reversals in environmental governance. In the United States, President Donald Trump withdrew the country from the Paris Agreement on the first day of his second presidential term[52]. In the EU, green parties lost influence in the 2024 elections, weakening environmental leadership in several countries including Germany, Belgium, Italy, and France. In 2025, the EU diluted elements of the Green Deal through the Omnibus I Regulation, which rolled back several sustainability requirements for businesses[53].

This shift creates a challenging environment for the cultural sector, which is still expected to advance sustainability goals even as the overall political support to greening weakens. Within this broader environment of political uncertainty, cultural sustainability policies often remain fragmented and insufficiently supported. Environmental responsibility is frequently promoted through funding criteria, reporting requirements, or voluntary guidelines. However, these expectations are rarely accompanied by holistic strategies, realistic timelines, or additional

51 Culture Action Europe, 2024. *State of Culture Report.*
52 The White House (2025) *Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements.* Presidential Actions, 20 January.
53 European Commission (2025) *Omnibus I.* Brussels: European Commission, 26 February. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/omnibus-i_en (Accessed: 18 March 2026).

resources to support implementation. As a result, cultural organisations face increased expectations without corresponding financial support[54].

At the European level, environmental sustainability appears across several cultural policy frameworks, but its integration remains partial. The Creative Europe programme requires applicants to contribute to the EU's Green Deal and identifies environmental sustainability as a cross-cutting priority. The programme is also expected to contribute to the EU-wide objective of allocating 30% of the EU budget to climate action. Yet climate mitigation and environmental protection are not explicit programme objectives, and there are no clear indicators to track progress. Green conditionality is not mandatory for applicants.

Similarly, the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 identifies *'Culture for the Planet: unleashing the power of culture'* as one of its priorities. However, the document largely frames the role of culture in environmental terms as raising awareness and encouraging shifts in public attitudes toward climate change. While this perspective is important, it does not fully recognise the broader transformative potential of the arts to imagine alternative futures, test new practices, and catalyse systemic change. The Commission's proposal for the new AgoraEU programme, intended to replace Creative Europe after 2027, also fails to establish strong links between culture and environmental sustainability. In the proposal, the climate crisis appears only in a general section on preparedness for crises, alongside health emergencies and security threats. Cultural actors are expected primarily to 'navigate' the green transition rather than actively shape it. The Culture Compass, the EU's strategic framework for culture adopted in November 2025, represents some progress by recognising that cultural actors should be empowered to contribute to the green transition. This acknowledgement marks an improvement compared with the New European Agenda for Culture (2018), which did not address sustainability at all. However, the Compass still lacks concrete mechanisms for placing culture at the centre of the EU's sustainability agenda.

One of the more comprehensive recent initiatives is the *Nordic Green Roadmap for Cultural Institutions*, published in 2023 by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The roadmap provides practical guidance for cultural organisations seeking

54 E. Polivtseva, "IETM Policy Guide: Advancing Green Cultural Policies in an Era of Greenlash", IETM, Brussels, March 2026.

to reduce their environmental impact and develop long-term sustainability strategies. It promotes a systems-thinking approach, recognising that sustainability in cultural institutions encompasses not only ecological action but also economic resilience, social responsibility, community engagement, accessibility, and education[55].

Despite such promising examples, a coherent and visionary approach to sustainability in cultural policy remains largely absent. Environmental sustainability is too often treated as a thematic niche or a compliance requirement rather than as a principle capable of shaping artistic practices, institutional structures, and cultural policy priorities more broadly. Most commonly, references to sustainability within national cultural policy frameworks focus on reducing the ecological footprint of cultural production and touring, preparing cultural infrastructure for climate-related hazards, promoting sustainable materials and resource use, and supporting cultural projects that raise awareness about climate change[56]. These measures are important and reflect growing awareness within the sector. Nevertheless, sustainability is often framed primarily in terms of environmental compliance rather than as an opportunity to mobilise the broader transformative potential of artistic practice. Cultural policy rarely positions the arts as drivers of systemic change or innovation within sustainability transitions.

At the same time, sustainability requirements are increasingly embedded in funding and reporting processes, even though cultural funding rarely includes dedicated budgets to support these expectations. Greening cultural operations can require significant additional investments—for example, in sustainable materials, waste management systems, carbon accounting, eco-certification, or new production processes. Without dedicated support, these requirements can place additional financial strain on organisations already operating under tight budgets.

Another challenge lies in the uneven global landscape of sustainability policies. Cultural policy systems vary widely in how they prioritise environmental issues. In many regions, cultural organisations operate under conditions shaped by conflict, economic hardship, forced displacement, or political instability. As

55 Secretary of the Nordic Council of Ministers Nordic Council of Ministers 2023, *Nordic Green Roadmap for Cultural Institutions*.
56 Culture Action Europe, 2024. *State of Culture Report*.

a result, expectations surrounding sustainability—especially how they are framed in the European cultural policy discourse—may differ significantly across international cultural collaborations.

Even the concept of sustainability itself carries different meanings in different cultural contexts. In many parts of the world, Indigenous communities and other local knowledge systems offer alternative understandings of ecological relationships that are often marginalised within dominant Western policy frameworks. Integrating sustainability into international cultural collaboration therefore requires sensitivity to diverse contexts and knowledge systems.

These developments point to a growing mismatch between ambition and capacity. While cultural actors are increasingly expected to contribute to the green transition, political commitment is weakening and support remains fragmented, under-resourced, and largely compliance-driven. Sustainability is often introduced through funding criteria and reporting requirements without corresponding investment, realistic timelines, or coherent strategies. As a result, cultural organisations face rising expectations without the means to implement them, while the broader transformative potential of culture in sustainability transitions remains underused. The core challenge is that sustainability is framed as an obligation for the cultural sector, but not yet supported as a structural priority.

Signals for funders

— In the current context, marked by slowing climate action and the broader failure to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the key question is not only how cultural policy can integrate green criteria, but how it can empower the arts to reimagine sustainability itself.

— Funding models for international cultural relations based on principles of ‘cultural diplomacy’ are often over-focused on producing outputs and showcasing cultural products across borders. This approach may undermine sustainability. Funders may need to reconsider incentives that encourage overproduction, hyper-mobility, and short project cycles.

— Green cultural funding should move beyond carbon reduction alone. It can support the integration of ecological thinking into the core values, working rhythms, and organisational practices of the cultural sector. Funding structures should encourage slower and more reflective cultural production. This includes allowing time for research, experimentation, relationship-building, and long-term community engagement.

— Greater financial stability for artists and cultural workers can enable more sustainable practices. Mechanisms such as basic income schemes or longer-term support structures may reduce pressure to prioritise short-term economic survival over ecological considerations.

— Sustainability should be supported through dedicated resources. Environmental requirements in funding programmes should be accompanied by budgets for sustainable materials, mobility, certification, and environmental management.

— Cultural funders from the Global North should avoid exporting unsustainable production models globally. Instead of reinforcing hyper-mobility and accelerated production cycles, funding frameworks should encourage locally rooted collaboration and knowledge exchange.

— Climate justice[57] should guide international cultural collaboration. Partnerships must recognise the uneven causes and impacts of the climate crisis and take into account the diverse economic, political, and geographic contexts of collaborators.

— Diverse knowledge systems should be recognised in sustainability approaches. Indigenous and community-based understandings of ecology can play a crucial role in shaping more just and holistic sustainability practices.

57 J. Baltà Portolés, I. Van de Gejuchte “Climate Justice—Through the Creative Lens of the Performing Arts”, IETM, Brussels, November 2023.

Supporting cross-border practice: needs in the sector

The context is undoubtedly far from easy, so what next for cross-border work in culture and the arts? This chapter offers a mapping of needs in the cultural field in relation to funding for cross-border collaborations—as identified through the survey and interviews with Globus beneficiaries.

One strong insight that can be gleaned from our conversations with sector representatives is that, on the one hand, the present moment is extremely challenging for the continuation of transnational cultural practice, while at the same time, these very challenges make the need for collaboration more acute than ever. As one contributor put it, 'in these times it's even more important to sustain projects that challenge and transcend boundaries, because these are the remaining spaces for open dialogue and global exchange'.

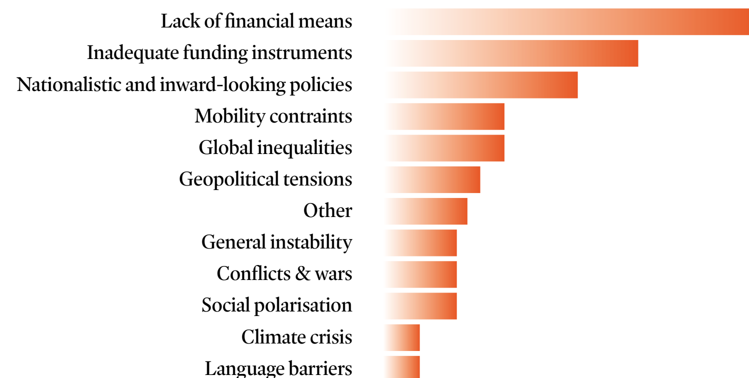
Some see these spaces as important for challenging artists' own perspectives. They push organisations and artists beyond their '*immediate microcosm*', helping them understand different realities, struggles, and systems. This is especially important because many of today's key challenges—climate change, democratic decline, shrinking freedoms, inequality, and conflict—cannot be meaningfully addressed within national borders alone. As one participant noted, these are '*not really national issues, but global ones and we really need to have a global conversation*'.

Another interviewee summarised the broader significance as follows: '*If everything is shrinking, then everybody, of course, looks at their own country, own city, everything will become very provincial*'. Cross-border cultural collaboration is therefore valued not simply as an artistic opportunity, but as a way of resisting that provincialisation—by keeping open the spaces in which people, ideas, and practices can still move across borders. For some, this concerns not only the arts field, but also broader communities. A respondent who undertook a project bringing local traditions across borders together stressed that such collaborations create forms of encounter that are increasingly rare. They make it possible '*to create meeting spaces between normal people and give people a space to talk and to discuss and share*', especially at a moment when '*the walls are being put up everywhere*'.

Yet, no matter how convinced people in the sector are about the value of trans-border cultural collaborations, the overall perspective of the policy and funding landscape is that there are many more barriers to overcome than opportunities to seize. As part of the beneficiary survey, we asked respondents to identify the most significant challenges they face when working across borders. Lack of funding, unsurprisingly, as well as the inadequacy of funding instruments, emerged as the most significant issues. Respondents also highlighted the impact of the nationalistic turn in politics and pointed to long-standing challenges such as mobility constraints and global inequalities (see the graph).

As part of the interviews, we delved deeper into the most pressing needs and gaps experienced by Globus beneficiaries, and the picture that emerged is summarised below.

CHALLENGES FACED BY TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL COLLABORATIONS



1. Stability and continuity

A recurring concern among beneficiaries relates to stability of funding for the arts field. Even established organisations usually struggle to identify funding sources that would allow them to sustain not only innovative initiatives, but also their core activities, beyond a single grant cycle.

For many practitioners, continuity is essential to building trust and reciprocity with their partners based in other parts of the world. In cross-border collaborations—especially between differently resourced regions—long-term engagement was described not only as a 'wish' but as an ethical necessity. Short-term exchange models risk reproducing extractive or symbolic relationships, where one partner benefits disproportionately or engagement remains superficial. Unfortunately, sustainability is likely to be the most acute gap in the current landscape of cross-border cultural practices.

2. Safe and sustainable working conditions

Precarity remains a defining feature of the arts sector. In Europe, many artists and small cultural organisations operate under unstable funding conditions, making long-term planning difficult. The situation in the Global South is even more challenging. The issue of uncertainty does not only concern the size of available budgets, but also the changing conditions under which they are distributed. Projects often require years to build momentum, yet funding priorities may shift before initiatives are fully consolidated.

Additional risks arise when working in politically or socially volatile environments, including war zones or countries with oppressive regimes. Travel restrictions, visa issues, insurance limitations and safety concerns add layers of uncertainty. Beneficiaries emphasised that current global tensions—political polarisation, conflict, border closures, economic instability—are intensifying the precarity of international collaboration.

3. Innovating conventional funding models

Many beneficiaries pointed to structural limitations in conventional funding systems. These often prioritise measurable outputs and short-term deliverables over research-based, experimental or process-oriented artistic work. As a result, projects are frequently evaluated using metrics—such as participant numbers or visible outputs—that fail to capture the value of learning, exchange, value-based dialogue and people-to-people engagement.

International collaboration, particularly involving partners in the Global South, remains underfunded. This undermines the possibility of continuous equitable exchange. Furthermore, beneficiaries observe that funders are becoming increasingly risk-averse, avoiding experimental projects due to concerns about public controversy or perceived failure. This discourages innovation and limits the sector's capacity for experimentation and transformative initiatives.

A related challenge concerns the afterlife of research-based initiatives. As analysis of Globus applications reveals, many bottom-up global projects are

collective inquiries into vital global topics; they often generate valuable and unique artistic or analytical insights, yet dissemination, reflection and further development of findings are rarely supported. Building upon research outcomes of a project—through discussion, translation, or scaling—often requires a separate 'project'. Under prevailing funding logic, however, the emphasis shifts quickly toward producing the next artwork or research output rather than consolidating and expanding the previous one.

4. Global collaboration as a value-based practice

The cultural sector does not simply seek to work across borders under any funding framework; on the contrary, the question of the values and intentions embedded in these frameworks is extremely important. Support for genuinely translocal collaboration remains rare within public funding systems. Funding frameworks often prioritise either local engagement—justified as serving taxpayers—or national cultural diplomacy abroad. Both approaches can overlook the needs of communities connected across borders around shared concerns, inquiries or aspirations.

Beneficiaries stressed the importance of enabling collaborations across regions, not only within the Global North. For many, international cultural work is inseparable from commitments to artistic freedom, justice, equity, sustainability, democratic principles and ethics. As discussed in previous chapters, even if the Fund chose not to promote specific themes within its Globus schemes, these topics have emerged naturally within project proposals.

Openness in grant language, flexibility in partnership structures and respect for locally grounded approaches were identified as key enablers of equitable collaboration. At the same time, beneficiaries expressed the need for clearer frameworks for what *fairness* may mean within partnerships. They need support from funders, such as roadmaps, transparent decision-making tools and safe spaces to raise ethical or sensitive issues. Protocols for addressing conflict and power imbalances were seen as crucial components of sustainable cross-cultural cooperation.

What works in cultural funding: insights from innovative practices

Making cultural funding fit for the world as it stands today is a challenge that has been on the minds of many funders and cultural organisations across Europe. Aspirations guiding the Nordic Culture Fund—such as building trust, shifting from project-based support towards relationship-building approaches, encouraging experimentation, and learning proactively from both funding practices and beneficiary work—are shared by many funders across the continent.

In the course of this study, we spoke with representatives from the European Cultural Foundation, the Prince Claus Fund, QuestionMe&Answer (Vienna) running the QMA Collective, the German Cultural Foundation that has launched a WAYS programme, IETM—International network for contemporary performing arts, coordinating the Perform Europe programme, and the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE), which supported the City of Zurich in developing their Kultur Labor Zürich, an innovation lab for cultural funding.

These initiatives should not necessarily be understood as 'best practices' in the strict sense. Rather, they represent ongoing experiments. While each programme has achieved important progress, their organisers remain conscious of balances and compromises involved in developing more responsive funding models, and they continue to learn and adapt through practice. Let us dive straight away into what we have learned from them.

1. Funder-beneficiary relationship: balancing 'burden' and building trust

For the Prince Claus Fund (box 5), established in 1996 and supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, trust is not an added value layered onto existing funding procedures; it is the organising principle of the whole funding model. As Tessa Giller, Head of Programmes, explains, '*trust has always been a really important part of how we work*'. What changed in recent years was not the commitment to trust itself, but the way it was embedded at different levels of the Fund's work.

Before 2021, the Fund worked more like many other international cultural NGOs: it supported projects through open calls, longer application forms, and conventional monitoring and evaluation systems based on outputs, outcomes, and KPIs. At the same time, however, the Fund already relied on in-depth research in their assessment and evaluation processes. Shortlisted applications were not assessed only based on what they submitted as part of application procedures; they were contextualised through desk research, follow-up questions, and consultations with people in the Fund's international network.

When the Fund adopted its new strategy in 2021, it decided to move away from project logic and redesign its support around what artistic development actually requires and needs the most. The answer, Tessa says, was clear: '*what is crucial to artistic development is experiment and autonomy*'. The Fund therefore removed the usual emphasis on outputs and outcomes and shifted to a more explicitly trust-based model, supporting artists directly and moving away from focusing on their pre-planned trajectories. This change also led to a new architecture of support. The Seed Awards focus on early experimentation, the Fellows Award offers more in-depth mid-career support, and the Impact Award recognises artists at a later stage, just before what Giller describes as 'the stage before lifetime achievement', where recognition can still act as a catalyst. Across these programmes, the emphasis is on supporting people rather than projects.

What makes this approach viable is that the Fund places most of its labour at the front end of the process. Tessa describes it as '*heavy on the front but lighter on the back*'. Instead of rigorous application processes and extensive controls after funding is awarded, the Fund invests in well-grounded and robust selection and due diligence beforehand. This does not only include juries, and desk research, but also what Tessa calls '*second opinion advice*' from trusted contacts in relevant countries and contexts. For an organisation based in the Netherlands but working internationally, this is crucial: it helps ensure that decisions are informed by '*knowledge from the ground and not just what through our lens seems to be a relevant practice*'. This does not only help to assess the profiles of applicants, but also to understand their specific practice within specific realities. '*Quality means different things in different places*', Tessa notes.

This due diligence is particularly important because the Fund operates in contexts where public information is often incomplete, and local knowledge is difficult to fully capture within a jury, even when it is diverse and experienced. Tessa notes that through outreach and cross-checking, the Fund has sometimes discovered serious ethical concerns about highly regarded candidates that would otherwise have been difficult to find through open sources. In this sense, the trust-based model is not a loose model: it is highly selective, but it shifts scrutiny to the stage before the grant is awarded, and the burden—from applicants to the Fund's staff.

Once support is in place, the relationship changes. The Fund does not use monitoring and evaluation to police whether grantees have delivered what they promised in advance. As Tessa puts it, '*if you say you're working trust-based, you also can't be doing checks and balances on what people have done, because then it's not really trust*'. The Fund still conducts interviews and surveys, but rather to learn how its programmes are functioning and how they are perceived

than to monitor beneficiaries' activities. The point is not to audit artists, but to reflect on the quality of the Fund's own support. When asked whether there had ever been concerns that their application and reporting processes might be too loose, Tessa noted that the organisation is continuously reflecting on their approach. Even in rare cases where local networks have reached out to question the allocation of funds to a particular beneficiary, the trust-based model still proves to be fairer for applicants, and the most effective way to deliver what the Fund strives to provide: autonomy and space for experimentation. 'Thus far, the benefits and belief in this way of working significantly outweighs the risks, and as the selection is so in-depth it allows for this looseness', Tessa reflected.

This trust-building mechanism extends across the organisation, and allows for rolling out new relevant instruments without additional checks and balances. For example, their Urgency Programme, providing rapid support to artists in fragile situations, can move quickly because it works with people already in the Fund's network, where the due diligence has effectively happened earlier. The Exchanges programme, which connects Seed Awardees with cultural institutions in the Netherlands, uses short forms and reflection sessions rather than burdensome reporting. Even in everyday interactions, Tessa stresses the importance of mutual trust and of being available to artists and practitioners as human beings, not only as grantees.

Therefore, in its effort to build meaningful and trust-based relationships with its beneficiaries, the Fund developed a funding model that is less bureaucratic for artists, more demanding for the funder at the point of selection, and ultimately more aligned with the realities of artistic practice. Rather than forcing artists to translate their work into development jargon, the Prince Claus Fund has built a system relying on expertise and advice of local experts. In doing so, it offers a strong example of how trust-based cultural funding can be both flexible and rigorous at the same time. At the same time, Tessa pointed out that when allocating funding it is often '*easier to trust individuals than projects*', since projects are by definition prospective initiatives that have not yet generated a track record.

Prince Claus Fund – Trust-Based Funding for Cultural Practitioners Where Culture Is Under Pressure

The Prince Claus Fund, established in 1996 and supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, supports artists, cultural practitioners, and cultural organisations working in contexts where culture and freedom of expression are under pressure, particularly in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. The Fund focuses on socially engaged artistic practices that address urgent social, political, and environmental challenges while strengthening local cultural ecosystems.

One of its core instruments is the Seed Award, which provides small, trust-based grants of €5,000 to around 100 emerging artists and cultural practitioners each year. The award targets early-career practitioners whose work engages with pressing issues in their communities. It enables recipients to experiment, develop new ideas, and strengthen their practice without requiring detailed project proposals or complex reporting procedures.

The Fellows Award is aimed at mid-career practitioners who have already demonstrated a strong socially engaged artistic practice. Each year, up to 50 Fellows are selected to participate in a 12-month programme that combines financial support with mentoring, peer exchange, and international networking opportunities. The programme is designed to accelerate artistic development, foster collaboration among Fellows, and strengthen their ability to generate social impact through cultural work.

The Impact Award recognises established artists and cultural practitioners whose work has made a significant contribution to society. Rather than funding a specific project, the award honours a sustained body of work that has had meaningful cultural, social, or political impact. It aims to increase international visibility for these practitioners and highlight the role of culture in addressing global challenges.

In addition to these awards, the Fund runs complementary programmes that support the longer-term development of its awardees. The Exchanges programme connects Prince Claus

Awardees with cultural institutions and organisations in Amsterdam that can provide residencies, exhibitions, workshops, or other professional opportunities, helping artists expand their networks and visibility.

The Urgency Programme provides rapid support to artists whose work is disrupted by crises such as armed conflict, displacement, natural disasters, or political repression. Through emergency grants and targeted support, the programme enables artists to continue their work in situations where cultural practice is threatened or interrupted.

Read more about the programmes and awards of the Prins Claus Fund:

2. Two-stage funding to build international partnerships

The German Federal Cultural Foundation has a unique mandate at the national level. It promotes contemporary art and culture in Germany and in an international context. It supports cultural organisations to engage in thematic and aesthetic experimentation, enhance their artistic standing and explore new working methods.

The WAYS—Towards Fair and Sustainable International Partnerships programme of the German Federal Cultural Foundation was designed in response to a clear gap in the German cultural landscape. While many organisations already had substantial experience collaborating within Europe, cooperation with non-European partners was far less common. As Cora Hegewald, WAYS Programme Lead explains, such collaborations are often more complex, requiring more time, more effort, '*more really putting yourself into it*'. WAYS was created precisely to make that step possible. It also aimed '*to address a growing demand to organise these partnerships in a more fair and sustainable way. eIn addition to joint artistic work, it is becoming more and more important to engage in an equal dialogue about different expectations, resources and complex decision-making processes*', Cora reflected.

The programme's central aim is, therefore, to encourage German cultural institutions to open themselves more deliberately to non-European and non-Western perspectives. For Cora, this is essential not only from an artistic point of view, but also in relation to contemporary global realities: if cultural organisations are to respond meaningfully to present challenges, they need to work with perspectives that go beyond familiar European frameworks. The programme therefore focuses not on supporting projects that are already well established, but on enabling organisations to try out new international partnerships.

This logic is built into the programme's two-stage funding design. In the first stage, the emphasis is not on immediate production and ready-made concepts for collaborations but on initiation, exploration, and relationship-building. Applicants are encouraged to use this phase to discover potential partners, develop trust, clarify expectations, and define what collaboration might actually look like. The point, as Cora stresses, is that '*the programme is not about*

only projects; it is very deliberately called International Partnerships', because the real objective is to invest in long-lasting relationships that can generate different formats over time, rather than a single pre-defined artistic output.

This first phase is designed to be light and accessible. Applications were kept relatively simple, especially compared to what is required later. The aim was to lower the threshold for organisations that had not yet worked internationally beyond Europe, while still remaining open to more experienced applicants. The programme made a clear distinction: experienced organisations were welcome, but they could not use WAYS simply to continue collaborations that were already well established. The fund wanted to support either entirely new partnerships or the substantial development of existing but less formal contacts.

A key feature of the initiation phase is that it gives partnerships time and resources to prepare the second-stage application together. In this sense, project development and application writing become part of the funded process itself. As Cora notes, the Foundation deliberately changed the design so that partners would jointly write both a Roadmap of Collaboration—to define how they will collaborate in fair and sustainable ways—and the second-stage application, rather than forcing them into a gap between phases. This is especially important in international settings where access to funding and fundraising capacities can be significant. Moreover, through its consultation process—lasting six months and involving 15 international experts from different artistic fields—the Foundation repeatedly heard that working with German institutions can pose bureaucratic challenges for those unfamiliar with the German system. The first phase therefore functions as a buffer: it gives partners the space to understand each other, negotiate expectations, and prepare for the more demanding second stage.

The Roadmap of Collaboration is one of the most important elements within this design. Rather than providing applicants with a fixed definition of what '*fair*' or '*sustainable*' collaboration could mean, the programme asks them to reflect together on guiding questions and articulate their own principles and rules. Applicants can also come up with their own questions—in addition to or replacing the ones provided by the Foundation. For Cora, the process of developing the Roadmap matters more than complying with ready-made, abstract definitions: 'we want to see that they spoke about it, that they negotiated these concepts'. The roadmap is therefore not just an application document for the funder, but a living instrument for the partnership itself, something that can be revisited and revised over time.

This emphasis reflects the programme's broader philosophy. The application process is structured in two stages. The first stage provides time and resources to prepare a strong, fair, and sustainable partnership. Rather than requiring a fully developed project, applicants are invited to outline potential partners and countries, reflect on fairness and sustainability, and sketch ideas for possible future collaborations. This phase is about building relationships and laying the groundwork for long-term cooperation. The second stage builds on this foundation. Partners are expected to submit a jointly developed artistic project—either a four-year collaboration or a two-year working stay including an artistic component. This stage places greater emphasis on co-creation, production, and continued artistic and aesthetic experimentation, as well as on testing models for fair and sustainable partnerships. Accordingly, the application is more detailed and comprehensive than in the first stage. The two-stage model thus creates a progression from exploration to commitment, without forcing partnerships to pretend they are already fully formed at the outset.

This approach is potentially also fair to the arts field, as the first stage itself functions as a space for networking, community-building, and learning. Even if applicants are unable to prepare an application for the second stage or are ultimately unsuccessful, they can still benefit from this platform for exchange—something that is reportedly both lacking and highly valued in the arts sector. At the same time, this strategy helps the funder mitigate risks while offering long-term stability to a smaller number of partnerships, after supporting them through an initial development phase and preparing them for the more demanding application process in the second stage. As the programme has only recently been launched, it will be important to follow its development and assess its outcomes over time

WAYS – Towards Fair and Sustainable International Partnerships programme of Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation)

With its funding programme WAYS, the German Federal Cultural Foundation wants to foster long-term, fair and sustainable artistic collaborations between cultural institutions or independent groups in Germany and partners in non-European regions (notably Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, Oceania, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia). The programme aims to address the complexity of international co-productions and partnerships: beyond joint artistic work, it encourages an open dialogue about expectations, resources, decision-making, and sustainability—including fair distribution of rights and equitable working structures.

WAYS is structured in three funding stages (across two application phases):

— It begins with an Initiation Fund to support research and partner scouting. This stage allows cultural organisations to explore potential collaborators abroad, engage in visits, discussions and workshops, and jointly draft a 'Roadmap of Collaboration' to define fair, shared working conditions. One of the questions guiding the development of this Roadmap is '*How do you plan to compensate for your CO2 footprint resulting from your collaboration? Where might your partnership leave an environmentally friendly and impactful handprint?*'

— From there, successful initiatives may advance to the Fellows-at-Large Fund, which finances two-year fellowships, allowing artists or cultural practitioners from non-European countries to work in Germany, or vice versa, with their partner institutions. A budget for artistic production is included in the working stays. The aim is to develop and test sustainable and equitable cooperation models in practice.

— The most long-term stage is the Tandem Fund, supporting four-year transcontinental partnerships that enable co-curated, jointly developed artistic projects and sustained intercultural exchange under shared, fair and sustainable working practices.

The programme covers a broad array of contemporary art fields—from performing arts, visual arts, and music to literature, architecture, cultural history, and interdisciplinary projects.

Complementing the funds themselves, WAYS includes accompanying measures to promote broader visibility and exchange: this includes planned a series of Academies (knowledge-transfer and networking initiatives for funded organisations) and two global 'World Summits' scheduled for 2028 and 2030, aimed at reflecting on fair global cultural exchange and sharing lessons learned. In total, for the period 2023–2031 the Federal Cultural Foundation has allocated roughly € 27.59 million to support all parts of the WAYS programme.

Read more about the WAYS programme.

3. Funding as a learning and experimental trajectory

Experimenting with New Models of Cultural Funding

When the City of Zurich launched Kultur Labor Zürich (2020–2023) (box 7), the starting point was a simple but urgent question: could the city's cultural funding system still respond to the realities of contemporary artistic practice? According to Claudio Bucher, Research Fellow from the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE) which was a scientific partner of Kultur Labor Zürich, the system had long struggled to keep pace with change. '*In Zurich, the funding system is very slow to react to developments*', he explains, '*Its basic institutional logic and categories still largely reflect a framework that took shape decades ago, designed for a very different cultural landscape.*'

City officials increasingly recognised that their existing instruments were not well adapted to transformations shaping the arts sector—from digitalisation and hybrid artistic practices to migration and demographic change. These concerns led the Department of Culture to launch an experimental innovation lab— Kultur Labor Zürich. The city secured additional funding specifically to test new approaches within public cultural administration. This multi-year innovation laboratory was designed, among other things, to inform the development of the city's Cultural Strategy 2024–2027.

The lab focused on the independent arts scene, where many artists operate outside established institutional structures. One hypothesis was that existing funding mechanisms failed to reach certain practitioners altogether. This was confirmed: for instance, when the lab launched a pilot call focused on digital culture, the results were striking—70 percent of the applicants had never previously applied for funding from the city. For Claudio, this proved that '*there are artists under the radar of the current system*'.

Rather than simply adjusting existing funding programmes or revolutionising the whole funding architecture, Kultur Labor Zürich experimented with rapid prototyping methods, borrowing approaches from design thinking and innovation labs. Small pilot projects were used to test new instruments, decision-making processes, and collaboration formats. Namely, three pilots were implemented—'Creative Tech for Good', 'Community Based' and 'Arts for

Future'. Through these pilots, the lab experimented with two-stage funding, peer-to-peer selection models, a digital platform for citizen participation, a match-making event, thematic calls targeting specific groups or focused on specific topics. The goal was not necessarily to institutionalise each pilot, but to explore the dynamics within the sector, and how the cultural administration itself might work differently.

Although not all experiments led to permanent changes, the lab generated tangible results. New funding formats began to emerge, including working grants for artists that are less tied to specific project outputs. The process also influenced broader debates about recognising new art forms, such as digital culture, within the city's funding framework.

Several experimental pilots pushed the boundaries of conventional cultural policy. One initiative handed funding authority to a POC-led community, which 'took over' Tanzhaus Zürich for two weeks and distributed project funding according to its own criteria, an experiment that successfully reached communities previously absent from the city's funding ecosystem.

For Claudio, the most important outcome was not any single pilot project but the creation of a learning environment within the cultural administration. Innovation labs like this allow institutions to experiment with new funding models and governance practices in ways that would be difficult within normal administrative structures. '*It wasn't only about pilots and thematic calls*', Claudio notes. 'It was also about testing new ways of decision-making inside the department'. For example, the lab experimented with cross-departmental collaboration, bringing together actors from different city departments for the first time around themes such as sustainability, and testing more proactive roles for the cultural administration. In one case, the lab organised a matchmaking event to connect artists, scientists and climate activists from transdisciplinary project teams, an approach common in start-up ecosystems but unusual for public cultural administrations.

The process also triggered smaller cultural shifts within the administration itself. Claudio recalls how some officials began experimenting with new forms of engagement with artists: meeting them informally outside the city building, organising open drop-in sessions, and seeking feedback more directly from

the cultural sector. He observes that, in some ways, the lab served as an educational platform for the administration itself, and that certain learnings might have begun to change how staff perceive and approach specific issues.

Analysing this case, it becomes clear that such one-off experimental interventions are highly valuable, but they could also become a more permanent feature of cultural policy development. Instead of evaluating funding systems only at the end of policy cycles, ongoing innovation labs could bring together administrators, artists, and researchers to continuously test new ideas.

In Claudio's view, this kind of collective learning could help cultural institutions avoid 'reinventing the wheel' and enable funding systems to evolve more dynamically alongside the arts sector, while strengthening bottom-up relationships with the arts community. Such labs could also support knowledge-sharing among funders and enable evidence-based innovation of core funding models without the need for large pilots or frequent overhauls of priorities and funding structures.

Kultur Labor Zürich (2020–2023): An Innovation Lab for Cultural Funding

Kultur Labor Zürich (2020–2023) was a three-year participatory innovation lab initiated by the Department of Culture of the City of Zurich and scientifically supported by the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE). With a budget of approximately CHF 900,000, the initiative aimed to develop, test, and evaluate elements of a future-oriented cultural funding system that could inform the city's Cultural Strategy 2024–2027.

The lab examined whether existing concepts of culture and art, as well as the selection and evaluation practices of cultural funding, remain adequate in light of technological, social, cultural, and ecological transformations. It also addressed potential gaps in cultural support, particularly regarding the representation of social and aesthetic diversity.

Kultur Labor Zürich adopted an interdisciplinary and participatory approach, bringing together stakeholders from different fields. The project team included experts such as a game designer, digital specialist, film composer, diversity expert, and representatives from various cultural departments. Through topic-specific collaborations, the network was further expanded to include external experts, for example from Diversity Arts Culture, a Berlin-based advisory centre on diversity in the cultural sector.

The lab functioned as an experimental field for new governance approaches in cultural funding. Using design thinking and agile working methods, the project developed and tested prototype solutions to public sector challenges. A core team led the process, while the ZCCE provided scientific monitoring and acted as a 'critical friend', contributing ongoing analysis and feedback.

The process included the development and testing of new funding instruments, selection procedures, and criteria, as well as the opening of the funding system to new art forms and open-disciplinary projects, including digital art. Pilot initiatives were also implemented, such as the Community

Based project, which transferred certain funding decision-making capacities to a selected community. In addition, the lab experimented with digital participation platforms and created opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration within the cultural administration.

The project generated insights relevant to the future design of cultural funding systems. It contributed to expanding access to funding for creative practitioners who had previously been underrepresented in the existing system, particularly those working in interdisciplinary or digital fields. The lab also highlighted the importance of cultural participation, the value of pluralistic cultural discourse in a diverse urban society, and the potential role of the arts in addressing broader societal challenges such as climate change.

Kultur Labor Zürich demonstrated how innovation labs can be used within public cultural administration to experiment with new funding approaches. The final report situates the project within the broader context of public-sector innovation labs and analyses its results in relation to funding formats, selection processes, funding criteria, strategic priorities, and communication practices. It also identifies key success factors for implementing similar innovation processes in cultural policy and administration.

Read more about the Kultur Labor Zurich:

The Perform Europe Learning Trajectory: collective learning through innovative practices

One of the key components of Perform Europe (Box 8) is its *Learning Trajectory*, a structured process designed to capture insights from the funded touring partnerships while they experiment with new models of performing arts touring. Rather than treating evaluation as a retrospective exercise, the programme integrates learning directly into project implementation. The objective is not only to monitor results but to generate practical knowledge for the wider performing arts sector, particularly around sustainability, inclusivity, accessibility, and fairer touring practices.

The resources developed within the Perform Europe programme by the research partner, IDEA Consult, reflect the evolution of the initiative from research and experimentation toward collective learning for the performing arts sector. The first set of resources emerged in 2021 during the pilot phase of the programme. At that stage, the consortium produced research reports analysing the conditions of cross-border touring in Europe. These studies were intended to diagnose structural challenges in the sector, such as uneven mobility opportunities, environmental concerns, and barriers for smaller organisations, and to provide an evidence base for designing new touring models. This was necessary in order to develop a truly relevant scheme responding to real gaps in the field. Alongside this analytical work, the programme also began documenting early project experiences in publications that explored how funded partnerships were experimenting with more sustainable and inclusive approaches to touring.

More recently, the programme has focused on consolidating the lessons emerging from the funded projects themselves. The learning process is based on the methodology of Reflexive Monitoring in Action, developed by researchers at DRIFT (Dutch Research Institute for Transitions). This approach focuses on documenting how innovation unfolds in practice, identifying challenges, adjustments, and emerging strategies during the project lifecycle. Each touring partnership designates a 'logkeeper' responsible for recording reflections and developments within the project. To support this work, Perform Europe allocated a small stipend (around €315) to compensate for the additional time required for documentation and reflection.

Alongside this individual reflection process, the Learning Trajectory creates opportunities for collective exchange between projects. Partnerships meet through facilitated workshops and events where they discuss challenges, compare approaches, and reflect on the development of their touring projects. According to Perform Europe coordinators, these encounters proved particularly valuable. Participants repeatedly emphasised that one of the most important outcomes was the opportunity to meet and learn from other projects. As Margherita Petti, Perform Europe's Coordinator shared, '*They met each other, they networked, they learned, they discovered. In several cases, these exchanges led to ongoing collaboration between projects during and after the touring phase*'.

At the same time, feedback from some participants also highlighted the need for the process to become more practice-oriented and accessible. While many appreciated the structured reflection, some felt that the meetings relied heavily on specialised terminology, and prescriptive discussion formats. As a result, coordinators are considering adjustments for future iterations, such as creating smaller thematic peer groups, organising case-based learning sessions, and pairing projects as 'buddies' that can support each other during their touring process.

Overall, the Learning Trajectory aims to create not only project-level insights but also a community of practice among participating organisations. Beyond the financial support provided by the grants, many participants identified this emerging community as the programme's main added value. As one coordinator observed, partnerships increasingly perceive themselves as part of 'a European community that is trying to do something different in the sector'. Several projects have continued collaborating after the programme, developing new applications and initiatives together.

Perform Europe – Reimagining International Touring

Perform Europe is an EU-funded funding and learning programme designed to rethink how performing arts works are toured and distributed across Europe. Funded by the Creative Europe programme, it supports collaborative touring partnerships that experiment with new models of international circulation that are greener, fairer, and more accessible and inclusive.

The initiative is implemented by a consortium of six partners: IETM – International network for contemporary performing arts, the European Festivals Association (EFA), Circostrada, EDN – European Dance Development Network, Pearle* – Live Performance Europe, and IDEA Consult.

Perform Europe was first tested through a pilot phase (2020–2022) with €2.25 million in funding. The pilot supported 19 partnerships involving 85 organisations, allowing artists, producers, and presenters to experiment with alternative touring and distribution models. Following its success, the programme was relaunched for 2023–2026, allocating €2.1 million to at least 35 touring partnerships across the 40 Creative Europe countries. Partnerships must involve at least three organisations from three different countries and tour a performing arts work across multiple locations.

A distinctive feature of Perform Europe is the support provided to applicants and partners in developing their projects. The programme offers a Conversation Starter tool, which provides guidance on designing collaborative touring projects, addressing environmental sustainability, accessibility, audience engagement, and fair working conditions. This toolkit helps applicants rethink traditional touring models and develop innovative project proposals aligned with the programme's priorities.

Another key component is the Learning Trajectory, a structured research and monitoring process led by IDEA Consult. Using a methodology known as *Reflexive Monitoring in Action*, the programme documents insights emerging from funded projects as they test new touring practices. Each partnership designates a learning facilitator who captures challenges, reflections, and lessons

during implementation. These insights are then analysed collectively through workshops and shared with the wider sector.

The learning process aims to generate practical knowledge for the performing arts ecosystem, identifying strategies for sustainable touring, stronger community engagement, more inclusive artistic practices, and fairer organisational models. The findings are disseminated through publications, open sessions, and a final Guidebook for Future Practices, offering recommendations for artists, cultural organisations, and policymakers.

Read more about Perform Europe: and its Learning Trajectory:

WAYS: exploring and advancing the understanding of 'fair' and 'sustainable' in the arts

Beyond its two-stage funding structure, the WAYS programme also treats international cooperation as a learning process—for participating organisations, for the funder, and for the wider cultural sector. The programme is designed to generate knowledge about what sustainable and fair international collaboration can mean in practice.

One of the starting points of the programme was the recognition that there is no universally accepted definition of 'fair' or 'sustainable'. As Cora Hegewald explains, the aim was not to produce abstract concepts but to encourage dialogue between partners. 'We don't want them to define fairness and sustainability in the sense of fixed ideas. We want to see that they negotiated what fair and sustainable means'. What matters is that partners actively discuss questions of responsibility, power relations, and working conditions within their partnership. This negotiation is documented in their Roadmaps of Collaboration, a tool that encourages partners to reflect on what fairness and sustainability mean within their specific context. For the Foundation, this method also provides a way to observe how different interpretations of fair and sustainable cooperation emerge across the arts field and within diverse projects, and to draw conclusions about the trends, tensions, and aspirations shaping the globally connected arts community. Cora explained that WAYS follows the idea that fairness and sustainability are not fixed or universally agreed-upon concepts. The program therefore embraces their multiplicity. It seeks to bring into dialogue a wide range of interpretations rooted in different cultural, geographical, and intellectual traditions, giving equal space to, for example, Indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western perspectives, and acknowledging them as vital to rethinking and reshaping these ideas.

The programme supports this learning process through a structured framework of collective exchange formats. Participants take part in a series of six 'academies', internal gatherings that function as spaces for knowledge transfer, networking, and reflection among the funded organisations. These meetings are curated by the Foundation and designed primarily for the programme's participants, combining peer exchange with input from external experts.

Alongside these internal formats, WAYS also plans to organise two World Summits (2028 and 2030), larger public events that will open the discussion to a wider international community. While the academies focus on learning within the funded cohort, the summits create a platform where practitioners, researchers, and cultural policymakers can collectively explore what international cultural cooperation requires today. The goal is not only to present project outcomes but also to bring together expertise, experiences and perspectives from different parts of the world.

4. Supporting community infrastructures

QM&A Collective: supporting community-building for a more inclusive arts scene

The Question Me&Answer (QMA) Collective programme (box 9) illustrates how cultural funding can support not only artistic production but also the development of community infrastructures within the cultural sector. Instead of focusing solely on artistic outputs, the initiative is designed to create long-term relationships and networks among artists with migrant backgrounds and locals, helping to make Vienna's cultural landscape more diverse.

At the heart of the programme is the idea that meaningful collaboration emerges from trust-based relationships and human bonds rather than transactional networking. Smaranda Krings, QMA Executive Director and Justina Špeirokaitė, Artistic Director, shared that participants frequently describe the network in familial terms, referring to fellow participants as 'siblings' or 'family members'. For the organisers, this reflects the programme's central ambition—to create a context where artists build genuine relationships that continue beyond the programme itself.

The structure of the collective reflects this priority. Each cohort brings together artists who are new to Vienna—migrants and international practitioners—and artists already established in the local scene. Traditionally, participants were paired to collaborate over several months, to produce a joint artwork presented at the end of the programme. However, the organisers stress that the artistic

output is not the central goal of participation. A final artwork is not strictly required, even though it often emerges naturally from the process.

As Smaranda and Justina explained, in practice, while developing relationships is still the primary goal of taking part in the collective, artistic production functions as a productive framework for relationship-building. Artists tend to collaborate and create together anyway, and working toward a tangible result can provide a shared focus that helps participants navigate differences, negotiate roles, and learn how to work together. Challenges, such as misunderstandings or creative disagreements, are not seen as failures but as an important part of the learning process. The key distinction, however, lies in the programme's priorities: community is the goal, while projects are the means. In many cultural funding schemes the logic is reversed, with community building treated as a secondary outcome of project production.

This emphasis on community extends to the careful design of the programme's working environment. The organisers pay close attention to the conditions under which relationships develop, including the physical and social spaces in which artists meet. Many activities take place during collective gatherings or short residencies where participants share space for several days. These environments are intentionally designed to allow people to interact both formally and informally—through discussions, shared meals, small exercises, or simply spending time together.

Physical space plays a crucial role in this approach. The organisers emphasise the importance of meeting in open and comfortable environments that allow participants to step away when needed. For example, residencies often take place in large houses with gardens or outdoor areas where artists can take breaks, rest, or have informal conversations away from the group. Creating such spaces is seen as essential for fostering genuine interaction and trust.

Beyond internal community building, the programme also acts as a mediating platform within Vienna's fragmented cultural ecosystem, which includes multiple overlapping artistic 'bubbles', from alternative spaces to more established commercial galleries and institutions. For many artists—particularly those new to the city—access to these networks can be difficult. QMA therefore actively connects participants to galleries, curators, museums, and professional

organisations, helping them navigate the local cultural infrastructure and enter more established institutional circuits.

The broader philosophy of the programme is captured in its guiding principle of '*heterogeneity as a norm*'. Diversity is not framed as an exceptional feature but as the natural condition of contemporary cultural life. The aim is therefore not to stage encounters between 'local' and 'foreign' artists, but to create situations where people simply meet as practitioners and individuals beyond their existing social or professional circles and free from stereotypical expectations.

Question Me & Answer – Supporting Artistic Integration and Collaboration in Vienna

Question Me & Answer (QMA) is a Vienna-based art initiative run by the association SolidarityPlus that aims to make the city's art scene more diverse, accessible, and inclusive. Founded in 2019, the initiative supports artists—especially those newly arriving in Vienna—by creating opportunities for networking, collaboration, and public visibility. QMA works closely with local cultural institutions and organises programmes, consultations, and events that introduce underrepresented artists to the city's cultural ecosystem while promoting interdisciplinary artistic exchange.

A key initiative of QMA is the QMA Artist Collective, a yearly programme launched in 2019 to support artists who are new to Vienna and help them build professional networks in the city. Selected participants take part in an eight-month collective process that combines artistic collaboration, mentoring, and networking. The programme includes activities such as a mini-residency, regular meetings with curators and cultural professionals, studio visits, museum tours, and peer-review sessions that provide feedback on artistic practices.

A distinctive feature of the programme is its emphasis on collaborative artistic development. Participants work closely with other artists in the collective—often paired across different backgrounds or experiences—to create new works, reflect on their practices, and exchange perspectives. The programme also facilitates access to the local art ecosystem by introducing artists to curators, galleries, and cultural institutions, and by supporting opportunities such as exhibitions or presentations with partner galleries.

Read more about Question Me & Answer (QMA) and the QMA Artist Collective:

Perform Europe: building a community around cross-border experiments

Although Perform Europe is primarily known as a funding programme for innovative models of cross-border touring, one of its most significant contributions lies in its effort to build a community infrastructure around the funded partnerships. The programme has systematically invested in a shared process in which projects can learn from one another, develop common tools, and remain connected beyond the funding period.

A key element in this approach is Perform Europe's *Matchmaking Platform*, an online tool designed to help performing arts professionals and organisations find partners for collaborative projects within the programme. It functions as a dedicated networking space where users can create profiles presenting their work, expertise, and collaboration needs, and browse others using filters such as country, discipline, or thematic focus.

Another tool is Perform Europe's *Conversation Starter*, developed by IDEA Consult. The toolkit is designed to help potential partners meet, reflect, and structure a collaboration before or during proposal development. It can be used by existing partnerships, by organisations who have not yet defined a joint project, or even by people who are only exploring whether they have enough common ground to work together at all. The Conversation Starter is more than an application guide, it is rather a facilitated reflection tool that asks partnerships to identify shared interests, define the change they want to bring about, clarify potential challenges, and test whether they are actually ready to collaborate. In that sense, it already operates as a form of community-building infrastructure: it helps partnerships talk more honestly and concretely about priorities, roles, and expectations before a project begins.

According to Margherita Petti, Perform Europe's Coordinator, the toolkit received strongly positive feedback during the application phase and proved useful well beyond it. Some partnerships continued using it during implementation, and others reused it for applications to other funding schemes. What made it valuable was that it 'challenged people to think about the partnership, not only about the project idea'. Therefore, the tool supports a deeper conversation about collaboration itself, helping to create more durable and reflective working

relationships. It also appears to be a valuable resource beyond the context of Perform Europe, addressing a gap in the broader funding landscape, which is typically focused on project-based collaboration. When such toolkits are provided, they are often tied to specific funding calls rather than supporting broader reflection on long-term collaboration-building.

Perform Europe's broader learning trajectory expanded the community-building logic from individual partnerships to the programme as a whole, facilitating peer-to-peer exchange among projects and partnerships. Many appreciated the moments when they could come together, compare experiences, and discover others exploring similar questions and facing similar challenges. Some participants explicitly said that through the process they had met other projects with whom they would continue to speak during the touring phase and even collaborate afterwards. As Ása Richardsdóttir, IETM's Secretary General and Perform Europe's Board Chair observed, one of the main added values of Perform Europe—apart from the grant itself—was that participants increasingly felt part of '*a European community that is trying to do something different in the arts sector*'.

This emerging sense of community did not happen automatically. It depended on facilitated conversations, structure, and careful design. Coordinators stressed that when gatherings were well moderated, projects felt they had genuinely 'met each other, networked, learned, and discovered'. At the same time, the programme also learned that not every method works equally well for everyone. Long meetings, specialist language, highly orchestrated formats could become barriers, particularly in online settings. This led to a growing awareness that community-building needs to be more practice-based, more flexible, and more attentive to participants' diverse capacities and needs, while also allowing space for their creativity. It is increasingly recognised that communities of practice require open and adaptable processes that they can shape themselves, discovering the unique group dynamics while still working towards a shared objective. Mindful and professional facilitation, by individuals with expertise in the field, is essential.

As a result, Perform Europe is moving toward a more targeted model of peer exchange. Rather than only convening large mixed groups, the coordinators are exploring smaller thematic interactions in which projects working on similar

questions can learn directly from each other. In these groups, projects or people could function almost as 'buddies' for each other during the touring process, allowing participants to compare concrete experiences and produce shared recommendations. The ambition is to integrate these conversations into the programme itself, so that peer exchange is not an extra activity but part of how projects document and develop their work, but in a more tailor-made, flexible and creative way.

5. Collaboration among funders: potentials, limits, and strategic implications

A recurring theme across interviews is that stronger collaboration among cultural funders is both necessary and difficult. There is broad recognition that many of the challenges facing international cultural cooperation—fragmented support, short-term funding, duplication of efforts, lack of structured change, and the vulnerability of transnational work in times of political retrenchment—cannot be addressed by individual foundations acting alone. At the same time, collaboration among funders is constrained by differences in mandate, scale, legal framework, geography, and institutional culture. The result is a field in which cooperation is widely valued, but still uneven, selective, and often under-structured.

1. Why collaboration among funders matters

At a time when overall support for culture is shrinking and rapid change is destabilising both cultural practices and established funding patterns, many funders are urgently seeking more strategic approaches—investing resources in ways that can generate ripple effects, address real gaps, and better equip the sector to navigate contemporary instabilities.

Answering the key question of how a fund can become more strategic in the way it supports the sector requires a holistic understanding of the evolving landscape, and such understanding is best developed collectively.

Many foundations and public funders operate in parallel, often supporting related themes or constituencies without sufficient awareness of each other's priorities, methods, or blind spots. This creates the well-known situations of 'reinventing the wheel', but also missed opportunities. Better coordination could help funders identify real fractures in the ecosystem, align support across different stages of artistic and organisational development, and provide more continuity for initiatives that otherwise fall between funding schemes.

This is especially relevant for international and transnational work, which requires space for experimentation, risk-taking and open-ended approaches. Innovative funding programmes may support the emergence of new partnerships, but these partnerships often face barriers when they try to continue after the grant ends and encounter more conventional funding systems. In this sense, nowadays, the problem is not only the quality of individual funding programmes, but the lack of follow-through across the wider funding landscape. Collaboration among funders is therefore important for building pathways through which promising work can continue.

2. Forms of collaboration: from informal alignment to joint structures

Several different models of inter-funder collaboration were discussed with interviewees, each with distinct strengths and limitations.

A first level is informal coordination and exchange, where funders share information, compare experiences, or learn from each other's methods. This can already be valuable, particularly for understanding sector dynamics, testing new approaches, and reducing duplication. In practice, personal relationships often play an important role here, sometimes more than formal platforms.

A second level is aligned or pooled funding, where multiple organisations contribute resources to support a common programme focused on a specific theme, region, or target group. This can increase scale, distribute risk, and connect different networks. It is particularly useful where no single funder can cover the full ambition of an initiative, and when each partner can contribute with a specific asset: a well-established network in a specific region, proven infrastructure for administering specific grants, solid outreach channels, etc.

A third level consists of joint strategic platforms, where collaboration extends beyond co-funding to include shared learning, research, awareness-raising, discourse framing, and advocacy. Such platforms respond to a broader need in the funding landscape not only to better understand the context, but also to proactively shape it beyond individual funding instruments. They can take both long-term, institutionalised forms—such as networks, membership organisations, co-funded think tanks, or other knowledge platforms—as well as more temporary, one-off initiatives created for specific purposes.

3. The main obstacles to collaboration

Despite the appeal of collaboration, several structural limits need to be considered.

The first is legal and institutional constraint. Not all foundations are equally able to engage in advocacy, experimentation, or politically sensitive work. Private foundations may be bound by charity law or internal mandates that make explicit political positioning difficult. Public funders are often constrained by transparency requirements, administrative frameworks, and accountability rules that limit flexibility. As a result, even when funders share concerns, they may not be equally able to act on them.

The second is resource asymmetry. Collaboration is often described as efficient, but in practice it can require substantial extra work. Joint programmes, decentralised partnerships, and regional collaborations all demand time, relationship management, and administrative capacity. This is particularly true when working with under-resourced partners, where 'partnership' cannot realistically mean equal financial contribution. Collaboration is therefore not a low-cost solution; it often requires dedicated staff and sustained coordination.

The third is pressure on core programming. As one of interviewees shared, in periods of financial contraction, institutions tend to retreat to their own mandates and priority activities. Joint programmes are often among the first to become vulnerable, not because they lack value, but because collaboration is harder to maintain when each organisation is under pressure to justify and protect its own budget. This makes collaborative ecosystems fragile precisely at the moment when they may be most needed.

4. Collaborative advocacy: an increasingly necessary arena

A particularly important but underdeveloped area is collective advocacy. Many interviewees suggest that the field may have overestimated its ability to transform the wider landscape through isolated pilot programmes or exemplary practice alone. If international cultural cooperation is to remain viable, funders may need to do more than exchange learning internally; they may need to communicate the value of this work outward, in forms that matter to decision-makers.

This implies a shift from documenting projects for the sector to translating their significance into policy language that can speak to governments, cities, regions, and other funding bodies. The issue is not simply sharing what they have learned from their own experiments—even if this is crucial and does not happen enough, but making visible what is at stake when support for international cultural collaboration or for culture in general shrinks. In this sense, collaboration among funders may need to become more political—not always through lobbying in a narrow sense, but through coordinated efforts to defend the public value of cultural exchange, artistic freedom, and long-term transnational cooperation.

At the same time, such advocacy is complicated by the uneven ability of funders to act politically. This makes alliances particularly important: even if not every institution can take the same role, coordinated action can allow different actors to contribute in complementary ways. Examples discussed in the interviews suggest that such platforms can be promising, but also difficult to sustain across national regulations, institutional mandates, and uneven capacities. Collaboration becomes even more demanding when it aims not only to pool funding, but also to shape discourse or influence policy.

However, when specific topics of shared interest are identified, funders can develop targeted collaborations to advance critical debates at both societal and policy levels. Advocacy can take many forms. Promoting ongoing debate through research and public conversations, without directly engaging policymakers, can be just as impactful. Similarly, even an informal partnership of several funds around a specific issue—be it global cultural collaborations, climate, equity, or Indigenous rights—without a fully defined plan, can generate visibility:

simply aligning around a topic and communicating it publicly can help shape discourse and bring it onto the radar of wider audiences.

5. Collaboration as knowledge infrastructure

One of the insights emerging from the interviews is that collaboration among funders should be understood not only in financial terms but also as a form of knowledge infrastructure. If funders are to collaborate meaningfully, they need a better collective understanding of the contexts in which they intervene: where the real gaps are, what barriers partnerships may face, how certain policy trends affect the sector, and what unintended effects particular narratives may produce.

This is especially important when several funders align around a specific theme, such as sustainability, social engagement, inclusion, international cultural collaboration, art and health, or art in rural areas. A joint action that brings together multiple funders—their resources, influence, and visibility—in one of these areas would not only distribute funding; it would also elevate certain priorities in public discourse, legitimise particular vocabularies, and shape narratives about the role of artists.

For this reason, collaboration should be grounded in evidence, evaluation, and contextual analysis, rather than solely in a shared commitment to a topic. It is therefore important to ask: what kind of discourse will our action generate, and how will it influence the field beyond financial contributions?

6. The importance of diversity in the funding ecosystem

Importantly, stronger coordination should not be confused with consolidation. Several reflections point to the importance of maintaining a diverse ecosystem of funders. Different organisations serve different functions: some can take risks, some can scale, some can work locally, some can act internationally, some can provide emergency support, and some can create longer-term infrastructures. Over-centralisation would risk reducing this plurality and narrowing the kinds of practices that can be supported.

Moreover, pooled funding can dilute conceptual sharpness if partners enter with different goals, reporting cultures, and risk-taking capacity. As one interlocutor with experience in inter-funder collaborations noted, ‘it is often in these joint programmes that the boldest and most courageous aspirations of funders are dampened, as they are compelled to seek common ground with others.’ This is not to suggest that collaboration should be abandoned for this reason. However, if the goal of collaboration is to innovate and push boundaries, it is essential to carefully select partners and to ensure that key conversations take place before the programme is designed.

The challenge, then, is not to create a single unified funding logic, but to improve the relationship between diversity and coherence. A healthy funding ecosystem needs both: enough diversity to support a wide range of cultural practices, and enough coordination to avoid fragmentation, high rates of discontinuation of projects, and unnecessary duplication.

Supporting culture in a fractured world: nine pathways forward

The realities described throughout this report suggest that supporting culture today requires more than adapting existing funding tools. Cross-border collaboration unfolds in a world marked by geopolitical fragmentation, shrinking resources, rising inequality, environmental urgency, and growing pressures on democratic life. In this context, cultural funding is not only about enabling artistic production, but about sustaining spaces for dialogue, imagination, and collective learning across borders. The following pathways do not propose prescriptive solutions, but outline directions emerging from the Globus experience, captured in Volume 1—Learning from the Globus Experiment, and broader sectoral developments. They point toward a funding ecology capable of supporting culture in a fractured world.

1. Cross-border cultural collaboration as a shared global infrastructure

As borders harden and resources shrink, cross-border cultural collaboration increasingly functions as one of the few remaining spaces for sustained human-to-human connection across contexts. These collaborations are not only about mobility, visibility, or circulation of finished works. They also operate as collective inquiries into shared global challenges—climate crisis, inequality, polarisation, conflict—while remaining rooted in specific local realities.

There is a need for cultural collaborations that connect places facing related conditions, enabling comparative learning and shared experimentation. They can create infrastructures of trust, knowledge, and solidarity that often outlast individual projects. In this sense, cross-border collaboration becomes less an exchange of content and more the building of shared space for plurality, dialogue, connection. If we believe the world has a future beyond the current polycrisis reality, we must also imagine it—together. Supporting these processes is not only a matter of international engagement, but of sustaining the global conversation itself.

2. From cultural diplomacy to bottom-up translocality

A global conversation about our shared future should not involve only governments and political leaders; it should also belong to communities. Traditional models of international cultural relations have often been shaped by cultural diplomacy, emphasising representation, promotion, and soft power—implicitly assuming that the global conversation about the future of the world is defined by national governments. The practices observed through Globus suggest a shift toward bottom-up translocal collaboration—sustained relationships between specific places and communities rather than exchanges between nations.

Translocality connects local contexts across borders, allowing communities to engage with shared concerns while respecting differences. It moves collaboration from symbolic exchange toward co-production of knowledge, methods, and infrastructures. In this model, international collaboration becomes an extension of cultural participation and cultural democracy, linking local engagement with global dialogue.

This shift also repositions funders: rather than defining themes or narratives, they create conditions for practitioners to identify what matters in their contexts. Relevance emerges from practice rather than being prescribed.

3. Learning from funding experiments as an ongoing practice

Supporting culture in a rapidly changing world requires funding structures that learn continuously. The Globus experience suggests that funding itself can function as a site of research—generating knowledge about collaboration, fairness, sustainability, and impact.

This perspective implies a shift from one-off programme innovation toward ongoing reflection embedded in funding practice. Core programmes can coexist with spaces for experimentation, allowing learning to inform gradual evolution rather than constant reinvention. Dialogue with practitioners, analysis of funded projects, and exchange with other funders become part of funding itself.

In this sense, funding is not only a mechanism for distributing resources, but also a process of collective inquiry into how cultural collaboration unfolds. These inquiries can be undertaken by funders collectively, across borders.

4. Practising trust in funding relationships

Cross-border collaboration unfolds in conditions of uncertainty. Partnerships evolve, contexts shift, and outcomes cannot always be predicted. Funding models that rely on rigid planning and predefined deliverables can therefore limit meaningful collaboration.

Trust-based funding acknowledges uncertainty as a condition of artistic work rather than a failure of planning. Flexible timelines, open-ended trajectories, and lighter reporting structures can enable experimentation, iteration, and adaptation. Practising trust therefore involves balancing flexibility with accountability, while recognising that deviation, learning, and even partial failure may generate valuable knowledge. Such approaches shift the relationship between funder and beneficiary from transactional to relational.

Trust, however, is reciprocal. Just as funders must trust beneficiaries' capacity to use resources responsibly, beneficiaries need a sense of continuity and confidence that their efforts can extend beyond a single grant. Such trust becomes meaningful when funding landscapes are aligned in ways that allow relationships, knowledge, and collaborative trajectories to develop over time.

5. Collaboration among funders as structural change

Innovation within a single funding programme rarely transforms the wider system. Practices piloted in experimental schemes often struggle to continue once projects return to conventional funding environments. This suggests that lasting change depends on broader coordination among funders. Ultimately, collaboration among funders can help move innovative practices from exceptions to shared standards.

Collaboration between funders can take multiple forms: shared learning, co-financing, coordinated calls, or exchange of contextual knowledge. Such collaboration can reduce fragmentation, strengthen continuity, and support more sustainable cross-border practices. At the same time, alignment should not flatten diversity of approaches. A plural funding ecosystem remains essential.

6. Rethinking regionality as self-transformation, not as self-positioning

Globus suggests that regional relevance is not a fixed identity but a shifting position shaped through global engagement. The Nordic region, within the programme, appeared less as a model to export and more as one context among many, in a collective endeavor to address globally relevant matters. The Nordic region, in these projects, appeared simultaneously as a supporter and a learner.

This perspective shifts regional cultural policy from self-positioning toward self-transformation. Regional identity emerges through collaboration, responsibility, and openness to change. Such an approach allows regions to engage globally without reinforcing hierarchical narratives.

More broadly, this lens offers a reflection for Europe as a whole: relevance in a changing world may lie not in asserting identity, but in continuously shaping one's role within global interdependence, while remaining true to its values.

7. Artistic freedom, autonomy, and experimentation

Artistic autonomy remains a core condition for cultural life. In contexts of rising polarisation, democratic erosion, and increasing pressure on cultural institutions, safeguarding artistic freedom becomes both more urgent and more complex.

Cross-border collaboration can create spaces where experimentation, disagreement, and critical reflection remain possible. At the same time, artistic freedom requires infrastructures—networks of solidarity, legal support, safe spaces for dialogue, and shared awareness of emerging pressures.

Supporting artistic freedom also involves accepting risk. Projects engaging contested issues may generate friction. Cultural funding can help create environments where such complexity is not avoided but navigated constructively.

8. Fairness as relational practice

Fair practice has become a central expectation across the cultural sector. Yet fairness in cross-border collaboration cannot be defined through fixed standards. Economic contexts, resources, and working conditions vary widely.

Fairness therefore emerges as a relational process: negotiation, transparency, and mutual understanding within partnerships. Time for relationship-building, clarity of roles, and shared decision-making become essential conditions.

At the same time, fair practice unfolds amid shrinking resources. Improving working conditions requires investment. Without structural support, commitments to fairness risk remaining symbolic. Supporting fairness may therefore involve slower production rhythms, longer-term collaboration, and trust-based funding. It also requires an active role of the funder in facilitating dialogues and agreements within the cultural field and advocacy towards wider systems defining working conditions.

9. Ecological sustainability beyond compliance

Ecological sustainability is increasingly embedded in cultural policy, yet often framed through compliance requirements. The practices observed suggest a broader perspective: culture can contribute to reimagining sustainability itself.

Cross-border collaboration enables exchange of ecological knowledge, including Indigenous and community-based perspectives. It can also encourage slower production cycles, locally rooted collaboration, and reduced reliance on hyper-mobility.

Sustainability in cultural funding may therefore involve not only reducing environmental impact, but reshaping working rhythms, values, and infrastructures. Dedicated resources, realistic timelines, and attention to climate justice become key considerations.

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