

Unveiling the sustainability landscape in cultural organizations: A global benchmark

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Are museums, theaters, and opera houses truly walking the talk when it comes to social and environmental sustainability? The University of Lausanne (UNIL) delved into this pressing question, conducting an

international survey with over 200 major cultural organizations. The verdict? While there's significant room for improvement across the spectrum, Anglophone countries lead the charge.

Cultural organizations, with their wide-reaching influence and power to shape narratives and imaginations, are poised to be trailblazers in championing sustainability causes. Recognizing this pivotal role, researchers from UNIL's Department of Geography and Sustainability initiated a comprehensive international survey to assess progress in the realms of social and environmental sustainability.

This global benchmark survey was answered by 206 leading museums, theaters, and opera houses on every continent. Respondents answered questions on diverse criteria, ranging from the inclusiveness and well-being of employees ([social aspects](#)) to waste management, [energy consumption](#), catering practices, and carbon impact (environmental considerations).

[Published](#) in the journal *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, the results underscore a collective need for improvement, with 60% of respondents integrating sustainability into their strategies only in the last five years or less.

On average, cultural organizations obtained only 37 out of 100 possible points in the sustainability score, doing better on social sustainability than on environmental sustainability. UNIL professor Martin Müller, spearheading the research, notes a gap between declarations and implementation.

Sustainability champions: A global strategy, a dedicated team and cross-functionality

However, amidst the challenges, the study unveils sustainability champions, 14 in all. A correlation emerges between social and [environmental sustainability](#), emphasizing that those excelling in one area tend also to shine in the other.

The top 14 cultural organizations feature notable Anglophone organizations like the National Galleries of Scotland and the Sydney Opera House. The study guaranteed the anonymity of the participating institutions, so only the top performers who gave their explicit consent are mentioned. ([see the results](#))

What sets the top-ranking organizations apart is their integration of sustainability into overall strategy and the establishment of dedicated internal groups, so-called green teams, that drive coordinated actions. National contexts and political decisions further influence these endeavors.

In England, for instance, publicly funded organizations must report on sustainability, adding an extra layer of accountability, according to co-author Julie Grieshaber.

"We're incredibly proud," says Anne Lyden, Director General of the National Galleries of Scotland, the most sustainable museum in the study. "We actively support Scotland's aim to reach net-zero before 2045, cutting our carbon footprint by 60% between 2008 and 2022," she adds. "We understand how important it is to play our part in making a more sustainable future, not just for Scotland but the world."

Louise Herron, CEO of the Sydney Opera House (first-ranked organization in the study), says, "Sustainability has been part of the Opera House's DNA since the beginning and over recent years, we've been focused on bringing together our efforts to drive social and environmental change, embedding sustainability into our organizational

strategy and making it part of everyone's daily lives."

"These are urgent challenges that we're facing, which can only be tackled through coordinated action and as cultural organizations we have a tremendous opportunity to inspire others and bring about change together."

Looking ahead, the UNIL researchers aim to extend their impact. Plans include forging a global alliance of cultural organizations committed to sustainability and introducing a label to structure these efforts effectively. Professor Martin Müller, securing substantial funding for a program to promote practical innovation based on scientific research, is poised to be at the forefront of this transformative journey. The future promises not just academic analysis but a concrete path towards a sustainable cultural landscape.

Survey methodology

Questionnaires were completed by 206 organizations from all continents. The data was analyzed according to a model comprising three areas: governance (commitment, strategy, implementation, transparency); social (integrity, partnerships, urban integration, community, access, diversity & inclusion, employee well-being, learning & inspiration); and environmental (climate, biodiversity, water, waste, energy, mobility & transport, food & beverage, supply chain).

The organizations included in the survey were selected according to criteria such as their importance to the sector (based on a body of literature), their attractiveness (number of visitors) and the costs invested in their development. The idea was to select deliberately large organizations as the major players in the field.

More information: Martin Müller et al, How sustainable are cultural

organizations? A global benchmark, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/15487733.2024.2312660](https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2024.2312660)

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