Cultural Sustainability

in Danish Community Health Centres

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Abstract

This publication aims to conceptualise the relatively new notion of 'cultural sustainability' within the context of health and healthcare. The book further examines whether—and if so, how—the concept of cultural sustainability can be translated into practice within the healthcare sector. First, the emergence of the concept of cultural sustainability within the broader sustainability discourse is outlined. Next, cultural sustainability is discussed in relation to the three conventional pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Finally, the study analyses how elements of cultural sustainability manifest and are operationalised within the healthcare system, drawing on empirical evidence from the Danish healthcare sector.

Through semi-structured interviews with regional and municipal stakeholders working in Community Health Centres, the study explores various dimensions of cultural sustainability. The research investigates the nature of culture in healthcare practices, with particular attention to interdisciplinary collaboration, teamwork, and organisational coherence. The analysis underscores the importance of clear communication, role clarification, and a shared understanding of organisational culture as foundational to cultural sustainability. Moreover, the study examines individual and group identities within healthcare organisations, highlighting their contributions to the development of a cohesive cultural framework. The findings reveal the cross-contextual significance of cultural sustainability, demonstrating its impact across multiple domains of the healthcare system. In addition, the study explores the relevance of cultural sustainability in both municipal and regional contexts, emphasising its role in shaping workplace environments and shared norms and values. Ultimately, the research highlights the interplay between culture and sustain-

ability, underscoring culture's role in promoting quality of care and organisational coherence within the Danish healthcare sector.[1]

Keywords: Cultural Sustainability, Danish Healthcare Sector, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Organisational Culture, Healthcare Quality, Community Health Centres.

Introduction

"The relationship between culture and development should be clarified and deepened in constructive and practical ways."

UNESCO: Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996

The Danish healthcare system faces a range of challenges arising from, among other factors, demographic shifts, political pressures, and a growing burden of chronic illnesses in an ageing population (Jønsson & Brodersen, 2022; Lyngsø et al., 2016). As a result, the development of innovative solutions has become essential. One such solution has been the establishment of collaborative efforts between municipalities and regions in the form of cross-sectoral Community Health Centres (CHCs), which link the two sectors (Lauridsen, 2011; Region Hovedstaden, 2016, 2020) (see Figure 1). The stated aim of these centres is often to enable various stakeholders to adopt a holistic approach to the individual patient (Møller & Elmholdt, 2018; Region Hovedstaden, 2016). Between 2009 and 2015, a number of CHCs were established across the country, facilitating collaboration between regions and municipalities on healthcare services located geographically closer to citizens (Region Hovedstaden, 2020; Region Syddanmark, n.d.).

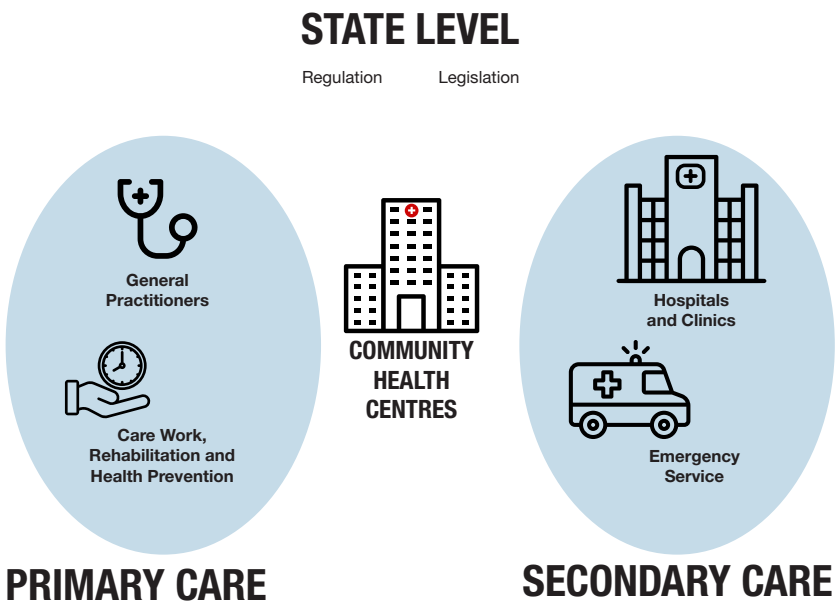


Figure 1: Community Health Centres (CHCs) in the Danish health-care system

Denmark has a total of 36 cross-sectoral CHCs nationwide (Region Hovedstaden, 2016). This study investigates these centres through interviews with municipal representatives from 10 CHCs, one digital community hospital (a complementary governmental initiative aimed at relocating healthcare services closer to citizens), three regional offices, and one General Practitioner (GP). Through this approach, the study seeks to identify emerging trends and insights that reflect the evolving landscape of culturally sustainable healthcare practices. CHCs are often located in towns that previously hosted hospitals and are frequently established in repurposed former hospital buildings; this applies to seven of the CHCs included in the study. Most municipalities have established health prevention and rehabilitation centres that offer nursing care and home visits, while the regions typically provide blood

testing, X-rays, and small, routine outpatient units associated with the CHCs (Region Hovedstaden, 2016).

Traditionally, sustainability discussions have focused on the three pillars of environmental, social, and economic sustainability, a framework that has remained dominant for an extended period (Jelsøe et al., 2018; Skovrup & Pedersen, 2025; Skovrup, 2025). However, a noteworthy shift has occurred in recent years with the emergence of a fourth pillar: cultural sustainability. This concept has gained considerable traction, particularly in heritage and conservation research, and is now also being applied in healthcare (e.g. Ali & Faruquie, 2016; Irving & Hoffman, 2012; Rawiworrakul, Triumchaisri, & Mawn, 2010). Despite sustainability research's predominant focus on the environmental and economic dimensions, it is valuable to explore how this fourth pillar of cultural sustainability relates to and can be operationalised within the healthcare sector, as well as the potential implications it may hold for the healthcare system. This shift in focus reflects a growing recognition of the need to address cultural sustainability more comprehensively within healthcare and to examine how it interacts with and complements existing sustainability dimensions.

The sustainable transition is arguably the most far-reaching political process taking place in Denmark and globally in recent decades (Løkka, 2023). Moreover, there is increasing concern regarding how this societal-wide transition will affect various sectors. The prevalence and growing prominence of sustainability as a concept in scientific discourse can be illustrated, among other indicators, by the volume of scholarly publications addressing the topic. For example, more than 2.5 million publications indexed by Google Scholar include the terms 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development'. Nevertheless, empirical and theoretical studies on the sustainable transformation of sectors such as healthcare and related thematic areas remain notably scarce.

Literature Review

"Sustainability is here to stay, or we may not be."
Niall FitzGeral

Cultural sustainability has been conceptualised and applied across a wide range of domains, including heritage, urban and rural planning, tourism, education and learning, architecture, the arts (e.g. music and theatre), cultural studies and folklore, design (craft and fashion), and geography.[2] For example, Hawkes (2001) introduced the term cultural sustainability as a "fourth pillar" of sustainability in the context of local planning; Throsby (2017) discussed the concept from a cultural economy perspective, assessing cultural production and value in light of the broader principles of sustainability; and Duxbury and Gillette (2007) examined cultural sustainability through the lens of community development. To mention a few examples.

Cultural sustainability—often in conjunction with social sustainability—has also been addressed in relation to health and healthcare. Research in this area has focused on, among other topics, health challenges and equity in relation to cultural meaning and background (Hernández et al., 2017); the relationship between culturally significant heritage sites and healing environments, examining how these settings can imbue culturally significant buildings with new meanings (Jeong, 2019); and the preservation of heritage buildings and urban environments, as well as the understanding of dietary culture (Medina & Sole-Sedeno, 2023).

In relation to the focus of this publication, however, the following studies are particularly relevant and interesting:[3]

Rawiworrakul, Triumchaisri and Mawn (2010) investigate the concept of sustainability in the context of public health challenges through a case study conducted in Thailand. They

explicitly employ the term cultural sustainability and argue strongly for the role of culture in defining and addressing public health sustainability challenges. They conclude that an evolving ecological model—one that recognises cultural, social, and behavioural influences on the sustainability of a healthy environment—is urgently needed. Ramirez, West, and Constell (2013) analyse the concept of sustainability within healthcare organisations, focusing on managerial competencies and change management strategies required to foster a culture of sustainability. Their findings suggest that healthcare managers who adopt holistic sustainability frameworks represent innovative and practical approaches to quality improvement in healthcare organisations. Irving and Hoffman (2012) examine the use of Augmented Reality as a pedagogical tool to support the cultural sustainability of Aboriginal culture within a Health Science Faculty course, concluding that culture plays an important role in health and that cultural sustainability has significant implications for the health and well-being of Australian Indigenous peoples.

Angeli et al. (2018) investigate the determinants influencing *Bottom-of-the-Pyramid* patients' choice between public and private hospitals in Indian slum contexts, in an effort to examine the socio-cultural acceptability of current models of private healthcare delivery. Their findings indicate that the development of successful business models for inclusive healthcare delivery in resource-constrained areas must adopt co-creation approaches that integrate patients' insights, values, and beliefs at an early stage as essential foundations for decisions regarding value propositions and delivery mechanisms. Finally, Ali and Faruquie (2016) explore the importance of social and cultural sustainability in relation to total health, demonstrating, among other findings, that both aspects are essential for understanding the relationship between inhabitants' health and their built environments.

We return to some of these studies in greater detail below in the section on cultural sustainability in the health sector.

Thus, while cultural sustainability has been widely addressed across multiple disciplines—and to a more limited extent within healthcare—few studies, to the best of our knowledge, explicitly engage with the concept of cultural sustainability in relation to health and the healthcare sector at both theoretical and empirical levels. It is within this theoretical, analytical and empirical gap that the present study positions its scientific contribution.

Problem Statement

> *"The most sustainable way is to not make things. The second most sustainable way is to make something very useful, to solve a problem that hasn't been solved."*
>
> *Thomas Sigsgaard*

The above considerations can be translated into the following problem statement:

Can the concept of 'cultural sustainability' meaningfully contribute to the understanding, implementation, and further development of sustainability within the domains of health, healthcare, and the healthcare sector, and, if so, how—i.e., in what ways, from what perspectives, and to what extent—might it enrich and inform healthcare practices and systems?

Conceptually, the question is twofold. The term 'can' here poses the overarching, investigative, and exploratory question of whether cultural sustainability can, in fact, be applied within—and contribute to—the domains of health and the healthcare sector, while—if the first part of the question is answered affirmatively—'how … can' addresses the ways in which the concept can contribute, both substantively and qualitatively, to health, healthcare, and the healthcare systems.

The answer to this research question can be broken down into the following five sub-questions:

- How can we understand and define foundational concepts such as culture and sustainability in the context of working with cultural sustainability?

- What role does culture play in sustainability and the broader sustainability discourse, and how can cultural sustainability be conceptualised within the overall sustainability framework?

- How can cultural sustainability be understood and defined—particularly in relation to social sustainability?

- How has cultural sustainability within the healthcare system been addressed and described in the scientific literature?

- Are there traces of the concept of cultural sustainability in the discourse on sustainability in the healthcare sector—i.e., in their descriptions of and attitudes towards sustainability; or in other words, do healthcare professionals articulate perspectives that may be described, interpreted, or understood as cultural sustainability?

The following sections will be devoted to addressing these five sub-questions in turn, while the discussion and conclusion will respond to the overall problem statement.

Fundamental Concepts: Culture, Sustainability, and Sustainable Development

> *"Culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterizes a society or a group. It includes creative expressions, community practices and material or built forms."*
>
> *UNESCO: Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996*

Below, we will examine the relationship between sustainability and culture—or, more precisely, we will describe the concept of cultural sustainability within the broader historical context of the sustainability discourse. However, since both the concept of culture and the concept of sustainability—including the closely related notion of sustainable development—are, as we will see, complex, multidisciplinary, contested, and dynamic concepts (Dessein et al., 2015), it is necessary to first define these foundational terms.

Culture. The English cultural analyst Raymond Williams is well known for observing that "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (Williams, 2015). By that, he means that the term has come to be used in a wide range of senses across multiple intellectual disciplines and often within incompatible theoretical frameworks. Williams identifies three primary contemporary uses of the term *culture*: i) "…a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development", ii) "…a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general", and iii) "…the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (Williams, 2015; cf. also Ali & Faruquie, 2016). Williams acknowledges a degree of con-

ceptual kinship between i) and iii), in that iii) can be seen as an applied form of i).

In the context of this publication, and for the sake of clarity and simplicity, we will operate with two primary understandings of the concept of *culture*: 1) the narrow humanistic or aesthetic interpretation, referring to the works and practices of artistic activity, as well as the general process of intellectual or aesthetic development and its outcomes—including the arts, heritage, creativity, and the creative industries; and 2) the broader anthropological interpretation, referring to the total and distinctive 'way of life' of a group, team, organisation, or society. This lifestyle-based understanding encompasses all domains of human life, including connotations such as collectively shared meanings, values, customs, traditions, norms, understandings, attitudes, practices, identities and so forth (see also Dessein et al., 2015; Soini & Birkeland, 2014; Ali & Faruquie, 2016; Christensen, 2023). Hannes Palang offers the following definition of culture, which primarily reflects the broad anthropological perspective:

> "We define culture as a loosely integrated totality of practices, institutions and mechanisms that deal with the production, distribution, consumption and preservation of collectively shared meanings, as well as the explicit and implicit rules that govern the relevant processes. The cultural system is only relatively organised and embraces the tensions and internal contradictions of the social and spatial world, in which it appears …" (cited from Dessein et al., 2015)

We will adopt this understanding and definition of the concept of *culture* in the present publication.

Sustainability. 'Sustainability' and the related concept of 'sustainable development' are also notoriously fluid and contested terms, and extensive debate has taken place regarding their practical meanings.

Numerous definitions of both sustainability and sustainable development exist; in other words, there is no single definition that applies universally across contexts, as noted by Dessein et al. (2015). The meaning of the concept varies according to the dominant theoretical and philosophical paradigms of the stakeholders involved (Rawiworrakul et al., 2010). Fullan (2015) suggests that sustainable development is "the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose". Similarly, Blackburn (2007) proposes that the meaning of sustainability can be encapsulated by the "2Rs": "Resources: the wise use and management of economic and natural resources", and "Respect: respect for people and other living things". These examples illustrate the conceptual diversity that characterises the sustainability discourse (cf. also Rawiworrakul et al., 2010).

Likewise, the concept has been subject to considerable criticism. Isar (2017), for example, points out that "the term [sustainability, Eds.] has been pulled in various directions", due to the differing emphasis placed on the individual pillars. This divergence, Isar argues, is largely "responsible for making the term so elusive and analytical inadequate" (Isar, 2017).

Although the concept has thus been the target of substantial criticism, its relevance has nonetheless been maintained. It remains one of the most widespread, influential, and agenda-setting concepts in both politics and science in recent decades (Soini & Birkeland, 2014).

In the context of this publication, we will take as our starting point the Brundtland Report's original and now widely cited definition, which defines 'sustainable development' as

"… development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987a). It is worth noting in this initial defining context that, regardless of discipline or application, most definitions of sustainability include, to some extent, a core focus on what are in some contexts referred to as the *three Es*—namely, Environment, Economy, and Equity (Rawiworrakul et al., 2010).

A brief remark must also be made regarding the two concepts 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development'. The terms are often used synonymously and interchangeably across a range of contexts. In some instances, however, the concepts carry subtle nuances or differences in meaning. 'Sustainability' tends to denote a state, a set of principles or values, a paradigm, or an ideal, and is therefore a relatively fixed and binding concept. 'Sustainable development', by contrast, implies a future-oriented goal, and thus refers to a process, a transition, or an aspiration, making it comparatively less binding. For these reasons, there are cases in which developing countries, governments, and business corporations prefer the less binding term 'sustainable development' over the more prescriptive or normative notion of 'sustainability' (cf. Dessein et al., 2015).

Cultural sustainability. As we have seen, both 'culture' and 'sustainability' are inherently ambiguous and contested concepts. When combined in a composite concept—such as 'cultural sustainability'—there is a strong likelihood that the resulting construct may also appear conceptually fluid and analytically elusive. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the concept of 'cultural sustainability' from both a historical and a conceptual perspective. In the following section, we will explore the relationship between the concepts of 'sustainability' and 'culture' and, more specifically, consider 'cultural

sustainability' within the broader context of the conventional sustainability discourse from a historical viewpoint. In the subsequent section, we will shift to a more conceptual analysis of 'cultural sustainability'.

The Concept of 'Cultural Sustainability' Against the Backdrop of the Sustainability Discourse

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."

Native American Proverb

"We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying."

Brundtland, 1987

'The Brundtland Report'

The genesis and development of the concepts of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are relatively well known and well documented (Throsby, 2010, 2012) and thus need only a brief outlining here. During the 1960s and 1970s, growing concern emerged regarding the negative environmental consequences of unlimited economic growth. This concern was articulated, among other places, in works such as E. J. Mishan's *The Cost of Economic Growth* (1967) and the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972; see also Throsby, 2017).

The conceptual framework surrounding sustainability and sustainable development was shaped between 1972 and 1992 through a sequence of conferences, programs, and initiatives—primarily under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The UN Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, is often regarded as the foundational event in the process (Isar, 2017). This conference addressed the seemingly competing demands of economic growth and environmental protection, while simultaneously

acknowledging their interdependence (Rawiworrakul et al., 2010). It generated significant political momentum and led, among other outcomes, to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The recommendations articulated in this program were further developed within the ecological domain in the 1980 *World Conservation Strategy.*

A few years later, in 1987, the term was popularised and canonised in a report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), *Our Common Future*—commonly known as "The Brundtland Report", named after the Commission's chair, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland (Brundtland, 1987a). This report was to become a cornerstone in the conceptualisation of sustainability and remains one of the most frequently cited sources within sustainability discourse. In The Brundtland Report, as mentioned above, sustainability was defined in the now widely recognised, mantra-like formulation as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987a). The report was subsequently endorsed by the UN General Assembly.

The Brundtland Report has a predominantly environmental focus (cf. e.g. Isar, 2017), which is consistent with the fact that the commission was named the World Commission on Environment and Development, but it also addresses economic issues to a large extent. The commission's assignment was to formulate: "A global agenda for change" and "to propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond" (Brundtland, 1987a). It is precisely this integration of a sustainable environment and the maintenance of development—primarily understood as economic development—that constitutes the main line of argument and a significant feature of the report.

"There has been a growing realization … that it is impossible to separate economic development issues from environment issues" (Brundtland, 1987a). The report is replete with formulations that closely link environmental and economic development: "interlocked economic and ecological systems", "ecological and economic interdependence", "spiral of linked ecological and economic decline" (Brundtland, 1987a), etc.

However, several formulations more-or-less explicitly address and acknowledge the social dimension, although they are much rarer. For example, it is stated that "… environmental and economic problems are linked to many social and political factors" (Brundtland, 1987a). At one point, there is talk of "extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development" (Brundtland, 1987a). And maybe most clearly here, where it is stated: "What is needed now is a new era of economic growth—growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable" (Brundtland, 1987a). In this way, the report—without making it entirely explicit—lays the groundwork for the later, now classical three-pillar model of sustainable development: environmental, economic, and social sustainability (cf. below).

In contrast, the concept of 'culture' did not occupy a prominent position and was not treated in an explicit or systematic manner (Dessein et al., 2015). To be more precise, the terms 'culture' or 'cultures'—including derivatives such as 'cultural' and 'culturally'—appear only 37 times across the report's 234 pages. Moreover, in the majority of these instances, the terms do not occur in the meanings outlined above but rather in contexts such as 'tissue culture' and 'arms culture'. Where the terms are employed in their more conventional meanings, it is primarily in relation to 'vulnerable groups', so-called 'indigenous or tribal people', or within discussions of biodiversity and species conservation, population growth, family planning, and the status of women in society, as well as in

the context of ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘cultural treasures’. As a not entirely compatible, yet nonetheless thought-provoking, comparison, it is worth noting that the terms ‘agriculture’ or ‘agricultural’ appears 270 times.

However, it can be argued that culture is addressed implicitly as a precondition for addressing broader global challenges. Brundtland, for instance, states: “To successfully advance in solving global problems, we need to develop new methods of thinking, to elaborate new moral and value criteria, and no doubt, new patterns of behaviour” (1987a; cf. also Dessein et al., 2015). Here, expressions such as ‘new methods of thinking’, ‘value criteria’, and ‘patterns of behaviour’ may be interpreted as elements aligned with a broad, anthropological understanding of culture (cf. also Dessein et al., 2015). Elsewhere, there are direct calls for changes in norms of behaviour, attitudes, and shared values: “We call for a common endeavour and for new norms of behaviour … The changes in attitudes, in social values, and in aspirations that the report urges will depend on vast campaigns of education, debate and public participation” (Brundtland, 1987a). Again, terms such as ‘new norms of behaviour’, ‘changes in attitudes’, and ‘social values’ can be said to have affinity to the broad understanding of culture. The Brundtland Report thus touches on aspects and ideas that are similar to the ideas of cultural sustainability in several places.

Similarly, the report explicitly rejects a narrow environmental agenda when it states:

> “When the terms of reference of our Commission were originally being discussed in 1982, there were those who wanted its considerations to be limited to “environmental issues” only. This would have been a grave mistake. The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions,

> ambitions, and needs, and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word "environment" a connotation of naivety in some political circles." (Brundtland, 1987a)

Again, terms such as 'human concerns', 'actions', 'ambitions', and 'needs' inherently carry cultural connotations. Thus, although culture has not been addressed explicitly since the inception of the sustainability movement, it has nevertheless arguably existed beneath the surface as an implicit, unarticulated prerequisite or foundational premise.

Before the publication of The Brundtland Report, a few conferences were held, and a few declarations were issued that bear significance for the cultural agenda. In 1982, UNESCO held the MONDIACULT World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City. Here, a new definition of culture was adopted, stating that: "culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO, 1982). The definition and declaration thus mark a clear shift from a humanistic-aesthetic to an anthropological understanding of culture. However, the terms 'sustainability' or 'sustainable' are not mentioned at all in the declaration.

In 1992, a broad set of additional principles was introduced at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development—also known as the Rio Summit or *Earth Summit*—culminating in *Agenda 21: A Programme of Action for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 1992; see also Isar, 2017). *Agenda 21* was a comprehensive action plan aimed at achieving sustainable development globally in the twenty-first century, with human beings positioned "at the

centre of concerns for sustainable development" and, as the document put it, "entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature" (United Nations, 1992). The conference formalised the principle of integrating environmental protection, economic growth, and social equity as interdependent dimensions of sustainable development, even though the vast majority of the 27 principles primarily addressed the environmental dimension. At the same time, however, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production characteristic of contemporary civilisation—concepts closely aligned with cultural concerns—were addressed explicitly for the first time. As Principle 8 states "To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption …" (United Nations 1992). Beyond this, 'culture' (and 'identity') is mentioned only briefly in Principle 21, and solely in relation to Indigenous peoples.

The UN's Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals

In the years immediately following the publication of *Our Common Future* and the adoption of *Agenda 21*, the emphasis in sustainability discourse remained primarily on the environmental dimension of sustainability (cf. e.g., Isar, 2017). However, definitions of 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' evolved toward greater comprehensiveness and specificity during the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century (Afshari et al., 2022; Dessein et al., 2015).

From the turn of the millennium onwards, a marked shift occurred away from an exclusive focus on environmental sustainability towards a broader conceptualisation encom-

passing environmental protection, economic development, and social equality. This shift laid the foundation for the well-known *three pillars* of sustainable development—social, economic, and environmental—often symbolically referred to as *people-profit-planet*. In other words, sustainability was to be achieved through the simultaneous pursuit of environmental, economic, and social objectives (Afshari et al., 2022). Environmental or ecological sustainability is typically associated with the preservation and responsible use of natural resources, ensuring that they are not depleted to the detriment of future generations. Economic sustainability involves long-term economic viability and development, while social sustainability encompasses justice and equity among people (Ali & Faruquie, 2016). The *three-pillar* model was further institutionalised at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 (Isar, 2017), where the importance of balancing all three dimensions in achieving global sustainability goals was emphasised. Since then, the model has been further developed by international institutions and scholars alike.

In September 2000, the United Nations adopted the *Millennium Declaration*, which included the so-called *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs). The MDGs comprised eight measurable goals with a target year of 2015, ranging from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger to the combating of specific diseases and the promotion of environmental sustainability. Six of the eight goals focused on the social domain—three of which directly addressed disease and disease control—while two targeted environmental concerns. Culture, however, was virtually absent from the declaration (Dessein et al, 2015). The word 'culture' does not appear in the goals themselves and is mentioned only twice in the declaration. One instance occurs under "Values and principles" in relation to "Tolerance": "Human beings must respect one another, in

all their diversity of belief, culture and language … A culture of peace and dialogue among all civilizations should be actively promoted" (United Nations, 2000). Similar omissions characterise other UN policy documents produced in the years immediately following the turn of the millennium.

At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012—commonly referred to as *Rio+20*, as it marked the twentieth anniversary of the original *Earth Summit* in 1992—one of the key outcomes was the agreement among member states to formulate a set of sustainability goals. These goals were intended both as tools for achieving sustainable development and as a framework that could be linked to the UN's *Post-Millennium Development Goals* (Dessein et al., 2015). Three years later, in 2015, the UN officially launched the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) to promote global progress towards sustainability by 2030. The SDGs comprise 17 primary goals, 169 associated sub-goals or targets, and 232 indicators—all grounded in the three dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, economic, and social (Afshari et al., 2022; Christensen, 2023). However, culture remains largely absent from the SDGs, both in the main goals and in the associated sub-goals and indicators. Specifically, the terms 'culture' or 'cultural' do not appear in any of the 17 primary goals and are mentioned explicitly in only four of the 169 sub-goals or targets:

- Under Goal #4, on quality education, Target 4.7 refers to "education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (United Nations, 2015).

- Under Goal #8, on economic growth and work for all, Target 8.9 highlights the promotion of "sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products" (United Nations, 2015).

- Under Goal #11, on inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements, Target 11.4 calls for the protection and safeguarding of "the world's cultural and natural heritage" (United Nations, 2015).

- Finally, under Goal #12, on sustainable consumption and production patterns, Target #12b speaks to the development and implementation of "tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products" (United Nations, 2015; cf. also Christensen, 2023; and Wiktor-Mach, 2020, who make similar observations).

As far as the 232 indicators are concerned, the terms 'culture' or 'cultural' are mentioned explicitly in only one indicator. This occurs in indicator 11.4.1, which addresses the preservation, protection, and conservation of cultural and natural heritage (United Nations, 2016).[4]

The goal most explicitly addressing health, Goal #3, "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages", does not mention 'culture' or any related terms. Thus, the explicit inclusion of the cultural dimension in the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals* remains very limited. In the few instances where culture does appear, it draws on a broad anthropological conceptualisation of culture (e.g., local culture, cultural diversity) or refers to culture in the form of cultural heritage.

In 2017—two years after the launch of the UN's *Global Goals*—Throsby, an Australian cultural economist and a prominent advocate of the concept of *cultural sustainable development*, stated that the SDGs:

> "… contained only the most fleeting mention of culture. References to culture in sustainable development and to the role of cultural heritage were consigned to three minor paragraphs dealing with education and tourism [as demonstrated above, culture is actually mentioned in four paragraphs, Eds.). None of the goals referred either directly or by implication to the case for integrating culture into sustainable development planning and decision making." (Throsby, 2017; cf. also Christensen, 2023).

As is often the case with political documents, treaties, and similar instruments, scientific engagement with the relationship between culture and sustainable development has likewise remained limited. Soini and Birkeland note in their 2014 review of the scientific literature on cultural sustainability that "until recently, the understanding of culture within the framework of sustainable development has remained vague" and that "… culture in the framework of sustainable development has remained under-emphasized and under-theorized". Moreover, they conclude that "the number of articles using the concept of cultural sustainability is … relatively low" (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). In a similar vein, Dessein et al. (2015) summarise that a key takeaway from their exploration of the intersection between culture and sustainable development is "how little is actually known about current and the potential interoperability of culture and the sustainability 'tripod'" and that "the essence of culture in sustainable development

research and politics, therefore, tends to remain ignored" (Dessein et al., 2015).

Several decades after The Brundtland Report, the conventional sustainability discourse remains dominated by environmental, economic, and—to a certain extent—social perspectives. The consideration of culture in relation to sustainable development remains rudimentary and under-theorised. Nevertheless, over the past two to three decades, a number of international initiatives and scholarly interventions have sought to integrate culture more firmly into sustainability discourse. These initiatives, however, have remained relatively limited and marginal when measured against the prevailing tendency to conceptualise sustainability primarily through the lens of the three-pillar model (Dessein et al., 2015).

Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainability—Cultural Sustainability

> *"Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability."*
>
> *John Hawkes, 2001*

A number of scholars and commentators have argued that the traditional three-pillar model is conceptually flawed due to the omission of the cultural dimension. Similarly, several international organisations—such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)—have actively advocated for the inclusion of culture as an explicit and integral component of the sustainability framework (Dessein et al., 2015).

The basic argument concerning the connection between culture and sustainability—and the assertion that culture matters in sustainable development—can be summarised as follows: many, if not all, of the planet's ecological problems and, it goes without saying, all of its social and economic challenges originate in cultural decisions and practices—that is, in human behaviour and human agency. Consequently, solutions to these problems must likewise involve culture (Dessein et al., 2015). Ali and Faruquie (2016) similarly note: "It has become more relevant to include culture as an important aspect of sustainability because of human behaviour and life style that also governs the use of non-renewable sources". Elsewhere, they argue that "cultural vitality is as important as the social equity in sustainable development" and, drawing on Jon Hawkes (2001), compare cultural diversity to biodiversity. At the same time, existing models of sustainable development that focus exclusively on environmental and economic dimensions are unlikely to succeed without the

inclusion of explicit cultural considerations (Dessein et al., 2015). However, as the following review will demonstrate, integrating culture into sustainability discourse and practice remains a political, scientific, and practical challenge.

The introduction and discussion of culture as a missing dimension in the sustainable development paradigm began to emerge in the early 2000s and gained traction in the 2010s, as numerous initiatives began promoting culture as an integrated component—or a potential fourth pillar—of the sustainability framework.

One of the earliest and most influential proponents of this idea was the Australian cultural analyst Jon Hawkes, who, in 2001, introduced the notion of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development in his book explicitly titled *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability. Culture's Central Role in Public Planning* (2001). Hawkes establishes his own definition of sustainability and a sustainable society, which both paraphrases and expands upon that of The Brundtland Report: "A sustainable society is one that is far-seeing enough, flexible enough and wise enough to develop in ways that will not exhaust its own or the planet's resources" (Hawkes, 2001). He also reformulates the conventional three pillars as 'social equity, environmental responsibility, and economic viability'. Most importantly, however, he identifies a fourth pillar as essential to sustainable development alongside the classical three: "Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability" (Hawkes, 2001). Drawing on his background in local public planning, he also argues that "for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic assessment" (Hawkes, 2001).

UNESCO is one of the key international organisations—and a significant driving force—that has worked for several decades to promote and strengthen the relationship between culture and development. Beginning with UNESCO's *Decade of Culture and Development* (1988–1997), the link between culture and development was brought to the forefront of international discussion. This period led, among other outcomes, to the publication of the influential report *Our Creative Diversity*, issued by the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD, 1995). The report was one of the first documents to highlight culture as a driving force in sustainable development—among other things through the now-iconic quotation: "Development divorced from its human or cultural context is development without a soul" (WCCD, 1995). Similarly, it is allegedly in this report that the term 'cultural sustainability' was used for the first time (Axelsson, 2013). The reference appears in Chapter 8, "Culture and the Environment", where the report outlines eight dimensions of sustainable development. 'Cultural sustainability' is identified as the eighth and final dimension. The report states:

> "Finally, there is the under-emphasized but important cultural aspect of sustainability. We have said that treating culture merely as an instrument for sustaining something else, such as economic development, and treating it as static, is wrong, and we have stressed its constitutive role, its importance as an objective embracing development. In both these respects cultural valuations and cultural activities can be looked at in terms of *cultural sustainability*. The valuable components of any changing culture should not be eroded by rival demands." (WCCD, 1995, our italicisation)

Since this milestone, the link between sustainable development and culture has been further addressed in a number of international conventions and policy documents under the auspices of UNESCO. Notable examples include *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO, 2001), the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003) and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (UNESCO, 2005; cf. also Soini & Birkeland, 2014). To briefly delve into one example: UNESCO's 2001 publication *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* affirms that cultural diversity is an essential factor in development, on par with economic and social development, and, as a consequence, acknowledges the role of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability. The document explicitly draws parallels between the biodiversity of nature and the diversity of culture: "As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" (UNESCO, 2001). Similarly, culture is ascribed intrinsic value independent of economic considerations: "Cultural diversity is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence" (UNESCO, 2001).

At the UN's Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, culture was still only mentioned peripherally; however, the discussions reflected that the dialogue concerning the concept of sustainability was already underway. From 2002 onwards, the idea of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development—partly building on the work of Hawkes—was discussed explicitly at several international conferences.

Among the key actors promoting this agenda was the international organisation of local authorities, United Cities

and Local Governments (UCLG), which played a pioneering role in advancing culture as a dimension of sustainable development. One of the outcomes of these efforts was the adoption—by UCLG and other NGOs and civil society initiatives—of a policy document entitled *Agenda 21 for Culture* in 2004 (United Cities and Local Governments, 2004). This document can be regarded as a cultural counterpart to the UN's original *Agenda 21: A Program for Action for Sustainable Development* (cf. above).

Agenda 21 for Culture is the first international document to explicitly position culture as a new and autonomous pillar within the sustainability discourse, stating: "Culture is the fourth pillar of sustainable development" (United Cities and Local Governments, 2004). The document also expands the perspective to encompass a broad, anthropological understanding of culture, as well as the significance of culture for sustainability in everyday life, as it states: "Sustainability in culture refers, not only to the preservation of cultural heritage but also to incorporating the sustainable development mentality into everyday life" (United Cities and Local Governments, 2004). The document further argues that culture should be considered a key component in local policymaking processes and includes a set of guidelines for the development of local cultural policy. The document has been revised and supplemented multiple times and was also integrated into the Rio+20 process (Pascual, 2012; cf. Isar, 2017; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). It has subsequently exerted significant influence, particularly in the field of local governance and urban planning.

Another important milestone in the trajectory of cultural sustainability was the international UNESCO congress held in 2013 under the telling title: *"Culture: Key to Sustainable Development"*. The aim of the congress was to "reflect on the place that should be given to culture within the interna-

tional sustainable development agenda" (UNESCO, 2013), and more specifically, to prepare the inclusion of culture as a fourth fundamental pillar in the UN's post-2015 development goals, as expressed in the statement: "There is no sustainable development without culture" (UNESCO, 2013). One direct outcome of the congress—which took place in Hangzhou, China—was the adoption of the so-called *Hangzhou Declaration,* bearing the equally significant title: *Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies* (UNESCO, 2013; cf. also Christensen, 2023; and Wiktor-Mach, 2020). Among other statements, the declaration reads:

> "Development is shaped by culture and local context, which ultimately also determine its outcome. Consideration of culture should therefore be included as the fourth fundamental principle of the post-2015 UN development agenda, in equal measure with human rights, equality and sustainability. The cultural dimension should be systematically integrated in definitions of sustainable development and well-being, as well as in the conception, measurement and actual practice of development policies and programmes." (UNESCO, 2013)

The declaration also included a reaffirmation that "... culture should be considered to be a fundamental *enabler* of sustainability", as well as a reaffirmation of "… the potential of culture as *a driver* for sustainable development …" (UNESCO, 2013, our italicisation). In a similar vein, the congress's closing statement recommended that "… a specific Goal focused on culture be included as part of the post-2015 UN development agenda … including clear targets and indicators that

relate culture to all dimensions of sustainable development" (UNESCO, 2013).

Although UNESCO actively sought to integrate culture as a key dimension of sustainable development in the lead-up to the 2015 *Sustainable Development Goals*, the outcome—as demonstrated in the preceding review of the SDGs—was relatively limited. Thus, incorporating culture into sustainability efforts has so far proven to be a challenge at the political, scientific, and practical levels (cf. also Dessein et al., 2015).

In the years leading up to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, several regional and global civil society organisations and global cultural networks—among others, IFACCA,[5] agenda21 for culture,[6] FICDC6[7] and CAE7[8]—actively campaigned for the inclusion of a specific goal dedicated to culture, or alternatively for the systematic integration of cultural dimensions across the other SDGs. This advocacy was coordinated under the #culture2015goal campaign and the banner "The Future We Want Includes Culture".

Between 2013 and 2015, the campaign produced four key documents: a *Manifesto—Proposal for a Goal* (2013), a declaration on the inclusion of culture in the 2030 Agenda (2014), a proposal of indicators for measuring the cultural aspects of the SDGs (2015), and an assessment of the final 2030 agenda (Culture2015Goal, 2015; cf. also Culture2030Goal, 2019).

The latter document, a communiqué that also constituted the campaign's final publication in September 2015, assessed the extent to which culture was reflected in the SDG Outcome Document. Published under the telling title *Culture in the SDG Outcome Document: Progress Made, but Important Steps Remain Ahead* (2015), the communiqué concluded that the Outcome Document "falls short of a full understanding and affirmation of the importance of culture to sustainable development". It further stated that:

> "… culture is a driver and an enabler of sustainable development. Culture is one of the four dimensions of sustainable development, and is as essential as its economic, social and environmental dimension, Holistic and integrated development will only be achieved when the values of creativity, heritage, knowledge and diversity are factored into all approaches to sustainable development." (Culture2015Goal, 2015)

In the same communiqué, campaign members committed to continuing their advocacy. At the first UN SDG Summit, held in New York in September 2019, the network formally re-energised the campaign, now updated as the Culture2030Goal Campaign or #culture2030goal. The revised mandate shifted towards monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda from a cultural perspective, while simultaneously advocating for a stronger role for culture in SDG implementation and in future global development agendas.

In the years that followed, Culture2030Goal published several reports analysing and assessing the role of culture in the implementation of Agenda 2030. These assessments consistently demonstrated the (still) marginal presence of cultural factors and actors within SDG implementation processes. In parallel, the campaign advanced concrete proposals for an explicit and dedicated Goal for Culture in preparations for the post-2030 development agenda, including initiatives targeting some of the UN activities mentioned below. This effort culminated in the publication *A CULTURAL GOAL IS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR COMMON FUTURE* (Culture2030Goal, 2022), which introduced a so-called 'zero draft' for a Cultural Goal formulated as: "Ensure cultural sustainability for the wellbeing of all". The goal was accompanied by ten proposed

targets, including associated potential indicators (Culture-2030Goal, 2022).

In 2022, UNESCO convened MONDIACULT—World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development in Mexico City to share visions for the future of cultural policies, forty years after the landmark 1982 MONCIACULT conference held in the same location. The conference adopted a declaration replete with formulations such as "the dramatic consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss", "unsustainable development patterns", and "environmental protection and sustainable and inclusive growth" and positioned culture as "a global public good with an intrinsic value to enable and drive sustainable development" (UNESCO, 2023). The declaration also outlined a forward-looking agenda "that fully harnesses the transformative impact of culture for the sustainable development". Among its key messages was the call "…to integrate it [culture, Eds.] as a specific goal in its own right in the development agenda beyond 2023" and to strengthen advocacy for the inclusion of culture in the United Nations Future Summit, scheduled in 2024 (UNESCO, 2023).

Culture2030Goal's publication of a 'zero draft' of a Cultural Goal was, among other things, targeted at and published shortly before the MONDIACULT conference. It can thus be argued that the principle of a Culture Goal was reflected in MONDIACULT's final declaration, and that the conference generated renewed political momentum for the concept of cultural sustainability.

Finally, in 2024, the above-mentioned United Nations Future Summit adopted what was solemnly termed a *Pact for the Future,* which in Action 11 explicitly commits to protecting and promoting culture as an "... integral component[… Eds.] of sustainable development" (United Nations, 2024). The same Action links culture directly to the three other pillars of sustainability, when the first sup-point states that the UN

will: “Ensure that culture … can contribute to more effective, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development, and integrate culture into economic, social and environmental development policies and strategies and ensure adequate public investment in the protection and promotion of culture” (United Nations, 2024). In addition, culture is mentioned more peripherally in four other Actions in the Pact.

The adoption of the Pact prompted the campaign to quickly issue a statement under the heading *FROM SUMMIT TO SUBSTANCE: AN ACTION PLAN FOR CULTURE TO DELIVER ON THE PACT FOR THE FUTURE*, in which they both welcome the integration of culture into the sustainability goals and also criticise and express disappointment that culture is not designated as a specific goal or as a pillar of sustainable development: “The Pact for the Future does mark a valuable step forwards, although still falls a little shorter than it could have done in raising culture to the same level as other policy areas / Calling for culture to be treated as a standalone development goal ... would have been an important signal” (Culture2030Goal, 2024).

Taken together, these developments suggest that although explicit references to culture remain limited in the text of the 2030 Agenda, and although the potential of culture within the SDG implementation remains largely underutilised at national and international levels—to paraphrase Culture2030Goal—there is still ongoing work to raise awareness of the cultural dimension within the sustainability construct to this day.

A few other notable initiatives related to cultural sustainability also merit attention.

During the four-year period from 2011 to 2015, the European research network Investigating Cultural Sustainability explored the relationship between culture and sustainable development. The network was supported by the European COST Association (European Cooperation in Science and

Technology, COST Action IS1007) and funded through the EU's research programme *Horizon 2020.* The stated aim of the network was to illuminate European research on cultural sustainability and to provide policymakers with tools for integrating culture as a critical component of sustainable development. In addition, the Action sought to strengthen the conceptual framework of sustainable development, propose strategies for operationalising new perspectives and insights, and embed culture more firmly in sustainability policy and assessment frameworks (Dessein et al., 2015).

One of the key outcomes of the Action was the publication of a series of books and scholarly articles that helped establish culture and sustainability as an emerging field of research. This included the launch of a new book series entitled *Routledge Studies in Culture and Sustainable Development.* Another significant result of the Action network's work was the identification and articulation of three distinct ways in which culture can play essential roles in sustainable development (cf. Dessein et al., 2015; Soini & Birkeland, 2014), which will be introduced in the following section.

To summarise, the origin of the conceptual framework around sustainable development clearly lies—as mentioned above—in ecological considerations. Therefore, the environmental dimension has been the most prominent and extensively addressed. Economic sustainability is seldom addressed explicitly as an independent dimension. However, it is nonetheless integral to discussions of solutions that link ecological (and social) sustainability goals through economic measures. The social dimension, and thus, among other things, the institutional aspects, have increasingly been seen as important elements in the pursuit of sustainable goals. (Dessein et al., 2015).

Figure 2 below shows Afshari et al.'s (2022) visualisation of the development of the understanding of the concept of sus-

tainability from the 1980s to the present (as contextualised by the publication year of Afshari et al.'s article, 2022). As shown in the figure, the emphasis has shifted from being primarily an environmental concern to encompassing economic and social dimensions, with social sustainability moving from a relatively marginalised pillar to a more prominent and integrated dimension (Afshari et al., 2022). In recent years, there has been a more balanced consideration of all three dimensions, with sustainability conceptualised as three interconnected circles, each mutually influencing and defining the others. It is also worth noting that the cultural aspect of sustainability in Afshari et al.'s visualisation is notably absent.

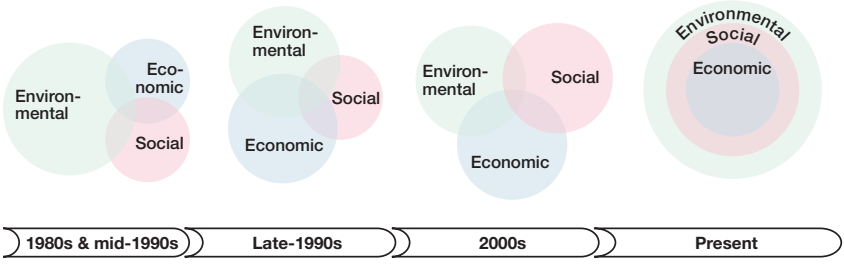


Figure 2: The evolution of the understanding of the concept of sustainability from the 1980s to the present (2022), adapted from Afshari et al. (2022)

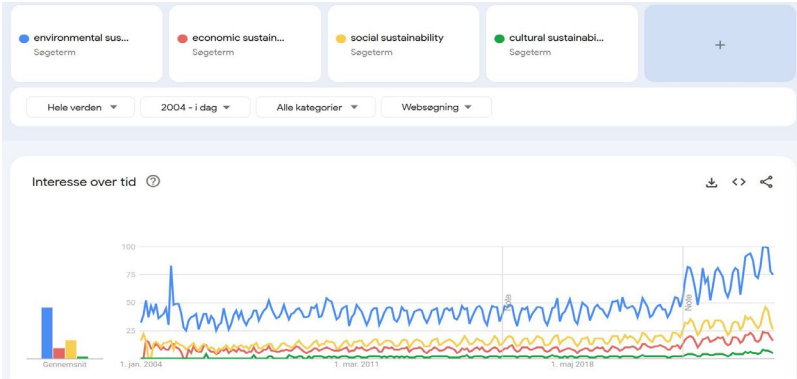


Figure 3: Google Trends search for 'environmental sustainability', 'economic sustainability', 'social sustainability', and 'cultural sustainability', authors' own search (12 January 2025)

An impression—and documentation—of the distribution of interest among the different pillars of sustainability and their historical development can be obtained through Google Trends data. Google Trends is an online search tool that enables users to compare and visualise interest in—or, more precisely, search activity for—various terms over time. The highest number of searches during a given period is assigned an index value of 100, with other search volumes ranked relative to this reference point. Figure 3 visualises searches for the terms 'environmental sustainability', 'economic sustainability', 'social sustainability', and 'cultural sustainability', respectively. The parameters are set to 'Worldwide' and cover the 21-year period from 1 January 2004 (the earliest available data in Google Trends) to 12 January 2025.

As the graph indicates, 'environmental sustainability' is by far the most searched term during the entire period. The peak in search interest occurs as late as September and October 2024, both of which are assigned the maximum index value of 100. This is followed by 'social sustainability', which—with very few exceptions—shows the second-highest

level of search interest throughout the entire period. Social sustainability also exhibits a general upward trend in search frequency, with a notable spike in October 2024. In third place is 'economic sustainability', which also experiences a gradual increase in interest over the period, with a peak occurring in September 2024. Finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy lies 'cultural sustainability', for which search activity is virtually non-existent until the late 2000s. However, in recent years, there has been a slight increase in search volume, also reaching its provisional peak in September 2024.

What can also be noted is the consistently and significantly greater interest in 'environmental sustainability' compared to the other pillars throughout the entire period, and that the hierarchy between the pillars—as well as the relative proportions among them—remains remarkably stable over time. Finally, it is worth noting that all four search terms peak relatively late in the period, specifically around September-October 2024, which indicates that there is still considerable public interest in—at least as reflected in search activity—the concepts of sustainability.

As is evident from the above brief review of the development of the sustainability framework—and as becomes even more apparent in Afshari et al.'s illustration of the evolution of the concept—culture continues to play only a marginal role in the conceptual framework of sustainable development. Culture is not defined as an independent dimension of sustainability on par with the environmental, economic, and social dimensions, and there are also no standalone sustainability goals explicitly focused on culture (Løkka, 2023).

This brief review can be summarised as follows: the integration of culture into sustainability discourse and efforts has proven to be a political, scientific, and practical challenge (Dessein et al., 2015). Within the political sphere, there has been some interest in the role of culture in sustainable de-

velopment—and thus in cultural sustainability—particularly in recent decades. However, this interest remains relatively limited, and the cultural agenda has not been systematically included and institutionalised in sustainable development policies, practices, strategic documents, or assessment frameworks, as demonstrated, among other things, by the above analysis of the SDGs' main goals, targets, and indicators.

Almost 40 years after The Brundtland Report, conventional sustainability discourse is still largely dominated by the traditional trilogy of pillars: environmental, economic, and social—where the cultural dimension continues to play a subordinate and marginal role. We acknowledge, however, that efforts to develop and implement policies that more consistently incorporate culture into sustainable development are ongoing and likely to continue (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). At the same time, emerging research on the role of culture in sustainable development—and on 'cultural sustainability' more specifically—has gained visibility within the academic field, particularly in recent years.

If we were to illustrate how proponents of cultural sustainability envision the future development of the sustainability discourse—based on Afshari et al.'s (2022) principles of representation—it might be visualised as shown in Figure 4 below. See also the description of Dessein et al.'s (2015) typology of the three roles of culture in sustainability in the following section.

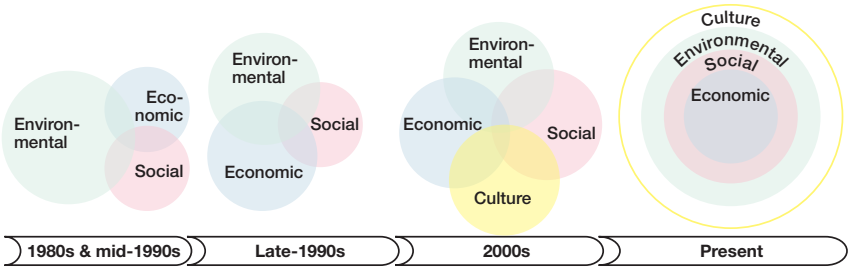


Figure 4: The evolution of the understanding of the concept of sustainability from the 1980s to the present, as envisioned by advocates of cultural sustainability. Cf. also Dessein et al.'s (2015) typology of the three roles of culture in sustainability below. Authors' illustration, inspired by Afsahri et al. (2022)

Definitions of 'Cultural Sustainability'

> *"… for development to be sustainable, it must be rooted in people's cultural values; and indeed culture is the foundation of sustainable development."*
>
> *Ali & Faruquie, 2016*

There is no precise or unambiguous definition of 'cultural sustainability' on which there is universal agreement. Understandings and definitions vary across contexts and evolve over time. "The field [cultural sustainability, Eds.] is challenged by multiple definitions and perspectives …, which characterises its complexity and multidimensional character" as Dessein et al. (2015) write. Similarly, Soini and Birkeland (2014) assert that "cultural sustainability is at least a multidisciplinary or even a transdisciplinary concept that moves beyond disciplines" (2014). It is not unreasonable to assume that the absence of a precise, widely accepted definition has hindered efforts to integrate the cultural agenda into the broader discourse on sustainable development. Given the absence of a universally accepted definition of cultural sustainability, we must rely on a composite, working definition—that is, a definition that synthesises the core elements identified by multiple scholars as characteristic of the concept.

In the early stages of the sustainable development discourse, the cultural aspects of sustainability were—if not entirely ignored—frequently subsumed under the social pillar of sustainability. Alternatively, cultural aspects were combined with social sustainability through linguistic constructions such as *socio-cultural sustainability* (Dessein et al., 2015; cf. also Ramirez et al., 2013; Angeli et al., 2018). As Dessein et al. point out, in the former case cultural aspects are treated as

a subset of the social dimension, while in the latter, there is an acknowledgement that culture is distinct from the social, yet that separating the two—either in practice or in definitional terms—presents considerable challenges (Dessein et al., 2015). Given that social and cultural sustainability have in this way been conflated and conceptually intertwined, it is essential in the present context to analytically distinguish these two dimensions.

It goes without saying that if one defines culture in the broad sense as encompassing 'all spheres of life', it must necessarily include society. However, such a broad and all-encompassing definition of culture is difficult to operationalise in practice; it is, as Dessein et al. (2015) put it, "conceptually obese". Without delving into the complexities of this extensive topic—which would exceed the scope and focus of this publication—it is sufficient to note that a substantial body of research acknowledges the distinctiveness of culture and society (Dessein et al., 2015; Habermas, 2009). We must therefore turn to the more specific characteristics of the two concepts. What, then, is the difference between social sustainability and cultural sustainability?

The 1992 Rio Conference presented social sustainability as the right to live a decent life, linking it to justice on social, intergenerational, intragenerational, and international levels, as well as to local participation in sustainable development processes (cf. Axelsson, 2013). This understanding was later expanded to include welfare, safety, a healthy environment, access to education, opportunities for learning, public participation, and related aspects (Axelsson, 2013). In contrast, with regard to cultural sustainability, Torsten Meireis (2019) emphasises that the central insight emerging from his research into the concept is that values lie at the heart of cultural sustainability. Marja Järvelä (2023), who examines the dimensions of cultural sustainability, associates the concept

with adaptation—particularly local adaptation—as well as with adaptive capacities and robustness.

Ali and Faruquie (2016), in the article "Significance of social and cultural sustainability in total health", explicitly address the distinction between social and cultural sustainability within the context of health systems. They define social sustainability as follows in a key passage: "Social sustainability is a process that promotes social health and well-being of present and future generations wherein the first aspect implies an individual's social interaction with others and the latter is related to the peaceful coexistence of communities while the basic human needs are being fulfilled" (Ali & Faruquie, 2016). They further state that socially sustainable societies are equitable, diverse, inclusive, and democratic, and that they provide a high quality of life. In contrast, they define cultural sustainability as follows: "Cultural Sustainability promotes fullest participation in cultural life with the lowest impact to the environment" (Ali & Faruquie, 2016). They further link the concept to (cultural) values, (cultural) identities, and to the lifestyles or ways of life of a group—encompassing customs, traditions, norms, meanings, attitudes, and shared understandings. Cultural sustainability is also associated with the continuity of cultural values across time, connecting past, present, and future.

Axelsson et al. (2013)—who examine criteria and indicators for social and cultural sustainability, respectively—summarise the criteria for social sustainability in a chart that includes, among other elements, welfare, housing, education, employment, equity, human rights, social justice, and social integration and cohesion. By contrast, cultural sustainability in Axelsson et al. (2013) is associated with concepts such as representations, expressions, artefacts, practices, and cultural spaces linked to tradition, identity, values, cultural diversity, aesthetics, and other related dimensions.

Finally, Paul James, author of the book *Urban Sustainability in Theory and Practice* (2015) and developer of the sustainability assessment method Circles of Sustainability, is critical of the term 'sustainability', which he finds both imprecise and problematic—indeed, overused and abused. However, rather than abandoning the concept, he seeks to rethink and redefine it. He is particularly critical of the three-pillar, or Triple Bottom Line, model of sustainability, i.e., the combination of economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

Among his criticisms is the claim that the Triple Bottom Line approach treats economics as an independent master domain that is entirely distinct from its social foundations; that it reduces environmental issues to externalities or background features of the economic domain and to something separated from human activity; and that it reduces the social to a catch-all category for miscellaneous concerns—a "grab bag of extra things that are left over after the economic and environment are designated and demarcated" (James, 2015). James regards such approaches as reductive and unable to account for the actual complexity of interactions and effects produced between different social areas.

The alternative model proposed by James does not operate with a distinct pillar of social sustainability as one category among others. Instead, he argues that sustainability, in this conception, is "irremediably social in character" and "fundamentally a condition of the social" (James, 2015), i.e., part of a larger context or framework of social life. He therefore proposes a domain-based framework comprising four domains he considers important for understanding the human condition: ecology, economics, politics, and culture—each of which is seen as a field of social practice and treated as an integrated part of a social whole. In this context, sustainability is generally defined by James as: "The capacity to endure

over time, through enhancing the conditions of social and natural flourishing" (James, 2015).

- Ecology is defined as "a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses, and material expressions that occur across the intersection between the social and the natural realms", focusing on dimensions of human engagement with and within nature (James, 2015).

- Economics is defined as "a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses and material expressions associated with the production, use and management of resources" (James, 2015).

- Politics is defined as "a social domain that emphasizes practices and meanings associated with basic issues of social power as they pertain to the organization, authorization, legitimation and regulation of a social life held in common" (James, 2015).

- Culture, finally, is defined as "a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses and material expressions which, over time, express the continuities and discontinuities of social meaning of a life held in common. In other words, culture is how and why we do things around here" (James, 2015).

James elaborates on the above description of culture: "The 'how' is how we practice materially, the 'why' emphasizes the meanings, the 'we' refers to the specificity of a life held in common, and 'around here' specifies the spatial and, by implication, the temporal particularity of culture from the local to the global" (James, 2015).

Each of these domains is divided into seven subdomains, or 'perspectives', which are in turn subdivided into seven aspects. The rationale for this is to create a more sensitive assessment process. The perspectives attributed to the cultural domain include: 1. Identity & Engagement, 2. Creativity & Recreation, 3. Memory & Projection, 4. Belief & Meaning, 5. Gender & Generations, 6. Enquiry & Learning, and 7. Well-Being & Health. In this context, sustainability is conceived not only in terms of practices tied to development but also in terms of well-being, social bonds, community building, and social support. James concludes: "Taking all of this together, sustainability thus relates not only to questions of environmental crises or to the nexus between economy and ecology. It also concerns the human condition from the local to the global, including both the nature of urban settlements and the forms that community life takes. It concerns the basis question of how we are to live" (James, 2015).

James' differentiation between Economics, Ecology, Politics, and Culture in terms of subdomains or perspectives is illustrated in Figure 5. In particular, note the difference between perspectives in the domain of Politics and Culture. It is noteworthy that *Well-being & Health* is listed as a perspective within the cultural domain.

DOMAINS OF THE SOCIAL	ECONOMICS	ECOLOGY	POLITICS	CULTURE
SUBDOMAINS OR PERSPECTIVES	Production & Resourcing	Materials & Energy	Organisation & Governance	Identity & Engage-ment
	Exchange & Transfer	Water & Air	Law & Justice	Creativity & Recreation
	Accounting & Regulation	Flora & Fauna	Communica-tion & Critique	Memory & Projection
	Consumption & Use	Habitat & Settlements	Representation & Negotiation	Belief & Meaning
	Labour & Welfare	Built Form & Transport	Security & Accord	Gender & Generations
	Technology & Infrastructure	Embodiment & Suste-nance	Dialogue & Reconciliation	Enquiry & Learning
	Wealth & Distribution	Emission & Waste	Ethics & Accountability	Well-Being & Health

Figure 5: Subdomains or perspectives associated with the four domains in James' 'Circles of Sustainability' (2015)

Although James' 'Circles of Sustainability' approach places the social domain as the very foundation for all practices and

not as an independent pillar among others, and although it operates with four domains—ecological, economic, cultural, and, as a fourth domain, political—he explicitly notes that the model is compatible with, for example, the United Cities and Local Governments' four pillars of sustainability, i.e., models that operate with the four pillars: ecological, economic, social, and cultural, thereby putting culture firmly on the agenda in sustainability analysis. In this way, there is a certain affinity between James' political domain and, among others, UCLG's social pillar.

These definitions provide a useful overview of the meaning and distinction between the two concepts of social and cultural sustainability. In Figure 6, we present a synthesis of key characteristics and differences between social and cultural sustainability, drawing on sources such as Axelsson (2013), Meireis (2019), Ali and Faruquie (2016), Järvelä (2023), and James (2015), among others.

	SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY	CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY
CHARACTERISTICS	Justice (on a social, intergenerational, intragenerational, international etc. level) Welfare Safety Access to education Access to healthcare Public participation Equity & equality Social inclusion and integration Human rights Employment	(Cultural) Values Identity (Cultural) Diversity Lifestyles Whole ways of life Practices & customs Traditions & norms Attitudes Meanings & understandings (Cultural) participation Adaptive capacities & resilience Aesthetics & representations Wellbeing

Figure 6: Key characteristics and distinctions between social and cultural sustainability, respectively, as compiled from the referenced sources (authors' own illustration)

This publication is based on the premise that culture and society can be meaningfully distinguished, and that this differentiation gives rise to distinct social and cultural dimensions within the broader framework of sustainability. The primary distinction lies in their respective foci—that is, the two concepts refer to different aspects of sustainable development and emphasise different dimensions of sustainability. To summarise, within the scope of this book, and specifically in the context of the health sector, we understand the distinction between social sustainability and cultural sustainability as follows:

Social sustainability focuses on the broader societal and systemic factors that affect health. This includes addressing the social determinants of health, such as income, education, and access to resources, and encompasses dimensions such as economic equity, social justice, inclusivity, labour practices, equitable healthcare delivery, the elimination of disparities, and equal access to healthcare services. For example, Skovrup and Pedersen (2025) note that social sustainability within the healthcare sector revolves around whole-person health, work environment, communities, technological development, voluntariness, and related areas. Despite its centrality to healthcare's fundamental mission—namely, patient care and well-being—discussions of social sustainability are often marginalised within the sector (Hussain et al., 2018). Correspondingly, social sustainability is frequently perceived as more abstract and less tangible than its economic and environmental counterparts (Colantonio, 2009).

On the other hand, cultural sustainability predominantly centres on the understanding, preservation, and integration of diverse cultural belief systems, norms, needs, practices, preferences, and values. This includes considerations of cultural identity, diversity, and intercultural dialogue (Dessein et al., 2015). The aim is to ensure culturally competent, sensitive,

and inclusive care. The relevance of cultural sustainability becomes particularly salient in a globalised society, where cultural frameworks increasingly intersect—and at times, come into conflict.

The primary distinction between the two concepts lies, to summarise, in the conceptual understanding that culture pertains to norms and values, whereas social sustainability encompasses social cohesion, communities, the work environment, and equality (Skovrup & Pedersen, 2025).

At the same time, however, we recognise that culture and society are deeply interlinked and mutually constitutive, such that culture shapes society and, conversely, society influences culture (Dessein et al., 2015). Similarly, although social and cultural sustainability are conceptually distinct and focus on different dimensions, they are often closely intertwined. "While researchers have considered "culture" as a fourth pillar of sustainability, it nonetheless seems inseparable from social aspects …" note Ali and Faruquie (2016). For example, cultural factors frequently contribute to the social determinants of health, and achieving social sustainability may require addressing cultural dimensions. However, even though the two concepts are closely interconnected, it is nevertheless imperative to actively pursue both social and cultural sustainability in order to realise a comprehensive and inclusive approach to societal well-being and justice.

The term cultural sustainability has also been subject to criticism from various quarters. The sociologist Yudhishthir Ray Isar offers a critical analysis—and what he terms "a contrarian view"—of the 'culture and sustainable development discourse', and specifically of "the campaign to make culture 'the fourth pillar of sustainability'" (Isar, 2017). Isar's main argument is that the notion of sustainable development has been stretched far beyond its original intent, to such an extent that the term has undergone what he calls

“semantic inflation”. In particular, the phrase ‘culture’ and ‘sustainable development’ has “come to embrace practically every aspect of the human condition”, thereby becoming an “all encompassing buzzword” and “a floating signifier” (Isar, 2017; cf. also Christensen, 2023). On this basis, he argues that the concept of ‘cultural sustainability’ should be abandoned, and that culture should be returned to its original intent, while the term ‘sustainability’ should be reserved for its initial ecological focus—particularly in relation to climate change as addressed in The Brundtland Report (Isar, 2017; cf. also Christensen, 2023). Although Isar’s critique may have some merit—and one must remain critically aware of this risk of conceptual inflation, or what Dessein et al. (2015) refer to as “conceptual obese”—it is also important to note that this line of criticism, in principle, applies equally to the social and economic pillars. As such, it carries far-reaching implications for the broader understanding and application of the sustainability discourse based on the three-pillar model.

Cultural Sustainability in the Healthcare Sector

> *"While overlaps exist within the priorities and methods of environmental/ecological science and public health, it has been suggested that public health researchers have been "slow to engage" in today's sustainability agenda."*
>
> *Rawiworrankul, Triumchaisri & Mawn, 2010*

While the concept of sustainability is well-established in the scientific literature, relatively few studies have addressed it from a health-related perspective or within a healthcare context. However, a growing number of researchers have begun to highlight various connections between health and sustainability. "Modern knowledge assumes that the issues of sustainability and health are inseparable phenomenon", write Ali and Faruquie (2016), who further argue: "Multidisciplinary research conducted at different parts of the world concludes that sustainability has its direct bearing on the overall wellbeing of the society. From this point of view, sustainability has an intertwined relationship with total health".

If only a limited number of researchers have addressed the relationship between sustainability and health, even fewer have attempted to conceptualise cultural sustainability in relation to health and the healthcare sector (Rawiworrakul et al., 2010). In this section, we present and discuss a selection of the still limited body of scientific contribution that explore cultural and socio-cultural sustainability specifically within the domain of health and healthcare.

Rawiworrakul, Triumchaisri, and Mawn (2010) explicitly engage with the concept of cultural sustainability—a term that also appears in the title of their article: "Promoting Cultural Sustainability in the Context of Public Health". The authors

argue that the sustainability agenda has expanded beyond the economic, environmental, and political realms to also encompass sustainable approaches to public health. Against this background, the paper seeks to highlight the challenges associated with sustainability in relation to contemporary health issues, and to explore the concept of sustainability within the context of cultural, economic, and public health challenges. The paper strongly advocates for the role of culture—understood here as collective values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours—in defining and addressing sustainability challenges from a public health perspective. It concludes, among other things, that it is time for public health experts to learn the language of ecologists and economists, who have long been at the forefront of discussions of an "integrated sustainable human development paradigm". Furthermore, the paper argues that "an evolving ecological model which acknowledges behavioural, cultural, social and economic influences on the sustainability of a healthy environment is an urgent mandate…" (Rawiworrakul et al., 2010).

Ali and Faruquie (2016) deal explicitly with what they describe as "the two interlinked but fairly distinct aspects of sustainability, i.e. social and cultural sustainability", and their effects on health, health outcomes, and well-being. They point out that while the relationship between sustainability on the one hand and health and well-being on the other has been explored in a substantial body of research, the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability have, until recently, played only a marginal role in the scientific knowledge base. Acknowledging these deficiencies in scientific understanding, they argue that sustainability and health are inseparable phenomena, that "sustainability has an intertwined relationship with total health", and that "sustainability has its direct bearing on the overall wellbeing of the society" (Ali & Faruquie, 2016). They particularly emphasise that social and cultural

sustainability are essential for understanding the relationship between sustainability and health. As they conclude, “social and cultural sustainability are important aspects to understand the relationship between health of the inhabitants and their dwelling” (Ali & Faruquie, 2016), which constitutes the primary empirical focus of their study.

Ramirez, West, and Costell (2013) examine the concept of sustainability in healthcare organisations, with particular emphasis on the key managerial competencies and change management strategies required to implement a culture of sustainability. The authors do not explicitly refer to a fourth pillar of cultural sustainability but instead draw on the so-called sustainability trinity—environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Nevertheless, they explicitly discuss ‘all the dimensions of sustainability’, adopting a holistic approach that balances environmental, social, and economic concerns—an approach that, in various contexts, is described as a ‘culture of sustainability’, ‘socio-cultural sustainability’ or “an organisational culture of sustainability in health care organisation” (Ramirez et al., 2013). In this context, they highlight the importance of addressing the ‘development of the total person’, ‘holistic well-ness’, and the user perspective. These considerations are discussed under the heading “Development of a culture of sustainability in health care organizations” (Ramirez et al., 2013). Their findings suggest that healthcare managers who adopt a holistic sustainability framework are better equipped to implement strategies for multidisciplinary teams, respond to continuous change, optimise operations, and effectively manage care quality. In this sense, a holistic approach to sustainability represents an innovative and practical strategy for quality improvement in healthcare organisations.

Angeli et al. (2018) seek to identify the determinants influencing ‘Bottom-of-the-Pyramid’ patients’ choices between

public and private hospitals in an Indian slum context, with the aim of examining the socio-cultural acceptability of existing models of private healthcare delivery. While the authors do not use the term 'cultural sustainability' directly, they draw on what in this context is referred to as 'the triple-bottom-line framework', in which sustainability is understood as a balance between financial, societal, and environmental objectives. Nonetheless, they explicitly refer to concepts such as 'socio-cultural sustainability', 'socio-cultural acceptability', and "the co-creation of consumer-centric and socio-culturally sensitive business models for healthcare delivery" (Angeli et al., 2018). The primary focus is the development of business models for the healthcare industry, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Their findings indicate that effective and inclusive healthcare delivery models in resource-constrained environments require co-creation approaches that integrate patients' insights, values, and beliefs from the outset of the decision-making processes related to value propositions and delivery mechanisms. This is described as a "co-creation process through which the healthcare need is identified by the patient and by the organization together" (Angeli et al., 2018).

Irving and Hoffman's (2012) paper, "Augmented Reality in the cultural sustainability of Indigenous cultures", describes the development and implementation of a location-based Augmented Reality (AR) learning tool designed to support the cultural sustainability of Aboriginal culture. Cultural sustainability is defined here as "the ability to retain cultural identity and to allow change to be guided in ways that are consistent with the cultural values of a people", drawing on the Sustainable Development Research Institute's definition (1998, cited in Irving & Hoffman, 2012). The tool was developed within a university course on Indigenous Cultures and Health in an Australian health sciences faculty. Its primary purpose

was to support health science students in understanding the significance of culturally embedded knowledge in relation to Aboriginal people's health and well-being, thereby equipping future health professionals with essential cross-cultural competencies. The paper concludes that culture, knowledge, and lived experience play a crucial role in shaping health outcomes and that cultural sustainability, in particular, significantly affects the health and well-being of Australian Indigenous peoples.

As a partial conclusion, there is a growing—though still limited—body of scientific research linking health and the healthcare sector to sustainability, including cultural sustainability. In other words, a strand of research approaches health and healthcare systems from a perspective aligned with the construct of cultural sustainability. However, this research remains fragmented, geographically dispersed, and has emerged relatively recent compared to many other domains of sustainability studies. As Rawiworrakul et al. (2010) observe: "While overlaps exist within the priorities and methods of environmental/ecological science and public health, it has been suggested that public health researchers have been "slow to engage" in today's sustainability agenda". They further emphasise that: "… it is time for public health experts to learn the language of economists and ecologists who have been at the forefront of the discussion of an "integrated sustainable human development paradigm"" (Rawiworrankul et al., 2010).

Culture *in*, *for*, and *as* Sustainable Development

"Sustainability is no longer about doing less harm. It's about doing more good."

Jochen Zeitz, President, CEO and chairman of the board of Harley-Davidson

As there is no universally accepted definition of cultural sustainability, there is likewise no consensus on how culture should be linked to sustainability (Christensen, 2023). Chiu (2004) introduces two interpretations of cultural sustainability. The first concerns the contribution of shared values, perceptions, and attitudes to sustainable development, framing cultural sustainability as a precondition for sustainable development. The second focuses on the sustainability of culture itself, viewing culture as a critical component of development whose evolution must occur within ecological limits (cf. also Ali & Faruquie, 2016).

Building on Chiu's framework, Soini and Birkeland (2014) and Dessein et al. (2015) identify three analytically distinct, though interrelated, ways in which culture can be integrated into—or contribute to—sustainable development. These are referred to, respectively, as culture *in*, culture *for*, and culture *as* sustainable development. The identification of these three approaches—or 'roles' of culture in sustainable development—is derived from an extensive review of peer-reviewed scientific literature that explicitly engages with the concept of 'cultural sustainability' (Soini & Birkeland, 2014).

- First, culture can play a supporting and relatively self-contained role, referred to as 'culture *in* sustainable development' (corresponding to Chiu's second in-

terpretation). This role aligns with the notion of culture as a fourth pillar. The approach expands the conventional sustainability discourse by introducing culture as a more-or-less autonomous, independent, and self-standing dimension—alongside, but distinct from, the environmental, economic, and social pillars. The fourth pillar perspective is frequently associated with a narrower, humanistic or aesthetic understanding of culture—as embodied in the arts, the cultural and creative sector, the cultural and creative economy, and as a distinct sphere of public policy.

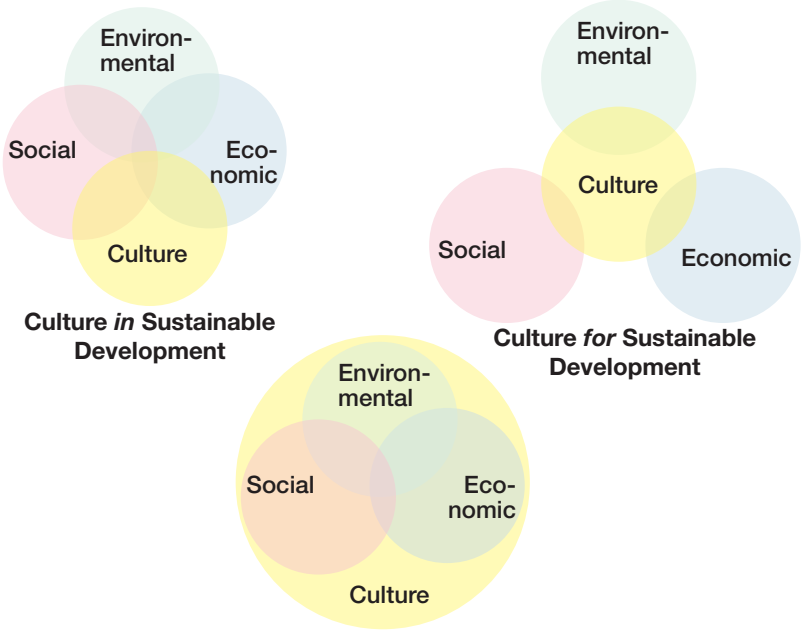
- Second, culture can serve a connecting, mediating, and bridging role among the other dimensions of sustainability—a perspective through which understandings of social, economic, and environmental sustainability may be articulated. This role is characterised as 'culture *for* sustainable development'. In this mode, culture assumes a framing and contextualising function that can guide and balance sustainable development in light of competing or conflicting demands from the three existing pillars. In other words, cultural processes translate environmental, economic, and social needs into a shared language. Here, culture functions as a driver of sustainable processes in a more instrumental sense, extending beyond the domain of culture itself. In relation to the conceptually broad and ambiguous notion of culture, this role aligns with the wider anthropological understanding of culture, encompassing values, meanings, expressions, and ways of life.

- Third, culture can assume an even more fundamental role, serving as the essential foundation and neces-

> sary condition for achieving the overarching aims of sustainable development—that is, the transformative role of generating sustainability (corresponding, more-or-less, to Chiu's first interpretation). This role is referred to as 'culture *as* sustainable development'. In this approach, culture acts as an enabler of sustainability by integrating, coordinating, and guiding all dimensions of sustainable action. Culture here is understood as a worldview rooted in a system of values and beliefs that, through intentions and motivations, shape human actions. This foundational role of culture is seen as essential for the transition to a truly sustainable society—for example, through increased awareness, behavioural change, and the enhancement of individuals' and communities' capacities to adopt more sustainable ways of life. Dessein et al. (2015) note on several occasions that by recognising culture as the basis of all human action and decision-making, and as a primary consideration in sustainability thinking, culture and sustainability become mutually interwoven. In this view, the traditional distinctions between the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability begin to dissolve.

As is evident from the above, the three roles span a continuum from a humanistic or aesthetic conception of culture to an anthropological understanding of culture as 'whole ways of life'.

Dessein et al. (2015) point out that all three modes of cultural intervention in sustainable development are valid and resonate under different contextual conditions. Although the three roles of culture in sustainable development are more-or-less distinct, they are never entirely discrete and often interweave and overlap.



ROLE OF CULTURE	Culture *in* sustainability	Culture *for* sustainability	Culture *as* sustainability
Definition of culture	culture as capital	culture as a 'way of life'	culture as semiosis
Culture and development	culture as an achievement in development	culture as a resource and condition for development	development as a cultural process
Value of culture	intrinsic	instrumental and intrinsic	embedded
Roles	supportive	connecting	transforming

Figure 7: Visualisation of the relationship between the three conceptual approaches through which culture can be integrated into or contribute to sustainable development (authors' own illustration based on Dessein et al., 2015; Soini & Birkeland, 2014; Soini & Dessein, 2016.)

Dessein et al. (2015) propose that this framework serves as a systematic approach for analysing the role of culture in sustainable development, and that it can be applied in both research and policy contexts concerning culture and sustainability, for example, as a tool for identifying and characterising diverse positions within the field. In the following, we draw on the conceptual framework of culture *in/for/as* sustainable development developed by Dessein et al. (2015), Soini and Birkeland (2014), and Soini and Dessein (2016) to analyse and interpret the various perspectives and statements provided by healthcare professionals from municipalities and regions working in Community Health Centres (CHCs).

The following empirical analysis also requires the introduction of a few additional analytical concepts, which are therefore presented within this context.

In his book *Urban Sustainability in Theory and Practice: Circles of Sustainability*, Paul James introduces two forms of sustainability: 'negative sustainability' and 'positive sustainability'. 'Negative sustainability' is defined as the maintenance of a system or process through the reduction of the harmful effects produced by previous phases of development—that is, sustaining the status quo primarily through acts of mitigation or negation. In contrast, 'positive sustainability' entails defining the conditions for what is considered positively desirable. It involves envisioning and negotiating future-oriented practices that reflect how we want to live in order to secure the long-term viability of those conditions. In James' words, "Positive sustainability is defined as practices and meanings of human engagement that make for an ongoing lifeworld that projects natural and social flourishing or vibrancy" (James, 2015).

The creation of positive sustainability, according to James, depends on understanding what kinds of community relations are valued by the people living and working in a given

context. He argues that both negative and positive sustainability can be identified across all four domains of social life addressed in the *Circles of Sustainability* model: ecology, economy, politics, and culture. To draw on James' own examples: negative ecological sustainability could involve reducing carbon emissions; negative economic sustainability could involve risk management; negative political sustainability could involve reducing corruption or violence, etc. It is precisely this difference between 'positive' and 'negative sustainability' that is expressed in a condensed form in Harley Davidson president Jochen Zeitz's quote: "Sustainability is no longer about doing less harm. It's about doing more good".

Finally, Thompson and Barton (1994), distinguish between 'anthropocentric' and 'ecocentric' conceptions of sustainability. 'Anthropocentric sustainability' focuses on human-centred benefits such as economic growth and improved living conditions, including better health. From this perspective, nature is valued primarily for the resources and material benefits it provides to humans. To return to a previously discussed document, The Brundtland Report is a paradigmatic representative of anthropocentric sustainability, as is evident, for example, when the rationale for the work is presented as: "Economy is not just about the production of wealth, and ecology is not just about the protection of nature; they are both equally relevant for improving the lot of mankind" (Brundtland, 1987a). In contrast, 'ecocentric sustainability' emphasises the intrinsic value of nature and the need to protect ecosystems, regardless of their direct utility to human beings. Here, nature is valued for its own sake.

Taken together, these typologies highlight the diverse—and at times conflicting—approaches to sustainability. Drawing on and applying these frameworks can help to navigate, analyse, and better understand the complexity of the construct of sustainable development.

Analysis

> *"I thought, now we really … want the staff to feel like a unified team within the centre, and that we have a bit of a common direction. So we could do … some joint seminars and joint social events every now and then to help establish a framework for that."*
>
> *Health professional, Municipality F*

Methods

To investigate the perceptions and practical applications of concepts related to cultural sustainability within the Danish healthcare sector and CHCs, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), using an interview guide, with key stakeholders affiliated with CHCs, representing both municipal and regional perspectives. The interview guide included themes such as organisational coherence, sustainability, health policies, and management.

The selected CHCs were geographically dispersed, ensuring representation from all five Danish regions. Through these interviews, we explored stakeholders' views on sustainability concepts, their collaborative practices, their engagement with culture, and the degree of organisational coherence within the CHCs. All interviews were transcribed and coded using a data-driven approach (Gibbs, 2007). Quotations were translated from Danish to English, and all cited statements were anonymised. The interviews were conducted between autumn 2022 and spring 2024, representing a total of 19.5 hours of interview material.

The health centres were classified according to municipality size, encompassing four small island municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants (Municipality B, G, I, and J); five medium-sized municipalities with populations ranging

from 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants (Municipality A, C, E, F, and K); and two larger municipalities with populations exceeding 50,000 (Municipalities D and H). In addition, three regional offices (Regions A-C) and one general practitioner (GP) were included in the sample (see Figure 8).

POPULATION SIZE	NUMBER OF MUNICIPALITIES
Small < 20.000	4
20.000 < Middle < 50.000	5
Large > 50.000	2
TOTAL	11
TYPE OF BUILDINGS	
Repurposed hospital	8
Newly build centre	3
TOTAL	11

Figure 8: Overview of the sampled Community Health Centres (CHCs), including population size, number of municipalities, and building types

Although the interview guide did not include questions explicitly targeting cultural sustainability, nearly all informants addressed the topic, either directly or indirectly. In the following, we analyse the cultural sustainability initiatives identified in the interviews conducted with the CHCs and organise them into thematic categories.

Work environment

The interviews revealed a central theme: organisational culture among employees. These discussions primarily revolved

around interdisciplinary collaboration, shared norms and values, and an emphasis on the collective as a cohesive unit, as exemplified by the following quote.

> "I think that culture is almost completely decisive, and it must be understood in the way that the whole culture of a place … also has something to do with interdisciplinarity and something to do with teams—how you work … How do you see yourself as … an individual, or as part of a group and part of a culture; that is, a carrier of culture? … I think the culture in locations, in the individual units …, is absolutely crucial for citizen quality and coherence." (Municipality E)

The quote underscores the importance of adopting a comprehensive understanding of culture, advocating for a holistic perspective that extends beyond surface-level dimensions. In this context, culture is clearly assigned a central role in shaping both the workplace and the understanding of organisational life. It is equally evident that a broad anthropological conception of culture is being invoked. Although there is no explicit reference to 'whole ways of life', the phrase 'the whole culture of a place'—here understood as referring to the 'workplace'—clearly echoes this idea.

At the same time, culture is framed as the essential foundation and prerequisite for the workplace's functioning and overall activities. According to Dessein et al.'s (2015) typology, this corresponds to the role of 'culture *as* sustainable development', positioning culture as an enabling force. In this role, culture integrates, coordinates, and guides actions and practices, and is understood as a worldview grounded in a system of values, beliefs, and shared practices.

It also emerges from the quote that an anthropocentric, rather than an ecocentric, position, is emphasised. The individual, the citizen, or the patient is valued—not the environment. Likewise, the focus is on 'positive sustainability', where an ideal future state is projected, rather than on 'negative sustainability', which involves negating and reducing existing shortcomings or adversities.

This understanding underscores the role of individuals as bearers of qualities such as resilience and resourcefulness, suggesting that they possess agency within the organisational cultural framework and are capable of responding to challenges and constraints. It implies that a strong cultural foundation has a significant impact on both the quality of care and the overall coherence of the healthcare system.

> "Sustainability … means that our efforts are documented, so if I'm in an accident tomorrow, others can just take over on [i.e. from/based on, Eds.] a piece of paper, because it's described who does what, what the content is, and who has the task. And sustainability is that I try to involve employees in the work they help carry out, so they know who I usually talk to about this and that …, so that things can continue regardless of who is present. What we do has to be sustainable in the long term. So sustainable in the social aspect is also that we have this value and say that we would like our efforts to also … help create networks at the social level …" (Municipality A)

Here, sustainability is understood as organisational continuity, resilience, robustness, and preparedness. Documenting procedures and responsibilities is considered essential to ensure seamless operations, particularly in cases of employ-

ee absence. Such practices align with principles of cultural sustainability, specifically those concerned with preserving institutional knowledge and practices, as well as with notions of cultural sustainability as robustness, adaptive capacity, and local adaptation (Järvelä, 2023).

The municipality fosters a culture of shared knowledge and establishes a foundation that transcends the individual. Teams may change, but knowledge is preserved by embedding practices within organisational culture while maintaining core values and functions. Together with the preceding quote from Municipality E, this example underscores the symbiotic relationship between cultural sustainability, interdisciplinary collaboration, and teamwork. It demonstrates how effective cooperation among individuals from diverse professional and disciplinary backgrounds fosters an inclusive environment, consistent with the core tenets of cultural sustainability.

Furthermore, the statement reflects a broader organisational perspective, emphasising the importance of role clarification and shared purpose. Clear communication and a deep-rooted understanding of organisational culture contribute to cultural sustainability by fostering a harmonious and cohesive work environment. Finally, sustainability is linked to the cultivation of social networks, community building, cultural identity, and everyday cultural practices.

With regard to the work environment, culture functions as an enabler of sustainability and as a foundation for broader sustainability efforts. This provides a clear example of the role of 'culture *as* sustainable development', wherein culture underpins all forms of activity and thereby supports the other pillars within the sustainability construct. Once again, the statement reflects an anthropocentric conception of sustainability, prioritising human needs and values over environmental concerns—that is, in contrast to an ecocentric perspective. Elements of 'positive sustainability' are also evident, particu-

larly in the forward-looking projection of a desirable future organisational and workplace culture over the long term. At the same time, however, the quote also acknowledges current challenges and shortcomings as a point of departure. It this respect, it incorporates elements of 'negative sustainability', aimed at mitigating or reducing the detrimental effects of existing practices.

Geographic Proximity

The geographical distribution of the interviewed municipalities and regions is highly diverse. Some are small island municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, while others are larger municipalities with populations ranging from over 50,000 to nearly 100,000 inhabitants. These geographical differences are also reflected in patient care practices and in how the CHCs are perceived and utilised.

> "As a small municipality, we are closer to each other, which sometimes makes the work easier. We always know whom to contact, although it can also be problematic, because you often run into Mr Hansen at the local store." (Municipality G)

The statement highlights the role of culture within a small municipal context, where geographic proximity brings individuals into closer contact and necessitates heightened attention to cultural dynamics. It underscores the centrality of culture in shaping collaborative efforts and emphasises the importance of cultivating a positive work environment, particularly in settings where citizens and employees frequently encounter one another in both professional and informal contexts.

The geography of the CHCs and the way in which proximity is leveraged within the municipalities suggest that culture

functions as an enabler of sustainability. Accordingly, this situates the case within the category of 'culture *as* sustainability' in Dessein et al.'s typology. Consequently, the broad anthropological conception of culture is also operative in this context. The geographic proximity between citizens and employees foregrounds the importance of staff well-being in their everyday professional lives. Furthermore, it highlights that in smaller municipalities it is relatively more straightforward to establish and disseminate a shared set of norms and values across departments—including those engaged in healthcare provision.

CHCs in small communities face a distinct dilemma: balancing close personal relationships with professional responsibilities. This dynamic is particularly evident in Municipality B, where a staff member notes, "We have both private and professional sides in … [Municipality B, Eds.], which we need to navigate" (Municipality B). The geographic and social proximity between healthcare professionals and residents tends to blur the boundaries between personal and professional roles. While such closeness may foster trust, familiarity, and a sense of comfort, it also carries the risk of overstepping professional boundaries, as informal interactions may influence clinical judgment or decision-making.

The statement highlights the challenges of maintaining confidentiality and impartiality in close-knit community settings. In such contexts, healthcare professionals must carefully balance their engagement in local social life with the obligation to uphold professional integrity. Encounters with patients outside clinical settings—such as in shops or social gatherings—frequently occur and further complicate this balance.

> "They take culture by the hand, then introduce health and culture into the local community, con-

> tributing to a cultural glue that helps prevent loneliness and various other factors, and so on, and we could go on with the other things." (Municipality K)

The unique cultural dynamics within a municipality are crucial in shaping its collaborative and organisational ethos. The significance of geographic proximity, shared values, cultural cohesion, and the quality of the work environment all contribute to the cultural sustainability of the CHC, as illustrated in Municipality K. This suggests that fostering a strong and inclusive organisational culture is not only imperative, but also particularly relevant in smaller contexts, where it directly influences employee well-being and the quality-of-service delivery, including healthcare.

Leadership Culture and Volunteer Culture

> "…to a greater extent, having a shared culture is essential. Otherwise, we might share a physical space within a Community Health Centre, but we aim to go further. We want individuals to be acquainted with each other's areas of responsibility and to refer to the services available within the healthcare centre. This simplifies and streamlines the healthcare system for the citizens. This is why we place strong emphasis on the need for a shared leadership culture." (Municipality F)

Municipality F approaches culture as a shared set of values—a collective endeavour fostered through collaboration across leadership levels. Accordingly, the establishment of a cultural framework within the CHC is understood as a joint responsibility involving both management and staff. This cul-

ture reflects an explicit commitment to promoting sustainable collaboration and cohesion among the various sectors and health professionals operating within the CHC. Such an approach to cultivating organisational culture is so deeply embedded in the municipality's practice that it is explicitly referenced in the municipal strategy as a 'shared culture' (Municipality F).

Notably, Municipality F places strong emphasis on volunteerism, recognising the volunteer culture as a significant pillar of cultural sustainability that serves to bridge the organisation and the local community.

> "Yes, it can also be social events, the act of staying active in the community; our sustainability is very much about community." (Municipality F)

Volunteerism is regarded as an essential component of social sustainability and as a practical means of generating a positive impact on patients within the CHCs (Skovrup & Pedersen, 2025).

This approach to—and understanding of—culture, in which culture is closely associated with a shared set of norms and values, social cohesion and connectedness, local networks and communities, as well as a shared leadership culture, reflects the broad anthropological conception of culture. Within this view, culture is positioned as a foundational element and a necessary precondition for other organisational activities, forms of collaboration, and service quality. In other words, culture functions as an enabler and corresponds to the role of 'culture *as* sustainable development'.

"Culture Shock"—Navigating New Work Structures in Community Health Centres

Integrating professional groups within CHCs is central to their success, yet it also presents significant challenges. In Region A, a staff member remarks: "The major cultural shift is probably not so much with the citizens; it's really very much within the professional groups in our healthcare system … because we need to take ownership of this" (Region A). This statement illustrates that the primary obstacles to successful integration do not stem from citizen engagement, but rather from within the professional cultures themselves, which must adapt to new forms of collaboration and shared responsibility.

Municipality I echoes this concern: "The culture of sharing information … can sometimes lead to areas of contact we might not recall" (Municipality I). The statement highlights how informal information flows can emerge within municipal structures and how they may be obstructed if not actively maintained and supported. The municipality emphasises the importance of cross-departmental information sharing among health, social services, and employment sectors to promote a more integrated approach and prevent potential oversights.

CHCs rely on interdisciplinary collaboration; however, integrating diverse professional cultures—such as those of doctors, nurses, and social care workers—can present significant challenges. Many healthcare professionals have traditionally operated within more hierarchical or siloed structures, particularly in hospital settings. The transition to a Community Health Centre model—which emphasises teamwork, shared decision-making, and a holistic approach to care—requires a substantial cultural shift within and across professional groups. Region A's emphasis on professional ownership underscores the importance of each discipline adopting new

ways of working to ensure that no single profession dominates the decision-making process.

The experience in Municipality K highlights the challenges inherent in this transition: “We have a couple of colleagues who’ve come from the hospital world and have had a culture shock” (Municipality K). The shift from a hospital setting—often characterised by strict hierarchies and highly specialised roles—to the more collaborative, community-oriented model of health centres can indeed be disorienting. Staff accustomed to clearly defined roles must adapt to a more fluid and integrated approach, where disciplinary boundaries are less rigid and teamwork is central. This cultural shift necessitates not only structural changes but also personal and professional adaptation, which can be particularly demanding for personnel accustomed to more traditional healthcare environments.

Building a Community Health Centre—Building a Culture

Some of the CHCs are newly established facilities. In this context, several informants referred to the cultural framework being developed from the very outset of the centre’s formation:

> “From the start, we set up some working groups, that is, one for those who work with the culture in the centre, which ran for a year. Then it settled down quite naturally into social activities in the centre.” (Municipality H)

They further elaborate on the intended purpose of the group working on cultural development:

> "We worked with a cultural group; it was simply at the very beginning of the centre's establishment. There was a representative from each department, that is, from the municipal and regional sectors, although not many from the private ones. We discussed how the culture at the centre should be shaped. Many staff members came from separate locations and suddenly had to become part of a shared community … Now, we are suddenly part of something larger, … So, do we have a greeting policy? How do we support one another? What do we do when encountering an outwardly reactive citizen? Some staff have assault alarms, and some do not—issues like that. We simply talked … and had some good discussions, and after about a year, the group was shut down, as we had agreed on a set of policies, and a document was produced." (Municipality H)

Municipality H indicates that culture must be developed deliberately and autonomously within the newly established CHC, particularly in parallel with the construction of cross-sectoral collaborations. One component of the resulting policy document was a greeting policy, which specified that employees should greet one another when encountering each other in shared spaces such as hallways, the cantina, and similar areas. This policy was designed to strengthen interpersonal connections among staff and to foster a positive and cohesive working environment—particularly important in the context of a newly established CHC.

Municipality D has also recently established a new CHC to replace a repurposed hospital facility. A key element of the architectural brief was that the design of the building should facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration:

> "This is something we have been working towards for a long time. So, it's not that this mindset doesn't exist today, but it's at least something that needs to be further realised within the community health centre. And when we say that—and as has also been said, since it has been part of the architectural requirements—it should resemble a cosy centre. So, you were invited to have these communities and cross-functional collaborations. It has been in the brief of the architectural firm that had to design the centre." (Municipality D)

The municipality notes that the architectural design requirements are intended to foster a sense of community, which aligns with the desired collaborative atmosphere. Overall, the emphasis is placed on the idea that designing physical spaces to support interaction within the CHC can actively encourage collaboration and cross-disciplinary engagement. In doing so, such spatial strategies contribute to cultivating a shared culture that enhances the facility's overall effectiveness and operational coherence.

Here, culture is once again conceptualised and described as a set of practices, traditions, everyday habits, and forms of interaction that are socially negotiated and collectively agreed upon—in this case, even formalised in an official document. This reflects an anthropological understanding of culture as a lived and shared social reality. Moreover, culture is presented as something that can be consciously developed and shaped through collective processes and even embedded into the physical and architectural design of the space—thereby functioning as a structural precondition for the cultivation of cultural norms and behaviours.

Absence of Culture

In other CHCs, culture has not been explicitly discussed or intentionally cultivated as part of the shared experience of co-locating in the same building. This is illustrated in the following example from Municipality I:

> "The culture of sharing information and remembering that there may be some contact points far away that we do not quite remember—and sometimes, that's not even necessary. But occasionally, you encounter a situation and think, why haven't we heard anything about this?" (Municipality I)

The informant from Municipality I reflects on the notion that information sharing constitutes a form of organisational culture. In the absence of such a culture among employees, effective collaboration can become significantly more difficult. The municipality underscores the importance of cultivating a culture of information sharing and promotes openness to receiving information—even when it may initially appear peripheral or unrelated to one's immediate responsibilities.

Recognising the absence of a shared culture, actively creating one, or engaging in mutual acknowledgement in daily work life are central to collaboration among stakeholders within CHCs. As highlighted by other municipalities, cultural sustainability is grounded in practices such as information sharing, interdisciplinary cooperation, and the ongoing recognition of colleagues in everyday professional interactions.

Similarly, there is a clear indication of an anthropocentric approach to sustainability, with a focus on human well-being rather than environmental concerns—i.e., as opposed to an ecocentric perspective. Moreover, distinct elements of 'positive sustainability' are evident in the articulation of the

long-term aspirational goals for the work environment and a collaborative organisational culture.

Cultural Management

Some informants at the regional level also emphasise the need for cultural transformation within existing management models in order to foster greater coherence across the healthcare sector:

> "I think the major challenge regarding cultural management is probably not so much with the citizens. It's actually … very much within the professional groups that we have in our healthcare system, the doctors and nurses, right? And they are the ones who … just have to come on board from the outset so that they develop a sense of ownership." (Region A)

This quote from Region A underscores that the professional culture of healthcare personnel is crucial to shaping the broader institutional culture and that intentional cultural management is required to implement and develop a cohesive culture across departments.

A frequently cited aphorism among contemporary managers, consultants, and business advisors is that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast',[9] meaning that no matter how well-designed and perfect a strategic plan may be, it will ultimately fail if the organisation or team does not share an appropriate culture—that is, if there is no organisational culture that motivates and enables employees to translate strategy into practice. This is precisely the issue at stake in this context. The region emphasises that for strategies to be realised and objectives achieved, it is essential that professionals within

the organisation develop a sense of ownership. This, in turn, requires leadership that actively engages with and fosters workplace culture—in effect, creating the conditions for a shared cultural foundation.

A new approach to cultural management is also required in relation to the development and implementation of new healthcare technologies.

> "But when we talk about tools and technology, it's also to some extent based on experiential knowledge, … so there are some discussions that need to be resolved in that area as well. So there will be a lot of … cultural processing that is needed, and the change management part of it, which must be focused on in building up e-healthcare and competence development within the digital field." (Region A)

Region A acknowledges the importance of tools, technologies, and experiential knowledge in the implementation and integration of new digital healthcare solutions. Moreover, it emphasises that cultural dimensions must be taken into account and that cultural nuances require careful consideration and understanding. More specifically, implementing a transition to an e-healthcare solution is not merely a technological shift; it also requires addressing cultural barriers and ensuring that stakeholders are prepared for these changes. Both technical and cultural dimensions must be considered in tandem when introducing new digital healthcare solutions.

> "The things we could take forward, we have chosen to do, that is, among other things, digitisation, putting power on everything that can be the first choice, and it is a joint management culture in the

> house. Then, there are some functions for particularly vulnerable citizens." (Municipality F)

The municipalities also discuss cultural management, particularly in the context of fostering new collaborations between primary and secondary care—namely, between municipalities and regional authorities. The quote illustrates how joint cultural management has been adopted within CHCs as part of a collaborative partnership between municipal and regional stakeholders.

In summary, culture and technology are deeply intertwined. Culture can drive technological adoption, and technology can, in turn, reinforce cultural practices. However, culture can also hinder technological innovation, just as technology can disrupt or displace existing cultural norms. Therefore, the successful introduction of new technologies in the workplace necessitates effective management—and change management—of both cultural and technological dimensions. Culture can thus act as both a driver and an enabler of technology. Conversely, without a workplace culture that is aligned with and prepared for technological change, implementation efforts are likely to fail. In such cases, culture will eat strategy—as well as technology—for breakfast. The quotes presented above reflect and thematise these complex and reciprocal dynamics between culture and technology.

According to the statements from the informants, culture can thus function as both a driver and an enabler of technological innovation and sustainability. In this sense, it embodies both culture *for* and culture *as* sustainable development. However, the successful introduction of new technologies and sustainability initiatives necessitates not only effective leadership but also, crucially, strategic change management. Once again, the emphasis lies primarily on human factors—on the professional culture within the organisation and the

collaborative culture among employees—rather than on environmental considerations. This reflects an anthropocentric approach to sustainability rather than an ecocentric one. Furthermore, there is a clear orientation towards long-term, aspirational goals—i.e., 'positive sustainability'—as opposed to short-term, reactive responses to existing problems, characteristic of 'negative sustainability'.

Discussion

> *"If habits, practices, and attitudes are to be transformed, this requires not only new governance frameworks, but also leadership that moves the culture that otherwise eats up the well-meaning strategies."*
>
> *Hjalte Aaberg, former Director, Region Hovedstaden, 2024*

In this discussion, we review the key findings, draw connections between the various sections, and discuss how the results align with and contribute to the existing scientific literature.

We set out to answer the basic question of whether the concept of cultural sustainability could meaningfully contribute to the understanding, implementation, and development of sustainability within the healthcare sector and, if so, in what ways, from what perspectives, and how it might enrich and inform healthcare practices and systems.

The review of the concept of culture and cultural sustainability in relation to the broader sustainability construct demonstrated that culture as a dimension—and cultural sustainability as an idea—have long been present within sustainability discourse. However, they initially appeared as implicit assumptions or underlying premises and only later emerged as more explicitly articulated demands. Conversely, despite the efforts of various actors and institutions, culture and cultural sustainability have yet to be fully institutionalised in formal policy documents, international agreements, strategic goals, or standardised measurement frameworks.

The investigation of cultural sustainability as a distinct concept revealed that there is a relatively long and well-established tradition of engaging with cultural sustainability within the broader sustainability discourse. Furthermore, the

findings demonstrate that it is both meaningful and analytically relevant to discuss cultural sustainability as a separate dimension, clearly distinguishable from for example the concept of social sustainability.

Both the general literature review and the analysis of scientific publications on cultural sustainability within the healthcare sector indicate the emergence of a growing body of literature that explicitly—albeit in diverse ways and across multiple analytical levels—thematises and explores cultural sustainability, or socio-cultural sustainability, in relation to health and healthcare systems.

Regarding the alignment between our results and existing research, the following points can be highlighted:

Our findings are consistent with the conclusions of Ramirez et al. (2013), who argue that leadership and change management competencies are essential for implementing sustainability and fostering a culture of sustainability within healthcare organisations. Our empirical results also partially correspond to Ramirez et al.'s (2013) observation that healthcare management characterised by a holistic approach to sustainability—balancing different pillars, acknowledging the importance of the user perspective, and addressing the 'whole-person' and holistic well-being—is better equipped to manage continuous change and ensure quality in healthcare delivery. Moreover, our findings resonate with the results of Angeli et al. (2018), which suggest that the development of inclusive healthcare systems should be grounded in co-creation approaches that incorporate patients' values, insights, and beliefs, with health needs identified collaboratively by both patients and healthcare organisations. Finally, our results align with Irving and Hoffman's (2012) conclusion that culture plays a significant role in health, and that cultural sustainability has a tangible impact on health and well-being, making it a critical factor in achieving positive health outcomes.

Additionally, the empirical analysis of interviews with healthcare professionals at both municipal and regional levels revealed that the concepts, ideas, and discursive patterns present in discussions of sustainability within the healthcare system are closely aligned with the construct of cultural sustainability—even if the term itself is not explicitly or consistently invoked.

The discussions on cultural sustainability within CHCs underscore its multifaceted significance and enduring relevance to these institutions. Culture is not merely a superficial attribute but rather a foundational element intricately woven into the structural and operational fabric of CHCs. Its expansive scope highlights its critical role in facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and fostering effective teamwork. This, in turn, underscores the importance of embracing diverse perspectives and cultivating a shared sense of purpose—both of which are essential components of cultural sustainability.

Furthermore, from an organisational perspective, the emphasis on clear communication, role clarification, and a deep understanding of organisational culture is crucial. These elements contribute to cultural sustainability by promoting a cohesive and harmonious working environment.

The discussions also engage with the dynamics of individual and group identities within the organisation. The distinction between individual and collective perception is particularly relevant in the context of cultural sustainability. Individuals function as carriers of culture, contributing to the development of a cohesive cultural framework, while groups—through shared understandings and common values—are responsible for establishing a collaborative and integrated working community.

The cross-contextual significance of cultural sustainability is clearly exemplified, highlighting its influence across multiple sectors within the healthcare system. This underscores

the foundational role of culture in promoting the quality of care and ensuring overall organisational coherence within the healthcare sector.

Sustainability is not a monolithic concept, nor is there a single way to interpret it. Within the healthcare sector, the meaning and application of cultural sustainability depend heavily on context and on the developmental state of the CHC. In newly established CHCs, the process of cultivating a new organisational culture often serves as a concrete manifestation of the concept of 'culture *as* sustainability'. Across the majority of contexts examined—such as work environment, geographic proximity, leadership culture, building a culture, and even architectural design—cultural sustainability is primarily articulated as 'culture *as* sustainability'. Here, culture is regarded as an enabler: it integrates, coordinates, and guides actions and practices, functioning as a foundational precondition for achieving sustainability. In a smaller number of contexts—such as technology adoption and cultural management—elements of 'culture *for* sustainability' also emerge. In these cases, culture functions as a driver or mediating force, facilitating alignment and integration between the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability.

The primary distinction between social and cultural sustainability, as observed in this context, lies in the emphasis on norms and values inherent in organisational culture and in efforts to make that culture tangible and lived. While cultural and social sustainability are conceptually distinct, certain elements overlap—for example, knowledge-sharing practices that evolve into embedded organisational cultures. Another important dimension of cultural sustainability is volunteerism, which is employed as a normative and value-based practice within the organisation, thereby reinforcing both cultural cohesion and social engagement.

Conclusions, Contributions, and Perspectives

> *"The biggest barrier to the success of the healthcare reform is cultural … the organisation does not move significantly if the culture remains unchanged."*
>
> *Hjalte Aaberg, former Director, Region Hovedstaden, 2024*

In this conclusion, we summarise and reflect upon the main findings and contributions of the study. We also critically address its limitations and consider their potential implications. Furthermore, we discuss the directions for future research and outline possible avenues for further investigation. The guiding research question was: To what extent—and in what ways—can the concept of 'cultural sustainability' contribute to the understanding, implementation, and advancement of sustainability within the healthcare sector?

This study aimed to contribute to both a theoretical and an empirical-analytical understanding of the concept of cultural sustainability within the healthcare sector by engaging with the theoretical discourse on cultural sustainability and analysing empirical accounts provided by employees in the Danish healthcare system.

Until recently, cultural sustainability has primarily been addressed—and most strongly promoted—by stakeholders affiliated with artistic and creative sectors. However, recognition of culture's significance in human-centred approaches to sustainable development has been steadily gaining momentum across other sectors, including, more recently, healthcare. This study responds to the growing need for systematic and context-specific investigations of cultural sustainability within healthcare.

Overall, our study demonstrates—through literature review, theoretical inquiry, and empirical analysis—that the concept of cultural sustainability, or culturally sustainable development, is highly relevant to health and the healthcare sector. The literature review reveals an emerging body of scholarly work on cultural sustainability, both in general and specifically within the domain of health and healthcare. The theoretical investigation of the sustainability discourse further indicates that applying cultural sustainability to healthcare is both meaningful and analytically useful, particularly when clearly distinguished from social sustainability. The empirical analysis of interviews and statements from Danish Community Health Centres (CHCs) provides evidence that cultural sustainability—as both a conceptual framework and a set of practices and ideas—actively informs reflections and decision-making within the healthcare system.

At the same time, the findings highlight the multidimensional nature of cultural sustainability within CHCs. Culture within CHCs is understood as encompassing norms, values, practices, and behaviours manifested across domains such as work environment, development of organisational cultures in newly established centres, cultural management, and geographic proximity. The interviews conducted across multiple municipalities underscore the pivotal role of cultural sustainability in facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration, shaping organisational culture, and enhancing quality of care and coherence within the healthcare system.

Based on both the empirical material and the literature review, cultural sustainability emerges as a developing discourse that introduces concepts and meanings with the potential to challenge and reshape conventional understandings of sustainability and sustainable development within the healthcare sector. As demonstrated in the empirical analysis, it also has the capacity to influence and transform percep-

tions of key practices and domains within the sector, including organisational structures, management and leadership approaches, and even architectural and interior design of healthcare spaces.

The overall conclusion of this study is that employing the concept of cultural sustainability within the context of health and the healthcare sector is both meaningful and analytically valuable. However, as the concept remains relatively novel in this domain, it requires further theoretical refinement and development. In addition, there is a clear need for more extensive, in-depth empirical studies to explore how cultural sustainability is understood and operationalised within healthcare systems. The present study has merely scratched the surface of the complex and multifaceted relationship between healthcare, the health sector, and the cultural dimensions of sustainability.

At a more detailed level, the interview material indicates that healthcare actors primarily draw on the broad anthropological understanding of culture—conceived as 'whole ways of life', encompassing meanings, values, identities, practices, and behaviours—particularly in relation to workplace and organisational culture. In this context, 'culture *as* sustainability' predominates—that is, culture as an enabler—with 'culture *for* sustainability'—culture as a driver—playing a secondary role. By contrast, no clear instances of 'culture *in* sustainability' were identified within the empirical material. This absence is perhaps unsurprising, as the 'culture *in* sustainability' role—aligned with the notion of culture as a distinct fourth pillar—is typically more prominent within the arts and cultural policy sectors and is generally associated with the narrower, humanistic concept of culture.

We further conclude that the type of sustainability articulated in the interviews aligns with what James (2015) describes as 'positive sustainability'. It is oriented toward the projection

of a desirable future state, rather than merely reducing or mitigating the adverse effects of existing or past social practices to maintain system functionality—as is characteristic of 'negative sustainability'.

Finally, the concept of sustainability reflected in the healthcare discourse is predominantly anthropocentric, emphasising human needs and benefits. In line with this, the empirical material does not contain examples of ecocentric sustainability, which centres on nature and ecosystems as intrinsic values, independent of human utility. This absence is perhaps not unexpected in a sector whose core mission is centred on human health and well-being.

This suggests a possible affinity between the anthropocentric position and the cultural—and, to some extent, the social—pillar within the sustainability framework; just as, in parallel, a similar connection may be observed between the ecocentric position and the environmental pillar. While this relationship warrants further exploration, it lies beyond the scope of the present study.

At this concluding point, it is important to note that the concept of cultural sustainability—and the broader field as a whole—continues to face conceptual challenges due to the multitude of definitions and perspectives, a situation attributable primarily to the concept's inherent complexity and multidimensional character.

This study has explored new ground at the intersection of the conventional three pillars of sustainability and the concepts of culture and cultural sustainability, with a particular focus on the health and healthcare sector. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has comprehensively examined the relationship between cultural sustainability and the healthcare sector at both theoretical and empirical levels. By addressing this gap, the present publication contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay among the

cultural, social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainable development within the healthcare sector.

This study offers several contributions to the existing scientific literature. First, we contribute to the theoretical discourse on cultural sustainability by exploring and proposing a conceptual definition and framework for understanding the term. Second, we advance the general understanding of cultural sustainability within the context of the healthcare sector. Third, we provide an empirical contribution by analysing how the discourse of cultural sustainability is understood and articulated in the Danish healthcare system. In doing so, this study offers important insights and implications for the broader scholarly conversation on sustainability in healthcare.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. First, although the empirical interview material is relatively extensive, it remains limited in scope. A more comprehensive and wide-ranging collection of empirical data might have nuanced the findings or yielded additional insights. Second, while the broader literature on sustainability—and its various pillars—is vast, the body of work specifically addressing cultural sustainability is also expanding. A more exhaustive and in-depth theoretical mapping of this literature could potentially have introduced additional concepts, alternative typologies, or new perspectives. Third, in exploring the relationship between health and the healthcare system on the one hand, and cultural sustainability on the other, a number of important issues have emerged that lie beyond the scope of the present study. One such issue is a possible connection or affinity between cultural sustainability and the notion of 'whole-person health', which will be briefly addressed below.

These limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research.

With regard to future research, the following points are particularly noteworthy: Several publications on health and

sustainability suggest potential connections between cultural sustainability and concepts related to the 'whole-person', 'whole-person health', and 'total health'. Ali and Faruquie (2016), for example, highlight the relationship between sustainability and the "overall wellbeing" of a society, as well as "total health"—the latter understood in line with the World Health Organisation's definition as "a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Ramirez et al. (2013) refer to the importance of addressing 'holistic well-ness' and the 'development of the total person'. Similarly, Rawiworrakul et al. (2010), in their work on promoting cultural sustainability in public health, refer to an "integrated sustainable human development paradigm" and advocate for "innovative collaborative empowerment approaches and actions … that impact health".[10] While this perspective lies beyond the scope of the present publication, it clearly warrants further investigation in future studies.[11]

A second issue that emerged from our analysis is that cultural sustainability is often associated with healthcare professionals, while significantly less attention has been directed towards its relevance for patients. Further research would benefit from a more patient-centred approach to cultural sustainability in healthcare.

As for implications and future perspectives, we recognise both the potential benefits—and indeed the necessity—of assigning culture a more central and transformative role in the discourse and practice of sustainable development, both in general and specifically within the healthcare sector. We are likewise convinced that the key findings of this study underscore the importance of acknowledging and addressing both the social and cultural dimensions as essential components of a truly sustainable and equitable healthcare system. Finally, we maintain that the progression towards a

more comprehensive integration of culture into the broader sustainable development agenda—and, more specifically, the incorporation of cultural sustainability within health and healthcare—will continue to evolve.

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Notes

1 Parts of this publication build upon and substantially revise and expand material originally presented in Skovrup (2025).

2 One of the authors of this publication is affiliated with the network project CultureSustain (https://cc.au.dk/culture-sustain), which investigates cultural sustainability in relation to museums. The network is currently engaged in developing a comprehensive literature review on the concept of 'cultural sustainability', not only in relation to museums but also across the broader body of scholarly literature. The present publication draws, to some extent, on this ongoing literature review (cf. Knudsen et al., 2026a & 2026b; Christensen, 2023).

3 The literature review was conducted using Aalborg University's search engine Primo and Google Scholar, employing search strings such as "Health" OR "Healthcare" AND "cultural" AND "sustainability". Titles, keywords, and abstracts of the retrieved articles were screened, and the most relevant publications were selected. Subsequently, backward snowballing was applied by reviewing the reference list of the selected articles.

4 It should be noted, however, that the Polish sociologist Dobroslawa Wiktor-Mach, in her article "What Role for Culture in the Age of Sustainable Development? UNESCO's Advocacy in the 2030 Agenda Negotiation" (2020) emphasises that "culture is integrated in a cross-cutting manner across various goals and targets" (Wiktor-Mach, 2020). Her analysis draws on the broad anthropological conceptualisation of culture (see also Christensen, 2023).

5 The International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), www.ifacca.org

6 The Committee on culture of the World Association of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), www.agenda21culture.net

7 The International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity, www.ficdc.org

8 Culture Action Europe, www.cultureactioneurope.org

9 The origin of the quote is unclear. While it is frequently attributed to management theorist Peter Drucker, other sources cite figures such as Steve Jobs or Jack Welch. See for example https://medium.com/@deanfoust_94519/peter-drucker-never-said-culture-eats-strategy-for-breakfast-0fe87beeb357

10 Cited in: Gitau, T., Gitau, M.W., and Waltner-Toews, D.: *Integrated Assessment of Health and Sustainability of Agroecosystems;* CRC Press: Boca Raton, FL, USA, 2009.

11 One of the authors of this publication has addressed this question in a dedicated article entitled: "The Whole Person Health and Social Sustainability: Transforming Healthcare Through the Patient's Eyes" (Skovrup, forthcoming; see also Skovrup, 2025).

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