

GFC BCA

The Group of Friends for
Culture-Based Climate Action

FROM ADVOCACY TO IMPLEMENTATION:

Initial findings on integrating cultural heritage into national climate adaptation planning

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ABSTRACT

Historically, climate governance under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has operated almost exclusively within technological, financial, and natural science paradigms, creating a persistent "culture gap" in global climate change policy and adaptation planning.

As a result, cultural assets and living practices linked with community-level resilience were either omitted entirely or referenced only symbolically in national policy and strategic planning documents such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and therefore excluded from formal planning, financing, and delivery mechanisms such as dedicated operational budgets, institutional mandates, or measurable targets.

With the adoption of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience at COP28, which established a thematic target on cultural heritage under the Global Goal on Adaptation (paragraph 9(g), Decision 2/CMA.5), and the subsequent adoption at COP30 of the five Belém Adaptation Indicators for that target (Decision 12/CMA.7), the UNFCCC adaptation framework now provides a clearer basis for integrating cultural heritage into adaptation action.

Based on evidence collected through the 2026 knowledge-building process of the Group of Friends for Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA), recurring implementation challenges are both technical and structural, including uneven readiness to report on the cultural heritage indicators and weak or inconsistent coordination between culture and climate authorities. These gaps can leave cultural sectors without the technical tools, institutional pathways or financing connections needed to engage fully in national adaptation planning.

For successful implementation of the cultural heritage thematic target and indicators, governments will need to:

1. Shift from treating cultural heritage merely as a vulnerable asset to be protected to leveraging it as an active driver of climate resilience;

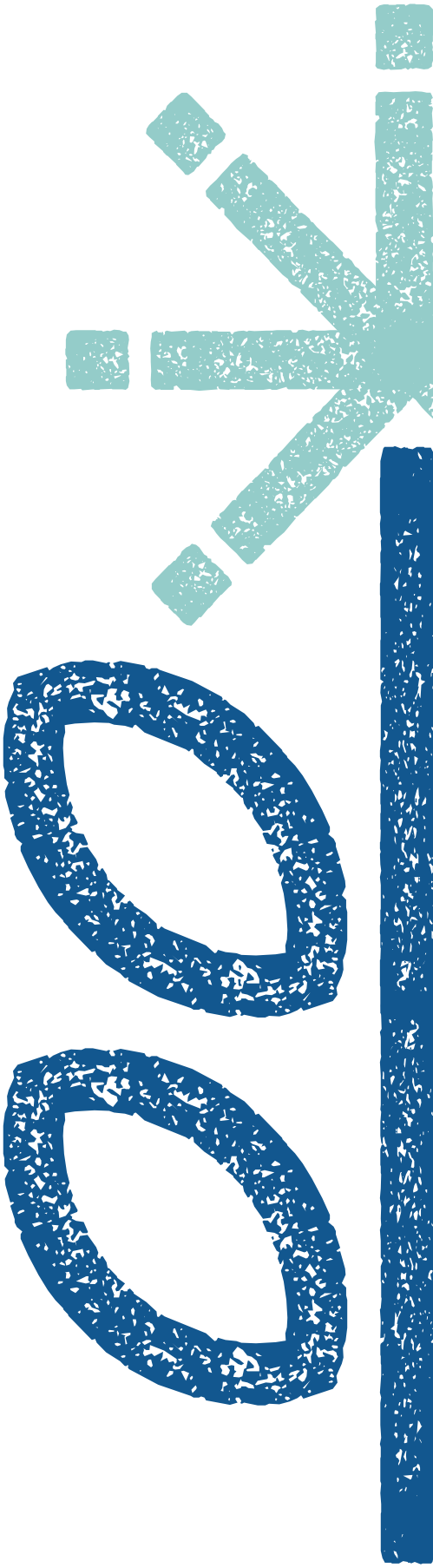
2. Strengthen coordination between culture and environment authorities and align national, subnational and local policies with UNFCCC mandates;

3. Strengthen policy and regulatory pathways for integrating the culture sector into existing national adaptation planning;

4. Embed the culture sector across the full adaptation planning cycle, from tailored risk assessments and the definition of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) metrics to the identification of implementation and financing pathways, with consideration for national priorities and contexts.

Since 2025, multiple publications have sought to accelerate the integration of cultural heritage into climate action, including contributions from experts (An ambitious global goal on adaptation for heritage, Nature, 2026); national ministries of culture (Rooted in Resilience – How Culture Shapes Climate Resilience in the UAE, 2025); regional organisations (Strategy for the Member States to Enhance the Role of Culture & Heritage in Countering Climate Change, ICESCO, 2026); and international organisations (UNESCO's Thematic Paper–Culture and Climate Action: from margins to mainstream, 2025).

With the aim of building on these efforts and the findings of a 2026 knowledge exchange programme among its Member States and Knowledge Partners, the GFCBCA is developing, in partnership with UNESCO, a culture-sector-specific Supplement to the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) Technical Guidelines and a Policy Guidance Document on Culture-Based Climate Action, to be delivered in 2027. These documents are aimed at directly supporting countries seeking to implement these decisions voluntarily by integrating culture into their national climate planning, while respecting national circumstances and priorities, and will provide national climate focal points, Ministries of Culture, municipal authorities, and heritage custodians with practical guidance for integrating cultural heritage into national adaptation planning processes.



CONTEXT

The UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, adopted at COP28, established an explicit cultural heritage target under the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA), covering the protection of cultural practices and heritage sites, climate-resilient infrastructure, and traditional knowledge, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and local knowledge systems.

The cultural heritage target also intersects with the GGA's other thematic targets, including water and sanitation, food and agriculture, health, ecosystems and biodiversity, infrastructure and human settlements, and poverty eradication and livelihoods, reflecting the cross-sectoral nature of adaptation. At COP30, the adoption of five cultural heritage-related Belém Adaptation Indicators provided a more concrete reference for monitoring progress. Together, these developments give cultural heritage a clearer place within the international adaptation framework and create a stronger basis for national implementation. The implementation challenge is therefore increasingly practical: how to connect these global objectives with national policies, institutions, risk assessments, financing arrangements, data systems and adaptation measures.

This mandate was reinforced by the launch of the informal coalition Group of Friends for Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA), co-chaired by the UAE and Brazil, with UNESCO as Lead Knowledge Partner and 56 current member parties. The GFCBCA's 2026 work has highlighted recurring implementation challenges related to institutional coordination, technical capacity, data and access to adaptation finance, including weak or inconsistent links between environment and culture authorities. These gaps can leave cultural institutions without the tools, institutional pathways or financing connections needed to translate recognition of cultural heritage into operational adaptation measures. The evidence therefore points to the need for practical, sector-specific support that can help connect cultural heritage more systematically to national adaptation processes.

The evidence points to five core operational areas where sector-specific technical guidance can support implementation: aligning national policy with UNFCCC mandates, conducting tailored risk assessments, strengthening governance and institutional coordination, mobilizing adaptation finance, and defining Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) metrics with consideration for national priorities and contexts. The proposed culture-sector-specific Supplement is intended to address this operational gap by providing national climate focal points, Ministries of Culture, municipal authorities and heritage custodians with practical approaches for integrating cultural heritage across the NAP process. The 2025 UNFCCC NAP Technical Guidelines: Updated technical guidelines for the process to formulate and implement national adaptation plans, prepared by the Least Developed Countries Expert Group (LEG) and launched at NAP Expo 2025, reinforce that NAPs should remain country-driven, non-prescriptive and responsive to national circumstances. National priorities and capacity therefore provide the foundation for keeping adaptation planning realistic and anchored in national development goals, and the Supplement should preserve that same flexibility rather than prescribe a single model for cultural heritage.

UNESCO provides an existing policy, knowledge and technical foundation on which this implementation work can build. Its work across cultural heritage, living heritage, cultural policies, Indigenous and local knowledge, disaster risk reduction, emergency preparedness and crisis management, and climate action has generated relevant evidence, methodologies and policy tools. This foundation also includes the 2021 UNESCO-IPCC-ICOMOS International Co-sponsored Meeting on Culture, Heritage and Climate Change, which brought together expertise across climate science, heritage and cultural policy. The 2025 thematic paper Culture and Climate Action: From Margins to Mainstream consolidated much of this knowledge and identified persistent gaps around governance, finance, evidence and participation. As the work progresses, the expertise of the GFCBCA's other Knowledge Partners should also be drawn on systematically to review and strengthen the technical development of the Supplement.

The GFCBCA's 2026 knowledge-building process has focused on how countries are beginning to translate recognition into implementation. Knowledge-sharing webinars, reflection sessions, written Member State inputs and official presentations have examined national approaches, implementation challenges and emerging practices related to the integration of culture and cultural heritage into adaptation planning. The exchanges show that progress is taking place through different policy and institutional routes, while also revealing recurring gaps in the mechanisms needed to connect policy recognition with implementation. Drawing on the experiences and inputs shared through this process, the report synthesises recurring approaches, implementation challenges and emerging practices rather than presenting a comparative assessment of national performance. Viewed against the proposed scope of the Supplement, the evidence can be organised around five operational areas: policy integration; governance and institutional coordination; risk assessment, participation and knowledge systems; adaptation finance and implementation capacity; and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

1. POLICY INTEGRATION INTO NATIONAL ADAPTATION PLANNING

The 2026 exchanges show that culture can enter national adaptation planning through several policy routes rather than a single institutional model. Some approaches establish cultural heritage as a dedicated objective, sector or set of measures within adaptation planning, while others integrate cultural dimensions transversally across areas such as water, agriculture, biodiversity, tourism, urban development or disaster-risk reduction. A further route is to incorporate climate considerations into existing heritage plans, emergency frameworks or longer-term culture-and-climate strategies. These different approaches reflect variations in national policy architecture, institutional mandates and the maturity of existing adaptation systems. Across them, however, the evidence points to the same requirement: cultural heritage needs to be translated into sufficiently specific objectives, measures and responsibilities to influence adaptation decisions. Policy recognition becomes meaningful when it changes what is assessed, prioritised, financed and implemented.

Policy integration becomes operational when culture is connected to the wider adaptation cycle rather than remaining a general statement of intent. The evidence includes dedicated heritage risk analyses, adaptation measures linked to identified hazards, climate considerations embedded in cultural heritage instruments, and links with preparedness and resilience planning. It also shows that culture can enter adaptation both as an area exposed to climate risk and as a source of knowledge, practices and institutional capacity that can strengthen resilience. This dual role is important because it moves the discussion beyond safeguarding assets alone and towards the contribution of cultural systems to adaptation outcomes. Integration is therefore most durable when it builds on existing national planning cycles and development priorities instead of creating a separate architecture for culture. For a country-driven NAP process, the practical task is to identify the most workable national entry points and connect them to responsible institutions, implementation processes, financing and monitoring arrangements.

2. GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

Governance and institutional coordination emerged as a cross-cutting condition for turning policy recognition into implementation. Cultural heritage adaptation often depends on mandates, information and resources distributed across ministries of culture and environment, civil-protection and emergency-management bodies, finance institutions, local authorities and other sectoral agencies. The exchanges identified a range of mechanisms for bringing these actors together, including interministerial committees, technical working groups, advisory structures, cooperation agreements, multilevel arrangements and cross-sector roadmaps. Their institutional form varies, but their practical function is similar: to create a regular place for cultural considerations within climate governance and to clarify how responsibility is shared. Coordination is particularly important where climate risks, heritage management, land use, emergency response and local implementation sit under different authorities. The evidence therefore points less to one preferred governance model than to the need for arrangements that are sufficiently clear, inclusive and durable to support implementation.

Effective coordination requires more than periodic consultation between institutions. It depends on clear responsibility for functions such as risk assessment, data exchange, preparedness, financing, implementation and reporting, together with channels that connect national policy to subnational and site-level action. The knowledge-building process also highlighted the importance of sustained interaction between cultural authorities and national climate focal points so that cultural evidence can enter adaptation decisions at the appropriate stage. Where coordination remains ad hoc, information and implementation capacity can stay fragmented even when policy recognition exists. More formal arrangements can help preserve institutional memory, clarify accountability and reduce reliance on individual projects, funding cycles or personal relationships. Governance should therefore be understood not as a stand-alone administrative objective, but as the enabling architecture through which the other operational areas can function coherently.

3. RISK ASSESSMENT, PARTICIPATION AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Climate-risk assessment is one of the clearest operational entry points for moving from broad recognition of the vulnerability of culture and cultural heritage to climate-related risks towards prioritised adaptation action. The knowledge exchanges identified complementary approaches ranging from national and territorial assessments to heritage risk maps, site-level condition assessments, digital planning tools and post-disaster damage and needs assessments. These methods can connect cultural heritage information with hazard, vulnerability and exposure data and support prevention, emergency preparedness, site management and the prioritisation of adaptation measures. They also show the value of working at different scales: broad national analysis can identify strategic priorities, while place-based assessment can reveal specific risks affecting individual sites, landscapes or cultural systems. Existing heritage inventories and management systems can provide an important starting point when they are linked with climate information rather than treated as separate datasets. Risk assessment becomes most useful when it produces information that can directly inform choices about preparedness, adaptation measures, investment and implementation sequencing.

Climate-related risks affecting culture and cultural heritage cannot, however, be understood through physical exposure alone. The exchanges repeatedly highlighted living heritage, livelihoods, cultural values, traditional practices and locally held knowledge as factors that shape both vulnerability and the suitability of adaptation responses. Participatory processes can complement technical assessment by identifying cultural significance, lived impacts, knowledge holders and locally appropriate responses that may not be visible in conventional risk data. Traditional, Indigenous Peoples' and local knowledge can also contribute observations and practices relevant to environmental change, resource management and resilience, particularly where such knowledge is embedded in place. This requires attention not only to participation itself but also to how knowledge is documented, shared and used within formal planning processes. A robust approach therefore combines technical evidence with sustained participation and uses qualitative or mixed methodologies where intangible heritage, community knowledge and social impacts cannot be meaningfully represented through quantitative measures alone.

4. ADAPTATION FINANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY

Finance remains one of the clearest points at which policy recognition can fail to translate into implementation. Risk assessments, preparedness measures, rehabilitation, monitoring, training and adaptation projects all require resources, yet cultural authorities may have limited access to adaptation budgets or experience engaging with climate-finance mechanisms. The exchanges suggest that dedicated culture-only funding is not always the most immediate or realistic route, particularly where relevant public, climate, disaster-risk, tourism, heritage or local-development financing already exists. Existing sectoral and external programmes can provide entry points when culture-related adaptation measures are sufficiently clear, prioritised and linked to responsible institutions. This places emphasis on translating identified risks into measures that can be costed, budgeted and incorporated into investment

or programme decisions. The practical financing challenge is therefore not only to identify potential sources, but to ensure that cultural adaptation priorities are formulated in a way that can compete within existing funding systems.

Implementation capacity is inseparable from financing because resources alone do not ensure delivery. The exchanges identified needs in climate-risk analysis, emergency preparedness, data management, indicator use, damage and loss assessment, project design and the identification of adaptation options. These needs extend beyond ministries to site managers, museums, archives, local authorities, cultural organisations and emergency responders, reflecting the distributed nature of implementation. Capacity-building is most useful when tied directly to institutional responsibilities, practical tools and measures that practitioners can apply in their day-to-day work rather than remaining at the level of general climate awareness. It can also strengthen access to finance by improving the ability of institutions to define priorities, prepare projects, use evidence and monitor results. Finance and capacity should therefore be planned together so that adaptation measures are linked to a responsible institution, an implementable financing route and the technical skills required for sustained delivery.

5. DATA, INDICATORS AND MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

The Belém Adaptation Indicators provide a common international reference, but the exchanges show substantial variation in national data and monitoring readiness. Some systems already contain heritage indicators, inventories, risk maps, geospatial information and administrative datasets that can contribute to adaptation monitoring, while others are still establishing what information exists, where it is held and whether it is sufficiently standardised or disaggregated. This variation means that reporting readiness cannot be assumed simply because heritage information is available. Environmental dimensions of heritage, cultural practices, traditional knowledge and non-economic impacts remain particularly difficult to capture consistently through conventional statistical systems. The evidence also points to the importance of data governance, including the sensitivity of georeferenced heritage information and the need to connect datasets held by different institutions. The first step towards workable Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) is therefore often to map and assess existing information before creating additional reporting requirements.

A proportionate MEL approach should combine existing information systems with methods capable of addressing genuine evidence gaps. Heritage inventories, climate-risk platforms, disaster-loss data, administrative records, geospatial tools and qualitative evidence can each contribute different parts of the picture, while shared indicators can connect culture-sector information to wider national adaptation monitoring. Mixed methods are particularly important where the consequences of climate change concern identity, social cohesion, well-being or living heritage and cannot be captured adequately through economic or physical measures alone. Monitoring should also be designed to support decision-making

rather than reporting for its own sake, so that information can help institutions adjust priorities and implementation as risks evolve. Alignment with the cultural heritage-related GGA indicators can provide a useful reference, but national systems will need to remain realistic in relation to available data, institutional capacity and reporting burdens. The emerging priority is therefore not a single standardised dataset, but MEL arrangements that strengthen national decision-making, support relevant international reporting and can be maintained over time.

FROM EVIDENCE TO THE NEXT PHASE

Taken together, the 2026 knowledge-building process suggests that the principal challenge is increasingly one of implementation and connection.

Policy integration, governance, risk assessment, participation, finance, capacity and monitoring are already being addressed through a variety of approaches, but these elements are not always connected within a coherent adaptation cycle. The five operational areas provide a practical way to understand where those connections need to be strengthened while respecting different national starting points, institutional structures, capacities and policy priorities. They also show that progress does not depend on a single institutional model, but on whether the relevant functions can be connected within existing national systems. The findings therefore provide an implementation-oriented evidence base for the next phase of the GFCBCA work programme and the development of the proposed Supplement.

The proposed Culture-Sector-Specific Supplement can use this evidence to develop practical, country-driven options that complement the 2025 UNFCCC NAP Technical Guidelines.

The next phase should examine how cultural heritage considerations can be connected across existing policy processes, governance arrangements, risk methodologies, financing pathways, implementation capacities and MEL systems without creating a parallel adaptation framework. Further technical work through 2027 should test and refine the five operational areas across additional national contexts and draw systematically on the expertise and feedback of GFCBCA Member States, Knowledge Partners and relevant UNFCCC actors. This process can help identify approaches that are sufficiently adaptable to support countries at different stages of NAP formulation and implementation and with different levels of institutional capacity. COP31 can therefore serve as a milestone between the knowledge-building phase and the technical development of the Supplement, allowing its scope and practical orientation to be further refined. The objective is to translate the implementation lessons emerging from the 2026 process into guidance that remains voluntary, realistic and responsive to national priorities, while helping culture and climate authorities move from advocacy and recognition towards practical implementation.

