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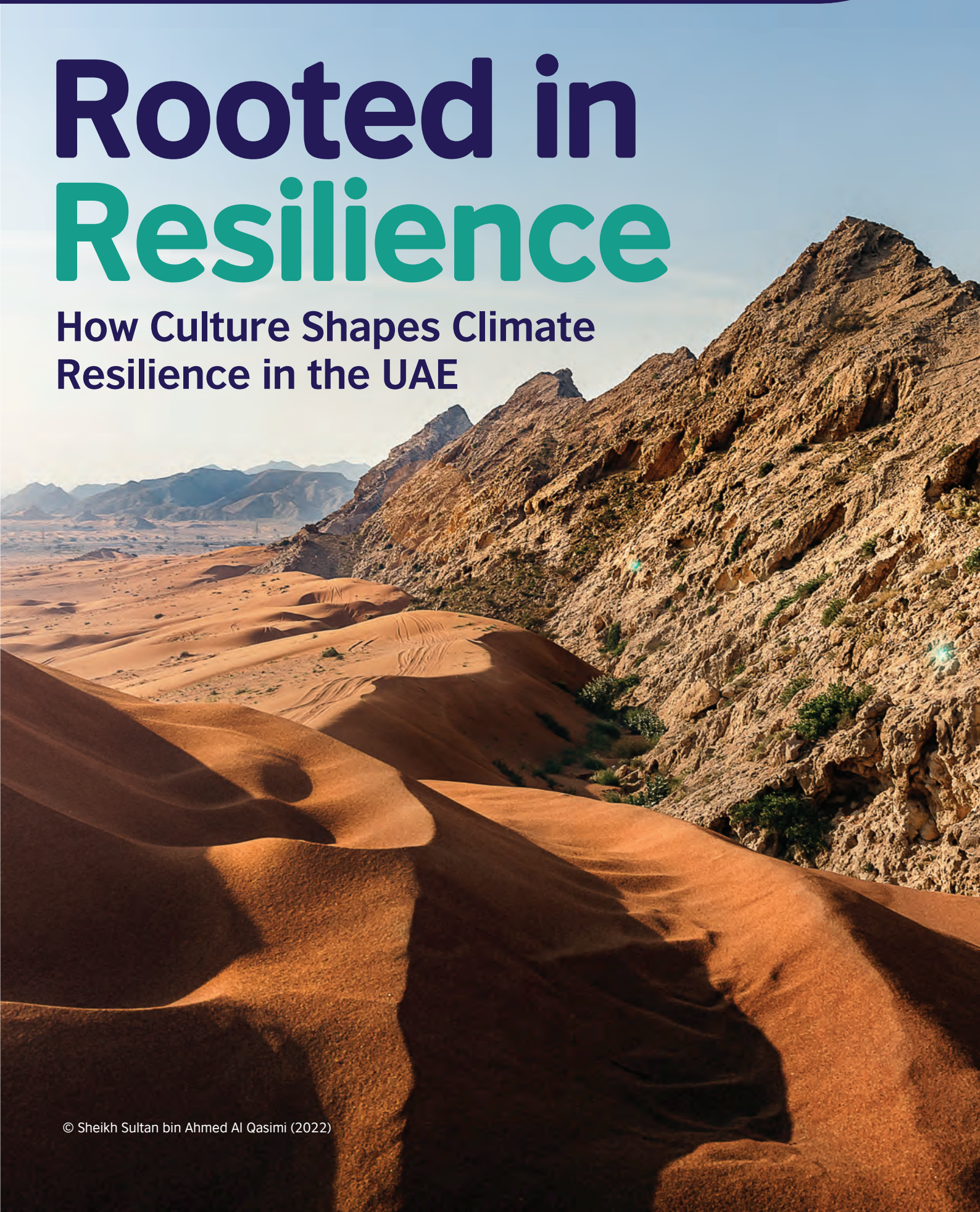
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

Rooted in Resilience

How Culture Shapes Climate Resilience in the UAE



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Abbreviations

ADSW	Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week
ALIPH	International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas
AUS	American University of Sharjah
CBCA	Culture-Based Climate Action
CCI	Cultural and Creative Industries
CFC	Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre
COP	Conference of the Parties (UNFCCC)
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DFF	Dubai Future Foundation
EAD	Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi
GFCBCA	Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action
GGA	Global Goal on Adaptation
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MoC	Ministry of Culture (UAE)
MoCCAE	Ministry of Climate Change and Environment (UAE)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
NELD	Non-Economic Loss and Damage
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NYUAD	New York University Abu Dhabi
P4H	Prototypes for Humanity
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SPAA	Sharjah Performing Arts Academy
STARS	Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (AASHE)
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCN	UAE Universities Climate Network
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UoS	University of Sharjah
Waqf	Islamic Endowment (plural: Awqaf)
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature (Emirates Nature WWF in UAE)

‘Tarabot_ Weaving a Living Forum Pavilion’ at Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, Courtesy Art Jameel. © Niño Consorte of Seeing Things

Foreword

I am pleased to share this significant step for the integration of culture in the UAE's national response to the most urgent global issue of our time: climate change.

Co-commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and the British Council, Rooted in Resilience: How Culture Shapes Climate Resilience in the UAE is a baseline study on how cultural organisations can contribute to the reduction of the national population's vulnerability to climate change impacts in the already harsh arid conditions of the Arabian Gulf.

Based on extensive research, we have reviewed diverse federal and emirate-level government-led institutions, independent and commercial entities working across cultural and natural heritage, visual arts, performing arts, as well as the creative industries. In consultation with stakeholders from the corporate, civil society, NGO and academic sectors, we found that a wide range of culture- and heritage-based climate actions are already being undertaken in the UAE. However, these efforts are not fully recognised or measured in reporting for the UAE's Nationally Determined Contributions, National Adaptation Plans or the Net Zero by 2050 National Initiative.

The UAE's culture sector contributes in diverse ways to national climate strategies. This includes preserving tangible and intangible heritage that holds indigenous climate solutions. Efforts also involve working with scientists to innovate new climate solutions based on traditional knowledge, as well as exhibitions and performances that raise public awareness about rising temperatures and sea levels. Furthermore, workshops provide practical guidance on reducing both carbon emissions and waste generation.

Through these activities, the culture sector demonstrates both a strong commitment to the public good and a clear capacity to advance sustainable development goals, from social cohesion and well-being to community empowerment, all of which are essential to climate change adaptation.

The report identified key opportunities to scale up the existing culture and climate nexus with cross-sector collaboration on strategic policies and initiatives, enabling the UAE to successfully embed culture in its national climate change strategies. By recognising these efforts, we will implement "culture-based climate action," an emerging concept in international climate change policy that was introduced at COP28 in the UAE. This concept includes the recognition of cultural heritage in the UAE Framework for Global Resilience and the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, as well as the launch of the UAE and Brazil-led Group of Friends for Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA).

This study was written ahead of COP30, where the Brazilian Presidency is advocating for culture as a valuable lever for collective climate action. In this spirit, we aim to initiate a whole-of-society effort to support culture-based climate action in the UAE. In alignment with these developments at both the national and international levels, we hope to set an example for the implementation of culture- and heritage-based climate solutions globally, ensuring a sustainable future for all.

H.E. Sheikh Salem bin Khalid Al Qassimi
UAE Minister of Culture

Foreword

The British Council is delighted to work with the UAE Ministry of Culture as strategic partners on this ground-breaking research, Rooted in Resilience, which aims to map culture-based climate action and embed culture into climate policy in the UAE.

As outlined in our Climate Connection Strategy, climate change is the biggest challenge the world faces which is testing the resilience of our societies. It is a paramount priority for young people worldwide, and governments are recognising the pivotal role of education and culture in shaping effective climate responses. As the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, working in over 100 countries and reaching 600 million people, the British Council is well placed to make a real difference. The Climate Connection is our organisational response to the challenge through education, English, and arts and culture. We support artistic and cultural responses that protect cultural heritage at risk from climate change, raise awareness of climate change and biodiversity loss, and support the sector to adopt more sustainable practices.

This report makes clear the need for an inclusive approach to climate policymaking through culture, arts and heritage. It advocates for culture in all its forms to be embedded in existing climate policy mechanisms at a national level - such as National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally-Determined Contributions (NDCs) - as well as align with global policies including the Sustainable Development Goals, and the UNFCCC Fund for Loss and Damage. It aims to inspire policymakers as well as cultural practitioners and heritage custodians to embed culture into climate policies and to explore creative solutions to the climate emergency.

Present in the UAE for over 50 years, we have recently partnered with Art Jameel on the Anhar Culture and Climate platform, supporting ambitious projects led by artists and organisations across the Middle East and North Africa that take local and community-based approaches to the climate emergency. Globally, we continue to advocate for the role of education, arts and culture at UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) and the Conference of Youth (COY) as a Silver Sponsor, working with strategic partners and young people, and sharing learning from good practice around the world. The research builds on the work of the Group of Friends for Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA), co-chaired by the Ministries of Culture of the UAE and Brazil, of which British Council is proud to be a knowledge partner, supporting the UAE's leadership in climate-culture diplomacy.

We're excited that this research is nationally led and that its approach can inform, be adapted and adopted by ministries and countries globally. We very much look forward to continuing our partnership with the Ministry of Culture UAE to show the power of arts, culture and heritage in climate action.

Ruth Mackenzie
Director Arts, British Council

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the vision and leadership of Mahnaz Fancy from the UAE Ministry of Culture, who led the Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) research project with commitment and clarity. Her stewardship has been instrumental in shaping a comprehensive and inclusive exploration of culture's role in climate action across the UAE.

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Heartfelt thanks go to the organisations that participated in the national survey, and to all the individuals who contributed their time and insights through interviews and focus groups. Your voices and experiences have enriched this study and grounded it in the lived realities of cultural and environmental practice across the UAE.


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Finally, we acknowledge the participants of the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (ADSW) dialogue on CBCA, whose contributions helped shape the policy and conceptual framing of this work. Your engagement reflects the collaborative spirit required to embed culture at the heart of climate resilience.

Executive Summary

Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) is emerging as one of the most important – yet historically overlooked – levers for addressing the climate crisis. Climate change is not only an environmental or economic challenge but a cultural one: it shapes and is shaped by how communities perceive risks, adapt in daily life and embrace new behaviours and policies. The UAE has been at the forefront of recognising this reality. As host of 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UAE introduced culture into the Global Goal for Adaptation (GGA) to the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) and co-launched the Group of Friends for Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA) with Brazil at the first high-level gathering of ministers of culture at any COP – advocating for the integration of culture into the global climate agenda.

This baseline study, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture in partnership with the British Council, represents the first national effort to systematically assess how CBCA is evolving across the Emirates. It provides a foundation for policy and practice, identifying both the breadth of initiatives already underway and the systemic gaps that currently prevent CBCA from reaching its full potential. The findings reveal a vibrant and innovative cultural landscape that is, however, fragmented – rich in practice yet limited in its systems. Across the country, cultural actors are mobilising heritage knowledge, the creative economy, education, digital tools community engagement to build resilience. Yet without stronger governance, shared metrics and more inclusive pathways, these efforts remain dispersed and undervalued within national climate strategies.

The results show that CBCA is already visible across the UAE. From heritage restoration projects in Al Ain to climate-themed exhibitions in Sharjah, from youth-led sustainability festivals in Fujairah to the greening of major cultural institutions in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, cultural responses to climate change are widespread.

Survey results indicate that 87 per cent of organisations are engaged in CBCA-relevant activities, even if not explicitly labelled as such.

These initiatives range from safeguarding traditional knowledge to sustainable creative production, climate education and the greening of cultural infrastructure. Large institutions often have the resources to lead, while smaller organisations – particularly in the northern emirates – report limited access to funding, policy guidance and cross-sector collaboration. As one respondent noted,

We are not starting from scratch—CBCA is already happening; we just need the systems to recognise and amplify it.

Thematic analysis identified six domains where CBCA is most visible and where opportunities for scaling are greatest. Traditional ecological knowledge remains a vital but fragile source of adaptive practice, with 53 per cent of organisations integrating it into programmes. The creative economy is embedding sustainability into exhibitions, films, festivals and performance, showing the potential to influence behaviours at scale – though often without consistent policy support. The built environment, cited by 80 per cent of respondents, reflects both experimentation with heritage-informed design and persistent barriers in building codes and procurement. Education – both formal and informal – is a key enabler: initiatives such as the Al Naliyah Emirati Cultural Activities Framework for Schools (ECAF) and sustainability modules at NYU Abu Dhabi and the American University of Sharjah (AUS) demonstrate progress, though CBCA is not yet mainstreamed in curricula or workforce training. Communities across the Emirates – particularly youth and grassroots networks – are highly motivated but face obstacles in funding, recognition and decision-making access. Finally, digital innovation and creative technology are expanding CBCA's reach through immersive exhibitions and material experimentation, though risks of superficiality and exclusion persist.

Taken together, these six domains reveal both the potential and the fragility of CBCA in the UAE. While energy and innovation are abundant, three cross-cutting challenges consistently limit systemic impact. First, governance fragmentation: there is no inter-ministerial mechanism to coordinate CBCA, leaving ministries and emirates to act in silos. Second, absence of metrics: only 31 percent of organisations collect data beyond attendance, and no shared frameworks exist to measure behavioural change, resilience outcomes or cultural vulnerability. Third, inclusion and access gaps: CBCA remains concentrated in urban centres and elite institutions, with barriers of language, funding and geography limiting participation by marginalised groups, grassroots initiatives and migrant communities.

The report concludes that the UAE now has a window of opportunity to address these barriers and build a systemic CBCA ecosystem that can serve as a model for others. The final chapter presents a six-pillar roadmap for scaling and institutionalising CBCA:

1. National governance and integration, through a CBCA Framework and inter-ministerial task force.
2. Capacity and workforce development, embedding CBCA competencies in curricula and job standards.
3. Finance and incentives, creating innovation funds, procurement reforms and green finance tools.
4. Measurement and evaluation, creating shared indicators aligned with the GGA and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
5. Equity and engagement, with community grants, multilingual outreach, and participatory design.
6. Global alliances and South–South collaboration, consolidating the UAE's leadership at COP30 and beyond.

These six areas are mutually reinforcing. Governance without finance cannot deliver; finance without metrics cannot scale; metrics without community engagement cannot reflect lived realities. By addressing these interdependencies, the UAE can move from CBCA leadership in global discourse to a model of national institutionalisation. Collectively, these measures chart a path to embed culture at the centre of climate action in the UAE. Implementing them will require collaboration across ministries, industries and communities – a genuine multi-sector effort. However, the payoff is a climate response that is not only scientifically sound but also socially embraced.

The findings of this baseline study invite policymakers, funders, cultural leaders, educators and citizens to work together to harness the UAE's cultural wealth as a catalyst for climate resilience. By embracing Culture-Based Climate Action, the UAE can pioneer a model of climate leadership that connects evidence with empathy – ensuring a sustainable future that is both locally grounded and globally inspiring.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer Pulse Canopy, 2025
Image courtesy of DCT Abu Dhabi

1. Defining Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) and its Importance

1.1 Framing CBCA

Climate change is not only an ecological and economic challenge but also a profound cultural one. It threatens identities, memories and traditions, calling for a cultural transformation in how societies live and act. Recognising this, the Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action (GFCBCA) — launched at COP28 by the UAE and Brazil — has provided one of the clearest definitions to date. CBCA is understood as:

An interdisciplinary approach that mobilises cultural and natural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, creative practices, and culture-led innovation to advance climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience. (GFCBCA, 2023)

CBCA addresses three interlinked imperatives. First, it responds to the vulnerability of culture itself – the degradation of tangible heritage and the disruption of intangible practices under climate stress. Second, it draws on culture's role in building resilience and driving transformation – as a repository of adaptive knowledge, a communicative force that engages people, and a means of influencing values and behaviours. Third, it ensures that climate strategies are people-centred and socially just, rooted in the lived values and practices of communities.

As United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2022) affirmed in the Mondiacult Declaration, culture should be treated as a 'global public good' and recognised as a stand-alone goal in the future international development framework — a vision that extends beyond its current cross-cutting treatment under the UN 2030 Agenda.

In this framing, CBCA is not a peripheral agenda but a foundation for systemic change. By bringing together cultural heritage, creative industries, and Indigenous knowledge, it anchors climate policy in social meaning, legitimacy and lived experience — elements that drive equitable and lasting transitions.

While 'Culture-Based Climate Action' is the term gaining traction through the GFCBCA, the concept appears under a range of labels in academic and policy literature. UNESCO and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) often refer to 'heritage-led' or 'heritage-based climate action' (ICOMOS, UNESCO and IPCC, 2021). The British Council and the Climate Heritage Network describe the 'culture–climate nexus', or culture as the 'missing pillar' of sustainable development (British Council, 2020; Climate Heritage Network, 2021). The UNFCCC's GGA frames the issue more narrowly as the protection of cultural heritage and the preservation of traditional knowledge. These overlapping framings all point to a shared realisation: culture is an essential enabler of effective and just climate action — on par with finance, technology and nature.


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1.2 CBCA across mitigation, adaptation, and loss & damage

The value of CBCA lies in its applicability across the three central pillars of climate governance — mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage — though the degree of integration and recognition varies significantly.

Mitigation

The cultural and creative sectors contribute directly to emission reduction by greening their operations and influencing patterns of consumption. Museums, theatres, and festivals are increasingly adopting energy-efficient technologies, renewable energy and sustainable materials, with documented carbon reductions (Arts Council England & Julie's Bicycle, 2024). Architecture and design offer parallel opportunities: vernacular building techniques such as wind towers and courtyards demonstrate passive-cooling principles relevant to net zero pathways (Leung et al., 2024). Beyond institutional footprints, the creative economy exerts indirect but powerful influence by shaping consumer behaviour through design, fashion, and media narratives (British Council Arts, n.d.). However, these contributions remain under-accounted in national greenhouse gas inventories and climate strategies. The mitigation potential of culture is genuine but structurally undervalued, with limited access to mainstream decarbonisation finance.

Adaptation

CBCA's most recognised role lies in adaptation, where cultural heritage and traditional knowledge provide long-established strategies for resilience (Mustonen, 2022; British Council, 2023a). Agroecological systems, water-harvesting, and community-based resource management have allowed societies to thrive under variable climates for centuries (Chanza et al., 2024; UNDP, 2024). The GGA (UNFCCC, 2023) now explicitly references cultural heritage and Indigenous/local knowledge as adaptation targets, supporting their integration in national adaptation planning. Yet significant gaps persist.

Most National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) mention culture symbolically, with limited operational detail, budgets, or measurable targets (European Commission, 2023; Daly et al., 2022). Moreover, divisions between culture and environment ministries often hinder systematic integration. The critical challenge is therefore not whether culture contributes to adaptation — evidence shows it does — but how to institutionalise and scale it within planning, finance, and monitoring frameworks.

Loss and Damage (L&D)

CBCA is perhaps most vital, yet most neglected, in the domain of loss and damage. Climate change increasingly drives non-economic losses, including the disappearance of sacred sites, the erosion of languages and the collapse of ritual practices, all of which undermine community cohesion and identity (Adger et al., 2013). These dimensions are rarely captured in economic valuation frameworks, leaving them invisible to compensation and financing mechanisms. While the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP28 was a landmark, cultural loss has not yet been systematically addressed in its design. Current L&D frameworks focus on infrastructure and livelihoods, often overlooking heritage and intangible culture. The risk is that cultural erasure becomes a hidden cost of climate change – profound, irreversible and largely unrecognised in policy. Addressing this requires new methodologies for assessing non-economic losses, developing indicators for cultural resilience and ensuring that L&D financing mechanisms include measures for cultural recovery and safeguarding.

Taken together, CBCA demonstrates significant potential across all three domains, but with varying degrees of institutionalisation. Adaptation is most advanced in terms of formal recognition (through the GGA), mitigation is visible at the practice level but remains structurally under-recorded, and loss and damage continues to be critically overlooked. This unevenness underscores both the progress and fragility of CBCA: it is increasingly present in discourse but still peripheral in decision-making structures. A priority for policymakers is therefore to close this integration gap by embedding CBCA in national reporting systems, financing frameworks and global work programmes.

'Tarabot_ Weaving a Living Forum Pavilion' at Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, Courtesy Art Jameel. © Niño Consorte of Seeing Things

2. Contextualising CBCA — Global and UAE Perspectives

2.1 Global context

The recognition of culture as a driver of climate action has been slow to develop within international frameworks, although recent years have brought significant progress. For decades, the UNFCCC and related processes prioritised finance, technology and nature as the main 'enabling conditions' for climate transitions, leaving culture largely overlooked. This gap, often described as the 'culture gap' (Europa Nostra, 2024), has been increasingly challenged by coalitions of states, cultural organisations and civil society.

The Rome Declaration of the G20 Ministers of Culture (2021) marked a breakthrough by identifying culture as a 'major engine of sustainable social and economic recovery' and, crucially, including climate change as a cultural priority. This was the first time the G20 formally linked culture to climate resilience, signalling growing political recognition. Building on this, the UNESCO Mondiacult 2022 Declaration went further, declaring culture a 'global public good' and calling for its integration across policy areas including disaster risk reduction, education and climate action. Mondiacult also galvanised the #Culture-2030Goal campaign, which advocates for culture's explicit inclusion in the UN Pact for the Future (2023). Culture and climate action was also a central theme of the follow-up conference, Mondiacult 2025, in Barcelona. Within the UNFCCC, progress has been uneven but notable.

At COP26 in Glasgow, the launch of the Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the GGA created an opening by explicitly naming the protection of cultural heritage and the use of traditional, Indigenous and local knowledge as formal adaptation targets (UNFCCC, 2023). This was a historic acknowledgement that culture is not peripheral, but central to building resilience.

The GFCBCA, launched by the UAE and Brazil at COP28 in Dubai (2023), consolidated this momentum (Emirates News Agency – WAM, 2024a). At its launch, it brought together 25 countries and 20 knowledge partners. The GFCBCA's Emirates Declaration on CBCA reframed culture as a driver of solutions across mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage (European Heritage Hub, 2023). It committed governments to embedding culture in climate planning and financing and has since positioned CBCA as a recurring theme in UNFCCC discussions, now engaging 56 countries and 25 knowledge partners.

At COP29 in Baku (2024), ministers reaffirmed these commitments through a second High-Level Dialogue on CBCA, though outcomes were mixed. While the GFCBCA adopted formal terms of reference and new countries joined the coalition, culture was referenced only briefly in the negotiated texts, revealing the persistence of the 'culture gap' (Europa Nostra, 2024). Cultural advocates emphasised that without structural mechanisms – such as a dedicated UNFCCC work programme – culture risks remaining largely symbolic.

The COP30 Action Agenda (Belém, 2025) offers a decisive opportunity to close this gap. Hosted in Brazil, COP30 has explicitly prioritised culture as part of its Action Agenda, linking it to just transition, biodiversity, and Indigenous Peoples' rights. Advocates are pushing for the establishment of a Work Programme on Culture and Climate Action under the UNFCCC — a formal mechanism that would institutionalise CBCA alongside finance, technology and nature. If realised, this would mark the mainstreaming of culture within global climate governance. Culture has also been incorporated into the Global Ethical Stocktake (GES) initiative led by the COP30 Presidency and the Brazilian Ministry of Environment.

Together, these developments demonstrate that CBCA has moved a marginal issue to one receiving increasing recognition within global policy. Yet the trajectory also reveals fragility: progress has been largely normative, with declarations and coalitions outpacing structural integration, financing, and metrics. The challenge for COP30 and beyond is to translate visibility into institutionalised commitments that embed culture at the heart of climate action globally.

Down to Earth 2023.
Courtesy of Art Jameel.
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2.2 UAE context

The UAE provides a distinct national context for understanding how culture intersects with climate change. Situated in one of the world's most climate-exposed regions, the country faces acute environmental risks that directly affect cultural heritage, traditional practices, and the cultural and creative industries. The UAE is experiencing some of the most severe projected climate impacts in the Gulf and wider MENA region. According to the National Long-Term Strategy (2024), by mid-century the Arabian Peninsula is expected to be among the most water-stressed areas globally, with mean annual temperature increases exceeding 2.4°C and a potential 98 cm rise in sea levels by 2100. More frequent and intense rainfall events – projected to rise by more than 200 per cent – increase the risks of flooding and infrastructure damage. These impacts threaten both tangible and intangible cultural heritage: coastal archaeological sites and coral-stone mosques face inundation; vernacular desert architecture must withstand unprecedented heat stress; and cultural landscapes such as oases, falaj-based irrigation systems and date-palm plantations are jeopardised by water scarcity. Intangible traditions linked to agriculture, pastoralism, and pearl diving are also increasingly vulnerable to ecological disruption (Al Qassimi & Menezes, 2023).

Against this backdrop, the UAE's cultural and creative industries (CCI) sector has emerged as both highly exposed and potentially transformative. The sector contributes around 3 per cent of national GDP and is expanding rapidly, encompassing museums, heritage institutions, performing arts, design, architecture, film and digital media. Its scale, public profile and capacity for innovation position it as a key lever for CBCA across mitigation, adaptation and climate communication.

Long-term vision is provided by frameworks such as the (now concluded) UAE Vision 2021 and the ongoing UAE Centennial 2071, both of which emphasise environmental sustainability, innovation, and community involvement. These guiding principles create a supportive environment for cultural-sustainability initiatives.

Supporting these wider strategies are complementary policies such as the UAE Green Agenda 2015–2030 and the UAE Circular Economy Policy (2021).
These promote resource efficiency and sustainable consumption patterns, which have direct implications for cultural production, events, and the management of cultural institutions. For instance, the Circular Economy Policy encourages cultural institutions to utilise sustainable materials and adhere to zero-waste principles.

Looking ahead, the forthcoming UAE Climate Law (2025) is expected to introduce mandatory emissions reporting and climate-finance mechanisms.

These regulatory changes are likely to encourage – and in some cases require – the adoption of sustainable practices across the cultural sector, embedding environmental considerations more deeply within its operations.

Table 1. Key national policies and frameworks

Policy/framework Title	Year of launch/ effect	Key cultural sustainability relevance/ objective
UAE Vision 2021	2010	National priority on environmental sustainability and infrastructure, fostering a supportive environment for cultural-sustainability initiatives.
UAE Green Agenda 2015–2030	2015	Roadmap for long-term sustainability, promoting resource efficiency with implications for cultural production and management.
UAE Centennial 2071	2017	Long-term vision emphasising innovation, community participation and sustainability.
Federal Law No. 12 on Integrated Waste Management	2018	Regulates waste disposal to protect cultural and natural heritage sites from environmental degradation.
Culture Agenda 2031	2018	Integrates cultural heritage into sustainable development strategies, strengthening the national cultural ecosystem and infrastructure.
UAE Circular Economy Policy	2021	Provides guidelines for sustainable consumption and production, encouraging cultural institutions to use sustainable materials and adopt zero-waste principles.
UAE Net Zero by 2050 Strategic Initiative	2021 (anounced)	Whole-of-society decarbonisation effort, framed as inclusive of culture in the first Long-Term Strategy submitted to the UNFCCC after COP28.
UAE's NDC 3.0	2024	Includes a dedicated 'Culture and Heritage – Culture–Climate Nexus' section, formally integrating culture into national climate commitments.

The UAE's cultural policy infrastructure has also moved to integrate sustainability. The Ministry of Culture now leads national CBCA efforts and represents the sector on the inter-ministerial Climate Change Council. Emirate-level organisations such as the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi and Dubai Culture have started embedding sustainability principles in their programmes – from greener museum operations to climate-themed exhibitions. High-profile institutions such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Expo City Dubai demonstrate climate-smart design, with Estidama ratings and renewable technologies positioning them as cultural flagships for sustainability. Yet, as stakeholders note, coordination across ministries and emirates is remains inconsistent, and culture's role in national climate governance is still less established than that of finance or infrastructure.

On the international stage, the UAE has played a catalytic role in elevating culture within climate negotiations. The UAE advanced its cultural role through the Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action (COP28 Presidency, 2023) and by integrating cultural heritage and knowledge systems into the outcomes of the GGA.

These interventions have positioned the UAE as a leading advocate linking cultural heritage and the creative economy to systemic climate-policy transitions.

Table 2. Major UAE-led international culture-climate initiatives

Initiative name	Key objective/outcome related to culture and climate	Key partners (if mentioned)
GGA - Cultural Heritage Target	Integrated cultural heritage as one of seven thematic targets for the GGA, promoting the protection of heritage informed by traditional and local-knowledge systems.	UNFCCC Parties
GFCBCA at the UNFCCC	Advocates formal recognition of culture and cultural heritage within climate policy, fostering international political momentum and knowledge exchange.	Brazil (co-chair), 56 countries, UN agencies and knowledge partners

Critically, the UAE context illustrates both the opportunities and challenges of implementing CBCA. On one hand, the country benefits from strong central leadership, substantial resources and high international visibility, which enable the rapid piloting of culture–climate initiatives (Emirates News Agency – WAM (2024b). On the other, CBCA remains vulnerable to fragmentation and short-term, project-based delivery, with limited metrics to demonstrate impact or mechanisms to ensure equitable participation across emirates and communities. Without stronger institutionalisation, CBCA risks remaining largely symbolic – prominent in international diplomacy but weakly embedded in domestic implementation.

The UAE provides a unique test case for CBCA. Its cultural heritage offers valuable adaptive insights; its cultural sector is beginning to embed sustainability in practice; and its diplomacy has made culture visible within global climate governance. Yet to translate leadership into systemic impact, the UAE must consolidate these gains within a coherent national CBCA framework featuring clear mandates, financing mechanisms and monitoring tools. Doing so would not only strengthen domestic resilience but also reinforce its role as a global leader in embedding culture at the centre of climate action.

Mariam M. Alnoaimi, works from
'The Water that Asked for a Fish',2025.
Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 16,
Bait Obaid Al Shamsi, Sharjah ,2025. Supported
by Art Jameel and British Council through Anhar:
Culture and Climate Platform.
© Shanavas Jamaluddin

Exhibition at Warehouse 58 in Dubai of “From Ink to Action - Comics in Climate”, a collaboration between The Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF) and the British Council – MENA © Cezar Abou Dehn

3. Research Approach and Methodology

3.1 Research design and objectives

This study represents the first national baseline assessment of Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) in the UAE. Its aim is not only to map the range of existing initiatives but also to identify the conditions that enable or constrain CBCA, providing evidence that could inform both national policy and international dialogues. Because CBCA is an emerging interdisciplinary domain, cutting across heritage, creative industries, education, governance, and community practice – a mixed-methods research design was adopted.

The study sought to capture quantitative trends across the cultural sector and the qualitative insights of institutional experience. It was therefore anchored in three core data pillars — a bilingual national survey, semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders and practitioners, and embedded practitioner fieldwork within the Ministry of Culture. These were supplemented by a series of consultation workshops with stakeholders to validate findings and co-develop recommendations. This approach was grounded in the principle of triangulation, ensuring that evidence from different sources was cross-checked and synthesised into a coherent, sector-wide picture.

3.2 Research methods

3.2.1 Organisational survey

The organisational survey was developed in early 2025 in collaboration with cultural and environmental specialists from the British Council and the UAE Ministry of Culture. It was distributed both online (in English and Arabic) and through direct outreach to organisations identified as active in, or interested in, the intersection of culture and climate. Respondents represented a cross-section of government agencies, cultural institutions, non-profit organisations and other stakeholders. In total, 45 organisations completed the survey.

Close-ended questions captured statistical trends – for example, levels of awareness and the prevalence of certain practices – while open-ended questions invited examples, explanations and personal reflections.

This design provided both breadth and depth: measurable indicators of the state of CBCA in the UAE, as well as insightful narratives showing how and why organisations engage in climate action.

Quantitative data from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics appropriate to the sample size, and results are generally reported as percentages of respondents. Qualitative responses were coded thematically. Recurring themes – such as shared motivations, barriers or types of initiative – were identified and integrated into the wider analysis. Where relevant, direct quotations from respondents are included (anonymously) to highlight individual perspectives and illustrate the findings. These quotations are drawn verbatim from survey comments or follow-up interviews, providing illustrative context alongside aggregated data.

It should be noted that the survey focused on UAE-based organisations already engaged in culture-related climate action. As a result, the sample may lean towards respondents with prior interest or experience in this area. The findings should therefore be viewed as indicative of trends and perceptions among active CBCA stakeholders, rather than representing the entire cultural sector.

With 45 respondents, the sample size – while robust for a qualitative study – is relatively small for broad generalisation. Nonetheless, it establishes the first national baseline in this emerging field.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach produced a rich dataset – one that captures not only what organisations are doing in relation to CBCA, but also how they interpret the concept, what motivates them and what challenges they face. The following sections present the analysis in a structured way, beginning with the profile of participating organisations and followed by thematic findings and policy implications.

The 45 respondent organisations span a diverse cross-section of sectors and functions within the UAE's cultural and environmental landscape. Table 3 summarises the main types of organisations that participated in the survey, showing a balanced mix of government entities, cultural institutions, NGOs and others – reflecting the UAE's multi-layered CBCA ecosystem.

Table 3. Profile of surveyed organisations by sector (N=45)

Sector category	Number of organisations	Percentage of sample
Government bodies (culture or climate authorities)	7	16 percent
Cultural heritage institutions (museums, heritage sites)	15	33 percent
Arts and creative sector organisations	8	18 percent
Environmental NGOs with a cultural focus	5	11 percent
Academic and research institutions	4	9 percent
Community-based associations and other entities	6	13 percent

As shown above, about one third of respondents were cultural heritage institutions, including museums, heritage site management authorities and cultural centres focused on preserving tangible and intangible heritage. Government entities (around 16 per cent) included both federal and emirate-level agencies – such as culture ministries, tourism and heritage departments, and environmental authorities – with mandates relating to culture and sustainability. Arts and creative sector organisations (18 per cent) – ranging from arts councils and galleries to creative economy incubators – were also well represented, indicating the creative sector's growing engagement in climate issues. Environmental NGOs (11 per cent) that integrate cultural heritage or community knowledge into their climate programmes formed another important group, as did academic and research institutions (9 per cent) conducting research or education programmes on heritage and climate. The remaining respondents (around 13 per cent) were community-based associations and other organisations – for example, youth-led cultural initiatives or private consultancies in sustainable design – that did not fit neatly into the other categories but are active at the community level.

Geographically, the organisations are spread across the UAE, mainly in the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, which host many national cultural institutions and government bodies. Several respondents from Sharjah – a recognised centre of heritage conservation and the arts – also participated, along with a few based in the northern emirates (Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah and Umm Al Quwain) that focus on local heritage sites or community programmes. In terms of reach, some organisations operate at the national level – or even internationally, in the case of those involved in global heritage networks – while others have a specific local focus within one emirate or city.

The individuals who responded to the survey held a variety of roles, offering both strategic and operational perspectives. These included directors and managers of cultural institutions, sustainability officers, curators and programme coordinators, policy advisers in government, and researchers or educators.

This range of roles means the survey captures insights from those developing high-level strategies as well as those delivering projects on the ground. For example, several respondents from government bodies are responsible for policy development and planning – integrating climate considerations into cultural strategies – whereas respondents from museums and NGOs often manage programme delivery, such as running educational workshops or conservation projects.

This varied organisational profile provides essential context for interpreting the results. It suggests that CBCA activity in the UAE is not confined to one area but is emerging across multiple sectors and levels. It also indicates that the challenges and observations reported reflect a broad view of the cultural sector's engagement with climate action, spanning community initiatives to national and international policy dialogues.


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3.2.2 In-Depth interviews

To complement the survey, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy officials, academics, cultural practitioners, architects, designers, creative-economy professionals, media and communications specialists, heritage-site managers and sustainability consultants.

These interviewees represented a wide spectrum of institutional types and sectors – including federal and emirate-level government, NGOs, academic institutions, national museums, arts foundations, private developers and civil society organisations.

Interview participants were selected through purposive and maximum-variation sampling to ensure diversity in sector expertise, geographic representation (across all seven emirates) and professional background. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. Thematic coding was carried out using NVivo, drawing on both deductive codes – based on the CBCA research framework (for example, mitigation, adaptation, cultural infrastructure and public engagement) – and inductive codes emerging from the data (such as emotional connection, vernacular sustainability and circular aesthetics).

Qualitative insights from the interviews were systematically compared with the survey results using matrix coding and frequency analysis to support triangulation of findings. This triangulation enhanced internal validity and helped to identify both convergence and divergence across sectors.

Embedded practitioner fieldwork

An innovative aspect of the methodology was the inclusion of embedded practitioner field-work within the Ministry of Culture. Members of the research team were placed within the Ministry to observe institutional practices and policy discussions as they took place. This provided valuable insights into how CBCA is understood internally, how responsibilities are shared across departments and how cultural value is expressed within wider national climate strategies.

The fieldwork also allowed direct observation of both the enablers and constraints within governance systems – including cross-ministerial coordination, budgeting processes and decision-making dynamics. These internal perspectives were essential for contextualising the survey and interview findings, helping to explain why certain patterns of fragmentation or innovation emerged. At the same time, the embedded approach required careful reflection to avoid conflating observation with advocacy – a challenge addressed through transparent documentation and triangulation with external evidence.

Concrete Tent by DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, Al Madam, Sharjah, UAE. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023. © Edmund Sumner. Courtesy of Sharjah Architecture Triennial.

3.3 Analytical framework

All data sources were brought together through a triangulated approach to analysis. Survey responses were aggregated and examined to identify broad sector trends. Interview transcripts were thematically coded to capture recurring patterns and differing perspectives, while fieldwork notes were synthesised to contextualise institutional dynamics. By cross-referencing these three datasets, the research team developed a matrix of CBCA engagement that mapped practices across key domains – including traditional knowledge, the creative economy, design, education, community resilience and digital innovation – against systemic conditions such as governance, metrics and inclusion.

This analytical framework ensured that the findings were not drawn from any single dataset but emerged from the intersection of quantitative breadth, qualitative depth and institutional insight.

3.4 Iterative and consultative process

The methodology was deliberately iterative and consultative. Its initial framing was tested during Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (ADSW) in January 2025, where public- and private-sector participants provided feedback on the study's priorities. This input helped refine the survey instrument and the interview guide.

At the mid-point, a CBCA reflection session was co-hosted by the UAE Ministry of Culture and the British Council in July 2025. This event brought together cultural institutions, policymakers and practitioners to review the emerging findings. The session featured open dialogue, question-and-answer segments and group discussion, producing practical recommendations that were integrated into the final analysis.

This iterative consultation process strengthened the study's legitimacy by ensuring that the research remained grounded in participants' lived experience while aligning with policy priorities.

3.4 Limitations

As with any baseline study, there were a number of important limitations. The survey sample of 45 organisations provides valuable insights but does not reflect the full diversity of the UAE's cultural landscape. Smaller, informal or community-led initiatives – particularly in the northern emirates – were under-represented because of limited institutional infrastructure. Responses were also uneven geographically, with Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah more heavily represented.

Survey data relied on self-reporting, which may lead to either overestimation or underestimation of actual practice. The six-month timeframe (January–July 2025) limited the ability to capture long-term developments or seasonal variations in cultural activity. Finally, while embedded fieldwork offered rich institutional insight, it also presented a risk of positional bias. These risks were mitigated through triangulation and by giving precedence to stakeholder perspectives in the analysis.


© Al Ain Museum UNESCO

3.5 Reflexivity and positionality

This study acknowledges its own positionality. Commissioned by the UAE Ministry of Culture in partnership with the British Council, it benefited from strong institutional support yet required careful reflection to avoid reproducing official narratives. Researchers maintained transparent documentation, anonymised responses where appropriate and integrated stakeholder feedback throughout the process.

Reflexive practice was especially important in balancing institutional perspectives with the experiences of smaller and less visible actors.

The methodological approach – combining bilingual survey data, in-depth interviews, embedded fieldwork and iterative consultation – has produced a robust, multi-layered evidence base. It captures both the diversity of CBCA practice across the UAE and the systemic factors shaping its development.

By integrating quantitative reach with qualitative depth and institutional reflexivity, this study provides the first comprehensive national baseline on CBCA. This foundation ensures that the findings presented in the following chapters are rigorous, grounded and relevant for policy, offering a credible basis for monitoring progress and scaling culture-based climate action in the UAE.

Al Manakh Spaces Bio-farm,
Al Qasimiyah School, Sharjah. 2025.
Courtesy of Sharjah Architecture Triennial.

Jim Denevan, Self Similar, Manar Abu Dhabi 2023 - 2024.
Courtesy DCT Abu Dhabi and the Artist. © Lance Gerber

4. Key Findings

4.1 Mapping the landscape of CBCA in the UAE

In the UAE context, 'culture' is not viewed as a fixed or uniform concept but as a dynamic and wide-ranging system of meanings, practices, material forms and expressions. It encompasses a vibrant spectrum including:

Tangible, intangible and living heritage:

Archaeological sites, historic buildings and museum collections, as well as living traditions, oral histories, Emirati dialects, poetry (Nabati), performing arts (Ayyala), crafts such as Talli and Sadu weaving, culinary traditions and traditional systems of environmental knowledge – for example, those related to pearl diving, desert navigation, falconry and date-palm cultivation.

Contemporary arts and the creative economy:

A rapidly expanding sector that covers visual arts, design (fashion, graphic, product and interior), architecture, film, music, literature and digital media. These are understood not only as forms of expression but also as industries with economic and social influence, and as powerful tools for communication and public engagement.

Education and knowledge transmission:

Culture is closely linked to how knowledge, values and skills are passed on formally – through schools, universities and vocational training – and informally within families, communities and the media.

Social practices, norms and community life:

Everyday social interaction, family structures, community governance (including the majlis system), consumption and leisure patterns, religious practices and the shared values that shape behaviour.

Urban and rural environments as cultural landscapes:

The design, use and experience of cities, towns and rural areas are expressions of culture. This includes public spaces, infrastructure and people's interaction with the built and natural environment.

Daily behaviours and lifestyle choices:

Culture is also evident in the daily decisions individuals and communities make – from what they eat and wear to how they use resources and relate to one another and their surroundings.

Experts interviewed consistently emphasised that culture in the UAE is not viewed as a relic of the past but is ***'ever-evolving,'*** in the words of one cultural leader. It represents an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, and between local identity and global influence. This dynamism is evident in the UAE's embrace of ancient Indigenous knowledge systems alongside emerging youth-led innovations in technology, the arts and social enterprise. This multifaceted and fluid understanding is crucial because effective CBCA strategies must be rooted in – and responsive to – the specific ecological, geographical, historical and socio-cultural context of the UAE. Generic, uniform approaches are unlikely to gain traction or achieve long-term impact.

Qualitative insights from the in-depth interviews reveal a consistent view that culture is intrinsically linked to its environment. A representative from the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation provided a particularly compelling etymological perspective, tracing the word 'culture' back to its Latin root 'calaire,' meaning 'to cultivate.' This linguistic origin, they argued, emphasises that

CBCA has to be grounded in where we are... culture to be very much of the land and the environment that we're in.

This sentiment underscores the idea that culture is not an abstract or disembodied concept but is shaped by – and in turn shapes – its physical and ecological surroundings.

A Cultural Advisor from the Ministry of Culture reinforced this close connection, stating unequivocally that it is important to understand

that culture...is coming from nature.

This perspective suggests that a sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world is not merely an environmental objective pursued separately from cultural, but a principle inherent to the preservation, vitality and authentic expression of culture itself.

A policymaker involved in national strategy expanded on this integrated understanding, noting:

Culture to me is education, its heritage, but it is also how people live their lives every day. It's the values we pass on, the way we respond to the environment around us.

This broad definition embraces both tangible elements – such as heritage sites, traditional crafts and artistic artefacts – and intangible dimensions, including values, beliefs, behaviours and traditional ecological knowledge – recognising their interconnection.

Further broadening the definition, the Vice President for Sustainability at Expo City referred to 'national heritage,' 'education,' and the linkage between the past, present, and future as core components of culture, emphasising that

Culture is also education for me.

This perspective highlights culture's vital role in transmitting knowledge, wisdom, and values across generations – a process essential for fostering long-term sustainability and societal resilience. As one expert summarised,

We need to stop thinking of culture only as artefacts. It's also values and systems—what we repair, what we discard, what we celebrate.

This underscores the need for a holistic and systemic understanding of culture's role in responding to the climate crisis.

The repeated emphasis across interviews on culture being 'grounded in where we are' and intricately linked to 'national heritage' – narratives of how earlier generations successfully 'lived through the deserts' and adapted to harsh environmental conditions – reveals a strong and distinctive relationship between cultural identity and environmental adaptation within the Arabian Gulf region. This suggests that CBCA initiatives are more likely to achieve broad acceptance, active participation and lasting impact when they align closely with local identity, historical experience and national pride.

Rather than being viewed as external models or imported agendas, such initiatives can draw upon these intrinsic cultural motivations, transforming CBCA from a perceived obligation or niche agenda into an integral and celebrated part of national development, cultural expression and future-building. One cultural foundation director captured this practice-oriented approach well:

We are interested in practices—what people actually do, how they engage, how they live with the land. That's where climate culture emerges.

4.1.1 Multiple definitions of CBCA

CBCA in the UAE is increasingly being understood not as a one-way application of cultural tools to address climate challenges but as a dynamic, reciprocal and highly interactive process. This evolving understanding emphasises a two-way relationship:

1. Culture driving climate action: how culture – in its broadest and most inclusive sense, encompassing heritage, arts, values, knowledge systems, behaviours – can be strategically and creatively harnessed to drive, enhance, and sustain effective climate action.

2. Climate change impacting culture: how climate change, through its growing environmental and social effects, is reshaping cultural practices, threatening tangible and intangible heritage, altering traditional livelihoods, and prompting significant cultural adaptation and transformation.

The UAE's understanding of CBCA goes farbeyond using culture for advocacy, awareness or public-relations purposes. It represents a systemic approach to embedding climate awareness, sustainability principles and resilience thinking into cultural systems, social norms, institutional practices and individual behaviours.

In doing so, climate action becomes both a cultural imperative and a shared societal value. As one government official involved in policy development explained,

We want culture to be more than a backdrop to climate action. It should be an active driver. It's about lived traditions, creative responses, and community values that shape how people adapt to change.

This vision conveys a desire for culture to act as a catalyst for transformation, rather than simply a recipient of climate impacts or a decorative element in climate campaigns.

This holistic view of CBCA is often applied implicitly – or even 'unconsciously' – by cultural practitioners who, in addressing wider social issues or pursuing creative goals, find their work aligning with CBCA principles. The Director of the National Pavilion UAE noted that their work at the Venice Biennale often aligns 'unconsciously' with CBCA, driven by an intrinsic institutional motivation

to tackle some of these big questions or issues

facing contemporary society, such as food security, sustainable urbanism, or resource scarcity – often approached through an architectural or artistic perspective.

The understanding that CBCA 'goes both ways' – meaning that culture builds climate resilience while climate action simultaneously supports and protects cultural vitality and diversity – is central to its effective and ethical implementation. One cannot be advanced at the expense of the other without reducing overall impact.

The survey analysis provided important quantitative insights into how CBCA is currently defined and understood by organisations in the UAE. When asked about their understanding of CBCA, only a small proportion of respondents (around 20 per cent) reported having a clear and comprehensive definition of the concept. This group mainly comprised individuals who had previously engaged with international frameworks or dialogues – for example, those familiar with UNESCO or UNFCCC discussions on culture and climate.

A much larger group, however, indicated that their understanding was partial: about 50 to 65 per cent of respondents said they recognised that culture and heritage can play a role in climate action but admitted that their understanding was informal or still evolving.

The remaining respondents (roughly 20 per cent) were not familiar with the term 'CBCA' but were nonetheless undertaking relevant activities – such as sustainable-heritage initiatives – without explicitly identifying them as CBCA.

As Figure 1 illustrates, most of the organisations (60 percent) surveyed fall within the middle range of conceptual awareness – those who described themselves as 'somewhat' aware.

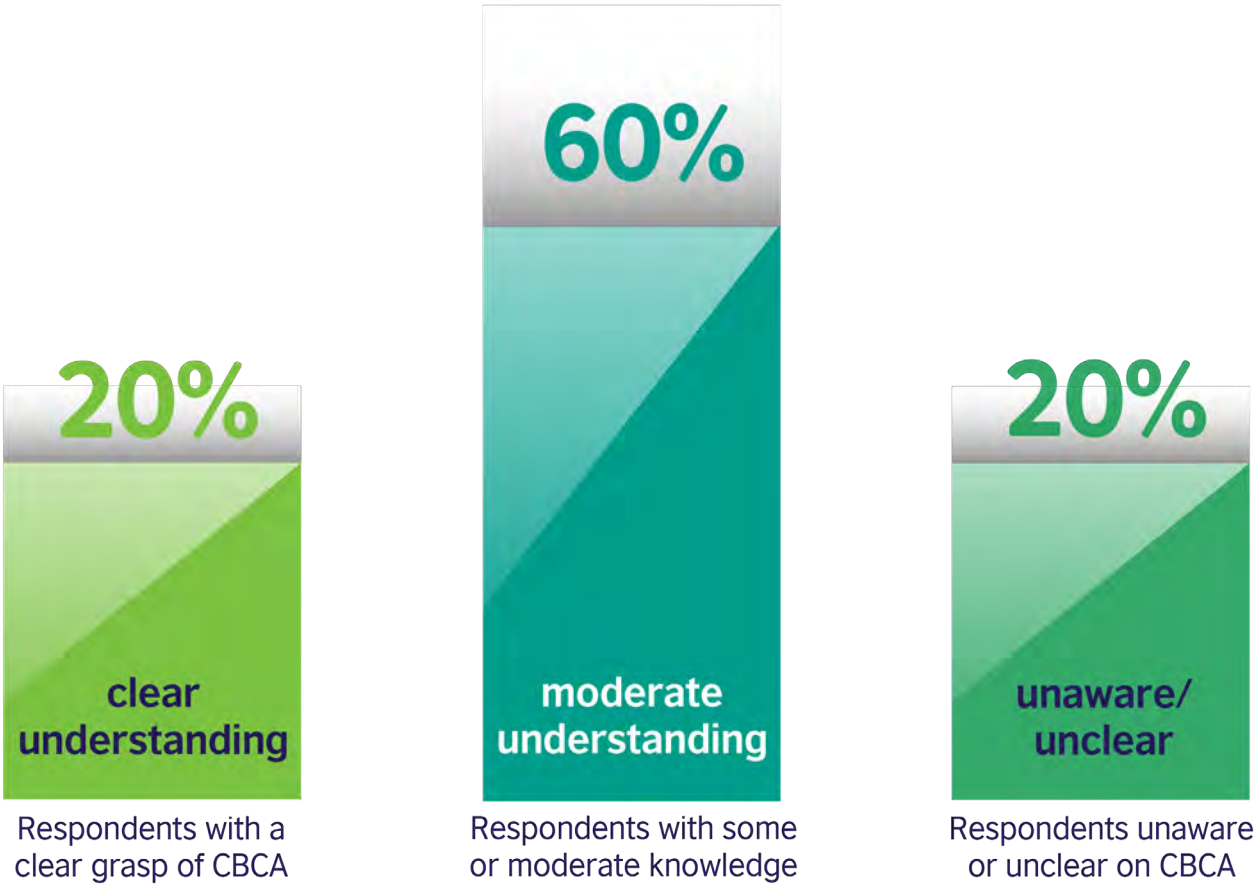

Figure 1. Understanding of CBCA as a concept

Many of these respondents noted that, although they intuitively recognised links between their cultural work and climate outcomes, they lacked a formal definition or framework.

We are doing things that definitely relate to climate change – like promoting sustainable heritage tourism – but we hadn't heard the term 'CBCA' until this survey,

explained one participant.

This finding shows that the practice often precedes terminology; many organisations are already engaging in CBCA activities without formally identifying them as such. It also points to a need for clearer communication and knowledge-sharing on what CBCA includes and how it can be operationalised within the cultural sector.

Seventy-three per cent (n = 33) of respondents provided a wide range of definitions, reflecting different institutional perspectives and levels of engagement. When these open-ended responses were thematically analysed, they typically clustered around one or more of the following core ideas:

Integration of cultural practices and traditional knowledge:

Many definitions stressed the importance of combining Indigenous knowledge, local customs and heritage-based practices with modern sustainability and climate-adaptation strategies.

Use of creative and artistic approaches:

A large number of respondents defined CBCA through the use of cultural expression – including exhibitions, storytelling, visual arts, the performing arts and digital media – to raise environmental awareness, improve climate literacy and inspire pro-environmental behaviour.

Activation of cultural spaces and events as platforms:

Several definitions pointed to the role of cultural infrastructure – such as museums, galleries, festivals, community centres and libraries – as key venues for climate dialogue, education, community mobilisation and behaviour-change initiatives.

Positioning culture as a foundation for resilience and identity:

Some respondents described CBCA as drawing on culture's capacity to strengthen community resilience, preserve identity in times of environmental and social change and foster social cohesion around shared climate goals and sustainable futures.

This diversity of definitions, while reflecting a broad and inclusive understanding of CBCA, also confirms that although interest in the concept is growing rapidly across the UAE, it remains an emerging field. It still lacks a universally accepted and consistently applied definition across different institutions, sectors and professional domains. The founder of Climate Tribe captured the human dimension of the concept, noting,

I love that phrase, CBCA, because I feel like it humanises what climate action is.

An academic from Zayed University elaborated on the often-overlooked cultural aspects of technical domains:

Buildings are not just infrastructure—they're cultural signals. What we demolish, what we preserve, how we design—it's all communicating our priorities. So yes, CBCA is about imagination and influence, and about making those cultural signals align ith sustainability.

Adding a crucial perspective on CBCA's enabling role in wider societal transformation, a senior policy advisor observed,

We must think of CBCA as an enabler—something that links other systems together. It's how we build trust in institutions, how we bring new actors and diverse voices into climate spaces, how we build a public that's willing to act and support ambitious climate policies.

A cultural researcher captured this connection succinctly:

Culture is where the climate crisis is felt—and where the response begins.

© Expo City

4.1.2 The Perceived importance and relevance of CBCA in the UAE's unique context

One of the survey's main aims was to assess how clearly cultural organisations understand the term 'CBCA' and how aware they are of related policies and frameworks. The results show that awareness is growing but uneven – many respondents recognised that culture and climate are connected, yet fewer held a clear or consistent definition of CBCA or knowledge of specific policy initiatives in this area.

Only about one third of respondents could name policy frameworks that relate to CBCA. For instance, several government-affiliated participants referred to the UAE's climate strategies beginning to reference culture – such as plans to include culture in future NDCs and NAPs, as indicated in recent strategic documents. A small number mentioned global developments, including the UNESCO Executive Board's 2023 resolution on integrating culture into climate resilience and the launch of the GFCBCA at COP28. However, most participants – including many working directly in cultural delivery – were not familiar with these high-level initiatives. One museum director explained,

I know our government has sustainability agendas, but I'm not sure if culture is explicitly part of those. We've mostly been figuring it out on our own.

This comment highlights a common situation: local activity often taking place in isolation from formal policy frameworks.

Despite limited awareness of specific policies, respondents almost unanimously agreed that culture has an essential role in tackling climate change. In other words, even when the terminology or policy connections were unclear, attitudes remained strongly positive.

Many respondents endorsed statements such as 'climate change is a significant concern for our heritage/resources' and 'cultural organisations should be involved in climate action.' The survey found that almost all participants – more than 90 per cent – acknowledged the relevance of climate change to their organisation's mission or sector. This strong consensus suggests fertile ground for building greater understanding: the motivation already exists, even if the conceptual frameworks need further development.

Across interviews, CBCA was regarded by experts and practitioners as both highly relevant and strategically important within the UAE's unique context. This perception arises from CBCA's potential to bridge the persistent gap between technical, data-driven climate information and public understanding – connecting policy pronouncements with tangible experience, emotional resonance and sustained engagement.

The Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Climate Tribe expressed this point powerfully, noting that traditional media coverage of climate issues often focuses extensively on the 'how and the what'—the scientific mechanisms, the technical solutions and policy details—while frequently neglecting the crucial question 'why.' She argued that

it's through storytelling, through culturally resonant narratives, that we can actually create that emotional connection,

a connection that is often the essential precursor to motivating meaningful individual and collective action.

This perspective highlights a gap in many conventional climate-communication strategies – a gap that CBCA, with its range of cultural forms such as art, music, heritage storytelling, community-based practice and creative media, is uniquely placed to fill. This sentiment was echoed by the representative from Dubai Holding Entertainment, who described the entertainment sector and cultural events as powerful ways to

transmit this message [of sustainability] and get people enthusiastic about the topic… not in a scary way,

but in ways that inspire curiosity, hope and a desire for positive change.

The UAE's governance structure – marked by visionary leadership and the ability of top-down directives to drive rapid social change – creates a distinctive and enabling environment for advancing CBCA. A representative from the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation observed that

behavioural change in the UAE [can happen] pretty quickly

when initiatives are clearly led and supported by strong mandates. This dynamic was illustrated by the swift nationwide adoption of the new weekend structure. The Associate Head of Sustainability at the AUS agreed, remarking,

This is very top-down. Culture and things happen much faster if they are directed from the top.

This pattern does not reduce the importance of grassroots cultural initiatives, which remain essential for authenticity, local ownership, context-specific solutions and community resilience. However, it suggests that the reach and impact of such bottom-up efforts in the UAE can be greatly enhanced when they are strategically aligned with – and visibly supported by – national policy frameworks and clear leadership direction.

4.1.3 Current practices of CBCA

The landscape of CBCA in the UAE reflects the diverse roles played by different cultural forms, an increasing focus on education and awareness, evolving methods of community engagement, the influence of policy and governance, innovations in sustainable cultural production and consumption, and the ongoing balance between mitigation and adaptation within a cultural framework.

The survey invited organisations to describe the current initiatives and practices they had undertaken that align with CBCA. Although CBCA is a relatively new concept, the findings reveal a rich and active spectrum of initiatives already under way.

Most respondent organisations were not starting from zero – nearly all had implemented or participated in at least one initiative connecting culture with environmental sustainability, and many had done more than one. This section groups the main types of initiatives and provides an overview of their scope and frequency.

Through a combination of quantitative checklist questions and qualitative descriptions, several recurring categories of CBCA practice emerged. These are summarised in Figure 2, which illustrates the proportion of organisations engaged in each type. (Multiple responses were allowed, as many organisations reported multifaceted programmes).

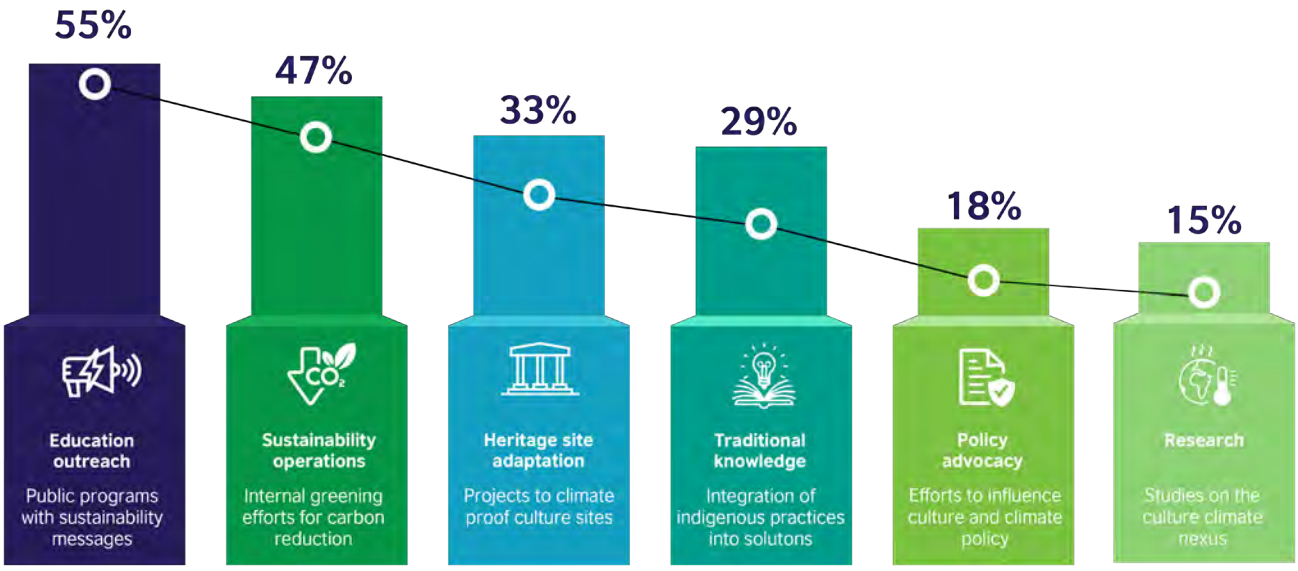

Figure 2. Prevalence of CBCA initiatives among organisations

As Figure 2 shows, the most common form of CBCA activity is education and awareness programming. More than half of the organisations surveyed reported using cultural platforms to educate the public or specific audiences about climate change. For example, numerous respondents referred to exhibitions, talks or festivals that highlighted climate themes through an artistic or heritage lens. One arts centre described hosting a 'Climate and Creativity' exhibition featuring local artists to spark dialogue on environmental issues through art.

Similarly, heritage organisations have run community workshops on traditional water-conservation practices, linking them to today's water-scarcity challenges.

These outreach efforts make use of the credibility and reach of cultural institutions to engage audiences with sustainability themes in accessible ways. They demonstrate that the cultural sector increasingly sees itself as a channel for climate communication – translating scientific concepts into cultural narratives that resonate with the public.

The second most common practice involves improving the environmental sustainability of organisational operations. Almost half of the respondents reported measures to reduce their own environmental footprint.

These included improving energy efficiency in museums and cultural venues – for instance, retrofitting LED lighting and optimising air conditioning in archives – implementing recycling and waste-reduction programmes at cultural sites and events, and opting for sustainable materials and procurement practices.

Some organisations have sought green-building certification for their facilities or adopted eco-friendly operational guidelines – for example, guidelines for sustainable exhibitions designed to minimise single-use plastics and material waste. These actions signal a growing commitment to 'walk the talk': cultural organisations increasingly view it as their duty to align internal operations with the sustainability values they advocate externally.

However, a few respondents noted that they are 'still at the beginning of greening our operations,' citing challenges such as limited funding for upgrades and lack of technical expertise.

A significant number of organisations – about one third – are engaged in climate-adaptation projects for heritage sites. These projects recognise that many cultural-heritage assets – including historic buildings, archaeological sites and museum collections – are at risk from climate change, owing to factors such as increased heat, humidity, storms and sea-level rise in coastal areas.

Examples shared by respondents include conducting climate-risk assessments for museum collections, reinforcing traditional buildings to improve cooling and ventilation, installing protective barriers or drainage systems around flood-prone heritage sites, and developing emergency-response plans for heritage assets in the event of extreme weather. One respondent from a heritage authority explained that they have begun

documenting our historic houses and assessing how higher temperatures and termites (which thrive in heat) might affect the wooden structures, so we can plan protective measures.

These initiatives represent proactive steps to climate-proof cultural heritage, ensuring its preservation for future generations despite environmental pressures. Notably, many of these efforts involve collaboration with environmental scientists and engineers, reflecting a cross-disciplinary approach to heritage resilience.

About 30 per cent of organisations involve reviving and applying traditional knowledge and practices to inform climate solutions. The UAE has a rich legacy of Indigenous and local knowledge – from Bedouin architectural techniques (for example, *Barjeel* wind towers for natural cooling) to agricultural and water-management systems (such as the *Aflaj* irrigation networks found in oases) – that evolved in harmony with the desert environment.

Several respondents described initiatives that draw on this heritage: for example, cultural NGOs documenting traditional pearl-diving and fishing methods that emphasised seasonal sustainability, or architecture groups incorporating vernacular design principles to inspire modern, low-impact construction.

There's so much wisdom in how our ancestors lived in tune with the environment,

noted one participant,

and we're trying to bring that into today's climate adaptation strategies.

These projects deliver dual benefits: they conserve intangible cultural heritage – including knowledge, skills and traditions – while promoting community-based, low-technology approaches to climate resilience. They also foster community pride and continuity by celebrating local traditions as part of modern sustainability practice.

While direct policy advocacy and dedicated research remain less common – with around 20 per cent of surveyed organisations active in this area – the initiatives that do exist are strategically significant. Larger cultural bodies, often those with established links to government or international networks, have contributed cultural perspectives to national climate dialogues or collaborated with ministries to align heritage protection with adaptation planning.

Academic institutions have begun producing evidence of how traditional knowledge and cultural practice enhance resilience. Although modest in scale, these initiatives point to important opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

Culture intersects naturally with education when curricula integrate heritage-based sustainability; with municipalities when urban planning includes cultural assets in resilience strategies; and with environmental governance when heritage sites are included in climate-risk assessments (ICOMOS, 2024).

Even limited advocacy or research efforts demonstrate that CBCA is not a standalone agenda but a connecting framework – linking culture with climate policy, education, urban planning and environmental science – in ways that strengthen and enrich all sectors.

4.1.4 Geographic distribution

The survey and qualitative findings show that CBCA initiatives are **primarily concentrated** in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah, which host the majority of the country's cultural institutions and infrastructure. These three emirates account for most documented initiatives across **education,heritage, the arts, design and urban planning**.

In contrast, far fewer initiatives were reported in Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah and Umm Al Quwain. While this imbalance partly reflects variations in institutional capacity and visibility, it also highlights a geographic gap: **the cultural assets of the northern emirates remain underused in climate action.**

"Fieldwork: Cultural Histories, Rural Futures" symposium at the Jameel Arts Centre
© Jameel Arts Centre

Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi has developed the most comprehensive CBCA portfolio, spanning all five sectors. The Department of Culture and Tourism has introduced sustainability guidelines for heritage-site management, embedding climate resilience in conservation practice.

Universities such as New York University (NYU) Abu Dhabi and Zayed University have integrated sustainability into their curricula and campus operations, while the Department of Municipalities and Transport has aligned urban planning with cultural-heritage protection under Plan 2040. Alongside these institutional programmes, independent artists and community initiatives have used public art and creative campaigns to raise awareness of climate change.

Dubai

Dubai stands out for its innovation in the creative industries and education sectors. Expo City's Terra Pavilion has been repurposed as an interactive sustainability museum, showing how cultural landmarks can be transformed into climate-education spaces (Grimshaw Architects, 2024). A wide range of institutions and commercial galleries have hosted sustainability-themed exhibitions, embedding climate dialogue in the arts. The Dubai Culture and Arts Authority has explicitly recognised heritage as a resource for climate adaptation, while local architectural studios are experimenting with sustainable design and materials. Notably, Art Jameel's Sustainability Charter and the Anhar: Culture and Climate programme – developed in partnership with the British Council – aim to expand support for cultural projects that engage meaningfully with the climate emergency across the MENA region.

Sharjah

Sharjah is noted for its strong focus on the arts, heritage and design. The Sharjah Architecture Triennial has positioned the emirate internationally as a centre for climate-conscious design, while the Sharjah Art Foundation and Maraya Art Centre regularly curate programmes on environmental themes. The American University of Sharjah has adopted a whole-institution sustainability strategy, engaging students in both cultural and climate initiatives. Sharjah's CBCA profile combines tangible and intangible heritage with modern sustainability practices, reflecting its cultural leadership and cross-generational approach to resilience.

The concentration of initiatives in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah shows how investment in cultural infrastructure often correlates with CBCA activity. Where there are strong cultural authorities, universities or international events, there is also greater climate-related cultural innovation. For instance, the legacy of Expo 2020 continues to drive climate education in Dubai, while Sharjah's biennials and triennials provide important platforms for cultural sustainability dialogue. By contrast, the northern emirates host fewer initiatives, highlighting an opportunity to decentralise CBCA and ensure that all regions contribute to – and benefit from – culture-based resilience.

Another key pattern is the interdisciplinary nature of CBCA in the UAE. Many initiatives deliberately span multiple sectors: museum exhibitions double as educational outreach, adaptive reuse of heritage buildings integrates sustainable architecture and the protection of heritage sites supports tourism strategies. This convergence shows that CBCA is not siloed but inherently cross-sectoral, reinforcing its role as a systems-level catalyst for resilience.

4.1.5 Sectoral intersections

CBCA does not take place in isolation. By its nature, it intersects with a wide range of sectors and policy areas (see Figure 3).

The survey results show that organisations are aware of these intersections and, in many cases, are actively pursuing cross-sector collaboration – though not without challenges.

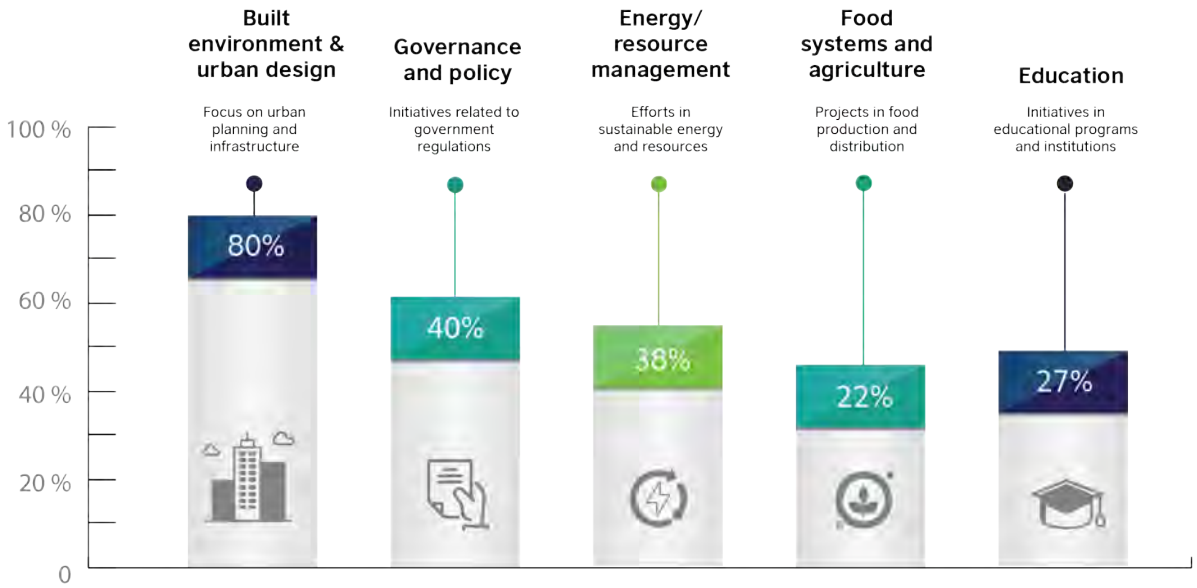

Figure 3. Sectoral intersections of CBCA

Urban planning and built environment

A recurring theme was the integration of cultural heritage considerations into urban design and climate resilience planning. Several respondents – particularly those from government or architectural backgrounds – noted that adapting historic urban areas and culturally significant landscapes to climate impacts requires working closely with urban planners and infrastructure agencies.

For example, one respondent from a preservation society described collaborating with city authorities to ensure that climate adaptation measures in historic neighbourhoods – such as upgrading drainage systems or cooling public spaces – are implemented in ways that preserve traditional character.

This section examines how CBCA aligns with, and adds value to, other sectors such as urban planning, education, tourism and environmental governance, based on the perspectives of respondents.

We can't just slap solar panels on a heritage building without careful design,' they pointed out, 'so we're coordinating with the urban planning council to pilot heritage-friendly renewable energy solutions in a historic district.

Respondents also noted that urban greening – such as creating parks or planting native trees for cooling – can serve as cultural initiatives when grounded in traditional landscape knowledge or designed to restore historic gardens. In this way, sustainable-city projects gain cultural depth, while heritage initiatives gain environmental relevance. Some organisations are advocating for the inclusion of heritage sites in urban climate-risk assessments and municipal climate-action plans. These examples show how CBCA is helping to connect culture and urban governance, aligning with wider sustainability and smart-city agendas.

Governance and policy integration

On the governance front, respondents discussed the extent to which culture is – or is not – represented in climate policy processes, and vice versa. A few participants noted positive developments, such as the creation of interdepartmental committees that include culture and environment officials, or the incorporation of cultural resilience in local climate adaptation strategies. However, most observations highlighted the persistence of policy silos:

Environmental policymakers tend to focus on technology and science, while cultural policymakers focus on arts and heritage – they rarely sit together,

one respondent noted. This separation means that opportunities for collaboration are often missed. For instance, a climate-action plan might overlook cultural institutions as platforms for public engagement, while a cultural-development strategy might exclude sustainability measures. Still, some examples of coordination exist: one respondent from a national heritage authority explained that they had provided input to the UAE's climate-negotiations team on how heritage could be reflected in national reports – a small but significant step towards policy integration.

Survey responses indicate a growing understanding that effective climate action demands joined-up governance across sectors. Many respondents expressed a wish for stronger frameworks connecting culture with climate governance – for example, through formal working groups, memorandums of understanding between ministries (such as between the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment and the Ministry of Culture) or shared policy targets.

One concrete recommendation that emerged – to be detailed in the Policy Implications section – is the creation of a national 'Culture and Climate Action Plan' to align initiatives across ministries and sectors.

Meanwhile, at the project level, several organisations have taken the initiative to coordinate directly with government counterparts.

For example, an NGO working on traditional agriculture described collaborating with the Ministry of Agriculture on a pilot project to reintroduce climate-resilient heritage crops – combining cultural and scientific expertise.

Education and academia

The education sector is another critical intersection. Many CBCA initiatives inherently have an educational component, and some respondents have formal partnerships with schools, universities, or youth programmes. Cultural organisations (like museums and cultural centres) often serve as informal educational venues on climate change, complementing the formal curriculum. A number of respondents reported working with the Ministry of Education or individual schools to bring climate-and-culture content into classrooms. Notably, the Al Naliyah Emirati Cultural Activities Framework for Schools (ECAF) – developed jointly by the UAE Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education – was highlighted as a pioneering national initiative integrating Emirati cultural values and environmental awareness into school curricula. Examples include school trips to eco-museums, development of heritage-based sustainability lesson plans, and university research collaborations.

One academic respondent noted that their university's environmental science department teamed up with the archaeology department to study how ancient settlements adapted to past climate variability – a research intersection that also feeds into public lectures and student training. These examples show CBCA aligning with the education and research sector to build knowledge and awareness among the next generation.

Tourism and economic development

Several survey participants highlighted the close relationship between cultural heritage and tourism in the UAE. Sustainable tourism initiatives acknowledge the effects of climate change – for example, through the promotion of eco-tourism. Respondents from heritage sites and tourism authorities described efforts to develop 'climate-friendly cultural tourism.' This includes adjusting visitor access to fragile natural and cultural sites during periods of extreme heat, educating tourists on conserving water and energy in heritage hotels or desert camps, and marketing cultural experiences that also support conservation – such as guided tours where visitors plant native trees at heritage sites.

Such initiatives align CBCA with the tourism sector's goal of remaining viable and attractive under climate constraints. They also link directly to economic development: as one respondent noted, investing in the resilience of cultural assets is essential not only for heritage preservation but also for the tourism economy that depends on those assets. This type of cross-sector reasoning can be particularly effective in mobilising support.


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Environmental conservation

There is a strong and natural overlap between CBCA and the environmental sector. Many CBCA initiatives complement environmental-conservation programmes (Maulidah et al., 2023). For example, projects that restore traditional irrigation systems contribute to water-conservation targets, while preserving mangrove forests with cultural value also delivers carbon-sequestration benefits (Avrami et al., 2000). Natural heritage is also championed through national and international conservation leadership. In the UAE, Emirates Nature–WWF plays a central role in safeguarding ecosystems that hold both cultural and ecological significance. The organisation's work on natural heritage and community-based conservation is led by H.E. Razan Al Mubarak, who also served as the COP28 High-Level Climate Champion, underscoring the country's integrated approach to nature, culture, and climate action.

Some environmental NGOs reported incorporating cultural-heritage dimensions into their work – for instance, engaging community elders in habitat restoration to learn historical ecosystem knowledge, or using art and storytelling in climate-advocacy campaigns. Conversely, cultural organisations often partner with environmental experts to ensure that their activities are grounded in sound science.

We teamed up with the Environment Agency to assess how rising sea levels will affect our coastal heritage site,

said one heritage manager, illustrating direct collaboration. By aligning objectives – protecting a site that is both culturally and ecologically important – these partnerships achieve shared benefits.

Cross-sector collaboration

Overall, the survey results reveal growing but still limited cross-sector collaboration. Many respondents recognised that CBCA is inherently multidisciplinary: effective action requires cooperation with urban planners, educators, scientists, tourism operators and policymakers. Several organisations have taken initial steps to form partnerships or informal networks, although these tend to arise on a case-by-case basis rather than through institutionalised mechanisms.

The cultural sector is increasingly present in wider climate discussions but often through individual leadership or ad hoc projects. Respondents repeatedly called for more structured opportunities for cross-sector engagement – such as conferences or working groups that bring stakeholders together to share knowledge and plan collectively.

CBCA in the UAE both aligns with and contributes to multiple sectors – from shaping climate-resilient cities to enhancing environmental education and supporting sustainable tourism.

These intersections offer valuable opportunities: by working collaboratively, sectors can leverage culture's distinct assets – such as community trust, historical knowledge and creative innovation – to strengthen climate outcomes.

Realising this potential, however, will require breaking down silos and building coordinated strategies – a theme that recurs in the following discussions on barriers, opportunities and policy priorities.

4.2 CBCA in action: Six domains of engagement

The findings reveal both the diversity and fragility of CBCA practice. Cultural institutions, creative industries, educators, heritage custodians and community groups are already integrating climate concerns into their work. Yet these efforts remain fragmented, intermittent and often under-recognised within formal policy frameworks.

What emerges is a landscape characterised by dynamic practice but limited systems support: innovation and enthusiasm are evident across the sector, but without coherent governance, shared metrics, or equitable access, the full potential of CBCA is only partially realised.

For clarity and comparison, the analysis is structured around six domains of engagement that reflect both the lived realities of stakeholders and the key policy clusters identified through the research:

Each domain highlights patterns of engagement, gaps, and tensions. Together, they offer a multi-dimensional picture of how CBCA is advancing in the UAE – and where systemic interventions are needed to sustain and scale it.

1. Safeguarding traditional knowledge systems
2. Embedding sustainability in the creative economy and cultural production
3. Integrating heritage-informed and low-carbon design in the built environment
4. Mainstreaming CBCA into formal and informal education
5. Strengthening community-based and decentralised cultural resilience
6. Advancing climate innovation through digital technology

4.2.1 Safeguarding traditional knowledge systems

Traditional knowledge represents one of the UAE's richest reservoirs of climate-adaptive practice, encompassing falaj irrigation channels that sustained desert oases, wind towers (barjeel) for passive cooling, coral-stone construction, desert pastoralism, and the resource-efficient uses of the date palm. In the baseline survey, more than half of participating organisations reported integrating traditional knowledge into their programmes, making it the most frequently cited cultural dimension of CBCA.

Across interviews, heritage was described as both an anchor of resilience and a form of ecological memory. One senior advisor at the Ministry of Culture summarised this connection succinctly:

If they want to preserve and promote their culture, they have to preserve nature first.

Others stressed the urgency of documentation and transmission:

We are losing vast amounts of knowledge that was never written down, that existed primarily in oral traditions and lived practices.

Concerns about intergenerational disconnects surfaced repeatedly, underlining the need for systematic recording, education pathways, and formal recognition of knowledge holders.

Practical applications show the breadth of this domain. Traditional architectural practices—such as inward-facing courtyard houses that create microclimates, narrow shaded *Sikka* alleyways, and *barjeel* wind towers—are being re-examined by architectural schools and practitioners not as historical curiosities but as design intelligence for climate-adapted cities.

As one educator explained, this reframes sustainability as locally grounded rather than externally imported. Beyond architecture, cultural organisations are using storytelling, museum programmes, and community workshops to teach water-efficient practices, local ethnobotany, and resource-frugal ways of living that evolved in harmony with arid conditions.

Modern heritage has also entered this discussion. The UAE Modern Heritage Initiative reframes buildings from the rapid modernisation period (1960s–1980s) as sites of 'rapid adaptation,' where adaptive reuse preserves embodied energy and reduces demand for new materials. Students and practitioners have explored reimagining modernist landmarks—such as Zayed Sports City Stadium—as low-carbon, mixed-use community spaces, extending the concept of adaptation to the nation's recent past.

Faith-based values add another layer. Islamic teachings such as

Even if you are at a running stream, you should not be wasteful

were cited as powerful anchors for climate ethics. Ramadan, in particular, was identified as a cultural moment that could be reclaimed as a model of moderation and mindful consumption, aligning religious practice with sustainability principles.

Institutionally, however, traditional knowledge remains under-recognised in national climate frameworks. While the UAE's NAP and NDC 3.0 reference culture and heritage, few operational mechanisms exist to embed this knowledge in adaptation planning, budgeting or risk assessment.

Large heritage projects—such as the rehabilitation of Al Ain Oasis—demonstrate what is possible, but they remain detached from community-held practices like desert farming, camel husbandry, or coastal craft traditions.Elders, craftspeople and pastoralists who hold lived ecological knowledge are seldom represented in formal climate decision-making.

Their expertise is often mobilised on a project basis – through exhibitions or education initiatives – rather than systematically integrated into resilience planning.

From a climate perspective, safeguarding traditional knowledge is vital for adaptation: it provides strategies for coping with extreme heat, water scarcity and fragile ecosystems. It also supports mitigation by reducing reliance on carbon-intensive technologies through low-energy construction, careful resource use, repair and reuse, and context-appropriate materials. As one architect reflected:

We are rediscovering how our ancestors lived with the land, and there is a humility in that. They were sustainable out of necessity—we can be sustainable by choice, informed by their wisdom.

Taken together, the evidence reveals both the richness and the vulnerability of traditional knowledge in the UAE. It is celebrated as a source of national pride, cultural diplomacy, and practical climate solutions.

Yet without systematic integration into policy and planning, meaningful intergenerational transmission and critical adaptation for modern contexts, it risks becoming a symbolic reference rather than a foundation for resilience and decarbonisation.


© UNESCO Sites in UAE

4.2.2 Embedding sustainability in the creative economy and cultural production

The UAE's cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are increasingly recognised as testing grounds for climate communication, behaviour change, and sustainable practice. From large-scale music festivals and public art to theatre, design weeks and international exhibitions, the CCIs are using their platforms to make climate action engaging, visible and aspirational.

Survey data support this trend: 47 percent of organisations reported integrating sustainability themes into their cultural content, while 67 per cent indicated that their initiatives included exhibitions, campaigns or programmes related to climate issues. Yet fewer than 20 percent had access to dedicated public funding or benefited from green procurement schemes. This contrast highlights the sector's commitment versus its structural fragility: momentum exists but depends heavily on short-term funding, charismatic leadership, and isolated showcases (British Council & University of the Arts London, 2023).

High-profile examples illustrate both the promise and limitations of this domain. Dubai Holding Entertainment has launched sustainability-focused programming, including the Earth Soul music festival, described by one organiser as a way to

transmit this message and give people enthusiasm about the topic of sustainability.

Expo City's Terra Pavilion has been repurposed as an interactive sustainability museum, blending design, education and public engagement. The National Pavilion UAE at the Venice Biennale regularly uses art and architecture to explore issues such as food security, water scarcity and sustainable urbanism — sometimes revealing what its director called an

unconscious but profound alignment

with CBCA principles.

Other institutions are embedding sustainability into their core operations and curricula. The Sharjah Performing Arts Academy (SPAA) has made sustainability a central part of its curriculum: sets are reused, costumes are produced from waste materials and energy-efficient lighting is standard practice. Its translation of The Green Book on sustainable theatre into Arabic signals an intent to shift practice regionally. Among arts institutions, Art Jameel stands out for its formal Sustainability Charter, positioning it as a sector leader in embedding environmental principles in governance, operations, and programming. Similarly, the Alserkal Arts Foundation has piloted exhibitions and community projects that merge creative expression with environmental education, while Expo City Dubai and the AUS are integrating comprehensive sustainability strategies across campus design and learning.

These initiatives show an evolving understanding within the sector: art is not only about reflection but about reimagining the future. By bypassing traditional communication barriers, artistic expression fosters emotional engagement with sustainability, catalysing behavioural change and shifting social norms. Respondents observed that the cultural sector increasingly sees itself as a conduit for climate communication – translating scientific information into cultural narratives that resonate with the public.

Yet persistent weaknesses remain. Interviewees repeatedly described sustainability efforts as episodic and personality-driven, reliant on individual champions rather than institutional mandates. Without sector-wide standards or regulatory frameworks, green practices often remain confined to high-profile showcases and fail to spread across the broader creative economy. As one cultural foundation representative noted,

There is an obsession with luxury — people reject buildings or performances that don't look expensive, even if they are sustainable.

This preference for spectacle undermines modest, circular or frugal approaches, reinforcing sustainability as an add-on rather than a core operating principle.

Funding and procurement systems exacerbate this fragility. Sponsorship and grant structures tend to prioritise visibility and novelty over continuity and depth, leaving many initiatives project-based and precarious. Procurement policies, often driven by cost minimisation, rarely reward low-carbon suppliers or circular production models.

The absence of robust monitoring frameworks further encourage superficiality. Several stakeholders warned of 'eco-themed' exhibitions or festivals that leverage climate branding but continuing carbon-intensive production. One academic cautioned that without metrics,

we are measuring logos, not impacts.

This disconnect risks turning sustainability into a communicative strategy rather than an operational practice.

From a climate perspective, CCIs contribute to mitigation by decarbonising their operations — reducing energy use in venues, cutting material waste and adopting sustainable supply chains. They also advance adaptation by shaping public perceptions and normalising sustainable behaviours, using cultural expression to build resilience, social cohesion and environmental literacy. In doing so, CCIs are emerging as leaders in sustainable production and consumption — offering models of circularity, creativity and community engagement that other industries can emulate.

Taken together, the evidence reveals a dual reality. On one side, flagship cultural institutions such as Terra Pavilion, National Pavilion UAE at the Venice Biennale and SPAA demonstrate how the sector can lead on mitigation – decarbonising creative production, experimenting with low-impact materials and modelling sustainable operations. On the other, the adaptive potential of culture – to shift mindsets, influence lifestyles and strengthen collective resilience – remains underdeveloped, particularly among smaller creative actors that lack resources and institutional support.

Without stronger policy frameworks and long-term investment, the CCIs risk remaining elite, episodic and symbolic – visible on global stages but insufficiently embedded in the everyday practices and social transformations needed for a truly sustainable cultural economy.

4.2.3 Integrating heritage-informed and low-carbon design in the built environment

The built environment is one of the most significant arenas where culture and climate intersect in the UAE. Survey data confirmed this centrality: 80 per cent of organisations reported that their CBCA initiatives engage with architecture, design or urban planning, making it the most frequently cited area of culture-climate activity. Respondents described buildings and urban form as both repositories of cultural identity and frontlines of climate vulnerability and emissions.

These built forms reflect centuries of resource-conscious design and are increasingly reframed as climate-smart models rather than historical artefacts. A Zayed University faculty member explained,

We ask students to look at buildings not just as structures but as cultural responses to environmental pressures. This reframes sustainability as rooted in place, not imported from the West.

Spotlight: Using cultural identity to define spatial concepts

In this design studio brief, taught in spring 2025 by Assistant Professor of Architecture Oorvi Sharma, first-year design students at Zayed University were tasked with developing digitally rendered, tapestry-like CAD drawings to synthesise research, spatial concepts and cultural narratives from an earlier project phase.

Building on their foundational investigations into sustainable systems tailored to the UAE, students refined their spatial proposals by integrating food-security strategies, global sustainability frameworks and anthropometric design principles. The project highlights the role of food in shaping cultural identity and demonstrates its potential to strengthen community resilience through resource-efficient, environmentally responsible design.

Using AutoCAD to produce detailed linework, students illustrated micro-architectural interventions that address agricultural scenarios, cross-cultural exchange and ecological awareness at multiple scales. The resulting drawings were conceived as richly layered visual tapestries – weaving together site-specific insights, sustainable-systems thinking and the symbolic significance of food in the UAE.



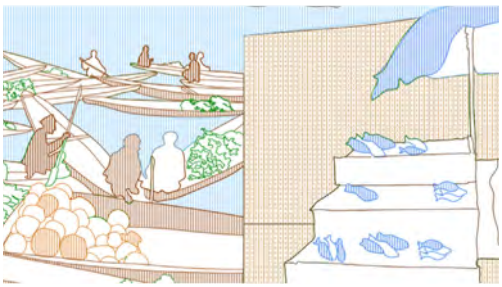

Image Courtesy: Zayed University

High-profile projects show how these principles are being applied creatively. The Dubai Design Week's Library of Alternative Materials introduces designers and developers to circular solutions such as mycelium, date-seed concrete and biodegradable composites. Expo City, as part of its legacy planning, has preserved heritage buildings while embedding water efficiency, energy conservation and pedestrian-friendly design in its site masterplan.

The Sharjah Architecture Triennial has made resource efficiency and heritage-informed design central themes, elevating national and regional debates on sustainability in architecture. Although these initiatives often remain within studios, exhibitions or biennales, they point to pathways for systemic transformation in design culture.

Educational institutions and cultural platforms are acting as key drivers. Zayed University and the AUS are training architects to measure embodied energy, prioritise adaptive reuse and experiment with locally sourced materials.

However, the mainstream construction industry often moves in the opposite direction. Interviewees repeatedly referred to a prevailing culture of demolition and rebuild, where older structures are razed despite their embodied energy and cultural value.

We still treat buildings as disposable. Build, demolish, rebuild — it is a loop,

one architect lamented. Procurement systems continue to privilege the lowest upfront cost, locking in carbon-intensive materials such as Portland cement. Developers and regulators frequently perceive vernacular or bioclimatic approaches as unconventional, delaying approvals or rejecting proposals. One foundation representative noted:

Procurement is geared to the cheapest money option. It penalises anyone trying to do something sustainable.

These systemic barriers expose a major contradiction. While heritage-informed design is celebrated internationally at platforms like Venice or Mondiacult, it remains peripheral within domestic construction practice, constrained by cost-focused procurement, slow regulation and entrenched preferences for prestige-driven, high-tech modernity. Respondents described this as a 'petroculture of design' — a reliance on energy-intensive buildings 'fixed' by mechanical cooling rather than designed to harmonise with the climate.

There's an obsession with spectacle. People reject sustainable buildings if they don't look luxurious,

one interviewee observed.

From a climate perspective, this sector embodies both mitigation and adaptation potential. Adaptive reuse of existing buildings and circular material innovation reduce embodied emissions, directly contributing to decarbonisation. Passive-cooling and vernacular forms lower operational energy demand, reinforcing mitigation while improving comfort in extreme heat. At the same time, heritage-informed planning strengthens adaptation by embedding resilience in public space, community identity and urban climate strategies. The Vice President for Sustainability at Expo City observed that heritage preservation and sustainable real estate development are being woven into the site's legacy framework, underscoring the dual role of design in both mitigation and adaptation.

Overall, the evidence portrays a sector rich in experimentation but constrained by structural barriers. Heritage-informed design and low-carbon material innovation persist as islands of practice- widely celebrated yet insufficiently mainstreamed. Without procurement reform, regulatory incentives and cultural shifts in aesthetic expectations, sustainable design will remain the exception rather than the norm.

The UAE's built environment reflects a clear paradox: it is globally recognised for architectural innovation yet domestically constrained by cycles of demolition, spectacle and the underuse of its own adaptive-heritage knowledge.

4.2.4 Mainstreaming CBCA into formal and informal education

Education consistently emerged as one of the most significant enablers of culture-based climate action in the UAE. Survey data confirmed this: 27 per cent of organisations identified education as a key domain for their CBCA initiatives. From K–12 curricula and university programmes to museum exhibitions and informal workshops, cultural institutions are experimenting with how to teach, model and communicate the climate–culture relationship. Yet despite strong enthusiasm, the education landscape remains fragmented and largely reliant on individual leadership rather than systemic policy mandates.

At the formal level, the Ministry of Education's Greening Education Partnership, developed with UNESCO, has begun embedding sustainability across curricula, teacher training and community engagement. One cultural advisor described the goal as achieving

100% green curriculum penetration… integrating sustainability into maths, Islamic studies, art—every subject.

More than 1,000 teachers have been trained as master trainers, and accreditation systems such as Eco-Schools are being adapted to the UAE's context. These reforms are helping to align national education with sustainability objectives, although CBCA-specific content remains inconsistently integrated.

The Ministry of Culture has complemented these efforts through the development of the Emirati Cultural Activities National Framework, which links cultural pride directly to environmental stewardship. Programmes such as the Nalia roadshow have toured all seven emirates, engaging tens of thousands of students through interactive stations on biodiversity, geology and endangered species. The roadshow's project lead explained,

We want students to understand that their cultural pride should extend to their unique natural ecosystems. This natural heritage is an integral part of our shared national legacy.

Universities are also playing an active role. The AUS has adopted the ASHE STARS framework to benchmark sustainability performance, implemented campus-wide decarbonisation measures and advocated for a compulsory general-education course on sustainability. Zayed University has incorporated heritage-based resilience into its architecture curriculum, encouraging students to explore vernacular design as a model of climate adaptation. The SPAA has embedded sustainability in its teaching practice by reusing theatre sets, crafting costumes from waste materials and promoting circularity in production. These initiatives aim to prepare students not only as professionals but as cultural leaders who integrate climate awareness into creative practice.

Informal education has proven equally influential. Expo City's Terra Pavilion is described by its programming head as building pedagogy around

awe and wonder… gateways to behavioural change.

Its immersive exhibits, green roofs, and pollinator gardens translate complex sustainability messages into interactive, sensory experiences for families and children. Participants in the reflection sessions noted Terra's experiments with AI-enabled citizen science, in which visitors contribute to biodiversity data collection — demonstrating how informal education can blend creativity, technology and participation.

Spotlight: World's largest community science event in Dubai

The City Nature Challenge, held in April 2025, invited participants to document Dubai's biodiversity using the iNaturalist app by photographing wild plants and animals, thereby contributing to the world's largest community-science event. It was organised by Terra, Expo City Dubai, in collaboration with Emirates Nature–WWF.
The challenge generated 1,378 observations and identified 324 species, supported by more than 130 contributors.

Image Courtesy: Terra, Expo City Dubai

Despite this vibrancy, systemic gaps continue to hinder progress. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the absence of formal CBCA-related competencies or job roles. Sustainability work in museums, universities, and cultural centres is typically pursued informally, driven by committed individuals rather than institutional mandates. One practitioner noted,

There is no CBCA job title — it is always a side hustle added to someone's already full plate.

This lack of professionalisation leaves initiatives vulnerable to staff turnover, burnout and discontinuity, and prevents the development of clear professional pathways.

Another barrier lies in what several participants described as a 'translation problem'. During the reflection session, participants noted that the language of CBCA often feels abstract or 'like jargon.' For education to resonate, they argued, CBCA must be made tangible in everyday life – linking sustainability to daily routines, familiar cultural practices and shared community values. Initiatives such as the Al Naliyah Roadshow or Terra Pavilion were cited as successful examples because they demystify climate science and translate it into culturally meaningful experiences for students and families.

Academic institutions see themselves as central to bridging these divides. Faculty at AUS and Zayed University stressed the importance of building a robust evidence base on culture–climate linkages that can inform both pedagogy and policy.

The UAE National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale has served as a platform for such research-led innovation, showcasing experiments in sustainable materials and heritage-informed design to international audiences. Yet academics also acknowledged a persistent challenge: a weak pipeline between research, policy and industry. As one professor observed,

Heritage is not a just symbol — it is data for resilience

but without effective translation mechanisms, academic insights remain confined to exhibitions or journals rather than informing policy or practice.

From a climate perspective, education contributes directly to both adaptation and mitigation. It strengthens adaptation by equipping communities with knowledge, cultural pride and resilience skills, while it supports mitigation by producing climate-literate professionals and citizens capable of adopting low-carbon behaviours. Participants in the reflection sessions suggested scaling up maker spaces and experiential programmes to bridge this gap, creating accessible spaces where youth, educators and communities can co-design climate solutions through hands-on cultural practice.

Taken together, the education sector reveals both enthusiasm and fragmentation. Students, educators and institutions are eager to connect culture and climate, but without systemic mandates, professional recognition, and sustained support, CBCA education risks remaining dispersed and ad hoc. The increasing engagement of universities and cultural institutions marks a pivotal opportunity: to embed culture and sustainability within national education and capacity-building strategies, ensuring that future generations treat CBCA not as an add-on but as a core element of resilience and sustainable development.

4.2.5 Strengthening community-based and decentralised cultural resilience

Community-level practice is where CBCA in the UAE often becomes most visible and lived. The survey and interviews revealed strong enthusiasm across youth groups, grassroots arts collectives, heritage custodians, and cultural entrepreneurs — particularly in the northern emirates — for linking culture and climate. These actors described their initiatives as hybrid spaces where cultural expression, environmental stewardship, and social solidarity intersect. Examples include seed-exchange festivals that revive traditional crops, heritage walks that double as biodiversity mapping exercises and traditional architecture workshops repurposed as green-skills incubators. Such practices demonstrate the potential of CBCA to embed resilience in daily life while reinforcing cultural identity and intergenerational continuity.
Yet despite this vibrancy, systemic barriers continue to restrict grassroots participation. Funding mechanisms are largely designed for large, established institutions, leaving smaller or informal actors excluded. As one NGO leader observed,

If we had $5,000 a year with no strings attached, we could do more than we do now with ten times that, filtered through ten layers of bureaucracy.

This reflects a structural bias: CBCA activity remains concentrated in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah — where cultural infrastructure is strongest — while Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, and Umm Al Quwain remain under-represented.

Socio-economic and cultural barriers further compound this imbalance. Many community organisers pointed to the elitism of CBCA platforms, noting that events are often hosted in flagship venues, delivered in English and priced beyond the reach of lower-income or migrant communities. One participant remarked.

We say we want inclusive engagement. But our events are in English, in the cultural district, and cost AED 50 to enter.

During the reflection session, participants echoed this concern, observing that climate discussions are still viewed as 'elitist' and emphasising the need to democratise participation so that all residents can see themselves as part of climate solutions.

The study also revealed a hierarchy of knowledge that marginalises grassroots contributions. Community-led initiatives frequently generate valuable insights – including oral histories of environmental change, citizen-science biodiversity data, and everyday practices of resource frugality.

Yet these are rarely recognised as 'data' within policy frameworks or funding mechanisms. As one grassroots leader asserted,

Stories and practices are data too — they show how people adapt.

Because formal evaluation systems privilege quantitative and technical indicators, such knowledge often remains invisible. This exclusion not only undermines inclusion but also weakens adaptation planning by omitting locally grounded evidence that could enhance resilience.

The announcement of 2025 as the Year of Community was widely welcomed as an opportunity to elevate grassroots participation.

Spotlight: 2025 as year of community in UAE

President of the UAE, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan has announced 2025 as the Year of Community under the tagline 'Hand in Hand'– a nationwide initiative running from January until December 2025. Rooted in the UAE's values of resilience, ambition, and openness, the Year of Community is dedicated to fostering a united and empowered society. It aims to inspire behaviours that strengthen family and social ties, encourage shared responsibility, and unlock potential for sustainable growth.

Participants in the reflection session argued that communities need safe, creative and accessible spaces – such as maker hubs or cultural labs – where they can test ideas, build capacity and collaborate with policymakers on equal terms. This dynamic underscores the need for balance between top-down directives and bottom-up ownership. In the UAE, leadership-led directives can deliver rapid, large-scale change, but grassroots initiatives provide authenticity, cultural legitimacy and local relevance. Stakeholders agreed that CBCA depends on both.

One expert explained that top-down policies can mobilise resources and set national direction, but without grounding in community practice they risk becoming 'too abstract' and failing to resonate.

The challenge lies in building feedback loops where local practice informs national frameworks – and where grassroots innovation can be scaled through policy and finance.

From a climate perspective, community-level CBCA contributes directly to adaptation by strengthening social cohesion, reviving traditional practices and embedding resilience in everyday life.

It also supports mitigation through low-carbon behaviours such as reuse, repair and sustainable consumption. Yet without formal recognition and structural support, these contributions remain undervalued, and the communities most capable of embedding climate action are often excluded from decision-making.

Taken together, the findings highlight a resilience paradox. At the community level, energy, creativity and cultural knowledge are abundant. At the systemic level, rigid frameworks, centralised funding models and technocratic evaluation processes constrain and marginalise these contributions. Unless these imbalances are addressed, CBCA risks reinforcing rather than reducing inequities – privileging elite cultural spaces and symbolic showcases while undervaluing, underfunding and under-recognising grassroots resilience.

4.2.6 Climate innovation through digital technology

Digital technology and material innovation are increasingly recognised as key enablers of culture-based climate action in the UAE. Survey findings indicate that a growing number of institutions are experimenting with immersive media, online platforms and sustainable-material technologies to expand the reach and impact of their climate initiatives. Interviewees described how digital storytelling, virtual exhibitions and AI-driven tools are extending the influence of CBCA, while experiments with low-carbon materials — such as mycelium-based components, date-seed concrete, and magnesium oxide cement — are directly challenging the carbon intensity of cultural production and the built environment.

Several respondents characterised digital technology as a force multiplier. One cultural leader explained that immersive exhibitions

make sustainability less abstract, more visceral — you can feel the climate future.

Others emphasised the accessibility of online platforms, particularly for younger and geographically dispersed audiences. Expo City's Terra Pavilion has pioneered the use of immersive pedagogy, blending sensory experiences with interactive AI-enabled citizen science projects that allow visitors to document biodiversity and contribute to real datasets.

However, several structural gaps remain.

First, innovation is still largely showcase-driven. Flagship projects — whether a sustainability pavilion or an award-winning material prototype — attract attention but rarely translate into widespread practice. As one academic cautioned,

We have proven something is 80% more sustainable, but no contractor wants to take the risk — and no policy compels them.

Without institutional mechanisms to validate, regulate and scale experimentation, promising innovations remain trapped at the demonstration stage. Reflection session participants reinforced this, noting the persistent 'lab-to-market' gap – research and prototypes win awards but often stall before commercialisation or integration into planning codes.

Second, issues of technological dependency and exclusion persist. Digital tools, immersive exhibitions and sustainable material research demand significant investment and expertise, which favours large, well-resourced institutions. Smaller organisations and community actors often lack the capacity to participate, widening the divide between major cultural centres and grassroots practice. One respondent described this imbalance

as innovation for those already inside the circle.

Third, technology can reinforce the culture of spectacle that already shapes much of the UAE's cultural economy. Interviewees noted that climate themes are sometimes used as content for high-profile events rather than embedded in everyday practice. A foundation representative critiqued the 'fetishisation of tech,' observing:

We build the biggest pavilion, the flashiest VR experience — but what happens after the show ends?

Reflection session participants echoed this concern, warning against treating CBCA as 'corporate social responsibility' or a passing 'trend' rather than a structural element of long-term resilience.

Finally, questions of epistemic balance emerged. While digital and material innovation can drive new solutions, several stakeholders cautioned against displacing traditional knowledge. As an architect from Zayed University observed,

We need to critically re-contextualise — merge ancestral wisdom with appropriate technologies, not replace it with imported gadgets.

This highlights the risk of technological determinism – assuming that innovation alone can deliver resilience while neglecting the cultural practices and values that sustain it.

During the reflection session, participants emphasised the need to make CBCA more relatable to daily life. One participant noted

that 'CBCA can feel like jargon'

and urged that innovation be framed in ways that connect to everyday choices and familiar cultural practices.

Others proposed that progress could be galvanised by setting a shared national 'big goal' — akin to Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC)'s 'One Million Learners' initiative — to unite diverse institutions under a collective CBCA innovation target while allowing flexibility in how each contributes.

From a climate perspective, digital and material innovation contribute to both mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation is advanced by the decarbonisation of materials, the promotion of adaptive reuse and the reduction of emissions from cultural production and events. Adaptation is strengthened through digital storytelling, participatory citizen science and immersive experiences that equip communities to anticipate and respond to climate risks.

In summary, digital technology and innovation are expanding the horizons of CBCA in the UAE, offering powerful tools for visibility, experimentation and global positioning.
Yet without systemic support – including pathways from prototype to policy, inclusive access and meaningful integration with cultural values – these initiatives risk remaining episodic, exclusive or performative.
The challenge is to ensure that innovation is not only celebrated but scaled, and that it complements rather than overshadows the cultural and traditional knowledge systems that underpin genuine resilience.

From Ink to Action - Comics in Climate, a British Council-funded project in the Middle East North Africa by Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF)

Khalid Shafar Sadu Red Carpet, 2025. Manar Abu Dhabi.
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5. Key Challenges and Gaps in Implementing CBCA

The analysis of six domains reveals a landscape rich in practice but limited by weak systems. Across heritage, the creative economy, design, education, community engagement and digital innovation, the UAE shows clear momentum. Yet progress remains fragmented, under-institutionalised, and often symbolic. Three cross-cutting blockers stand out: governance fragmentation, the lack of metrics, and persistent barriers to inclusion and access.

5.1 Governance fragmentation

A consistent message across the survey, interviews, and the reflection sessions is that responsibility for culture, climate, education, and infrastructure is spread across multiple ministries and emirates, with few mechanisms for coordination. While the UAE has taken a leading role internationally — co-launching the GFCBCA at COP28 and championing the Emirates Declaration at the UNFCCC — domestically CBCA remains largely voluntary, fragmented and reliant on individual champions.

Interviewees described ministries as

working in islands, not ecosystems.

Even proven innovations, such as heritage-informed dry-stone construction or adaptive reuse of older buildings, struggle to scale because

no contractor wants to take the risk — and no policy compels them.

Procurement frameworks reinforce this dynamic, prioritising the lowest upfront cost over lifecycle sustainability and penalising circular or heritage-informed approaches.

Fragmentation limits both mitigation and adaptation. On the mitigation side, opportunities to decarbonise cultural production, reduce embodied carbon through adaptive reuse, or embed low-carbon procurement standards remain marginal.

On the adaptation side, actions such as safeguarding traditional knowledge, integrating heritage into climate-risk planning and mobilising culture for resilience education are celebrated rhetorically but seldom embedded in formal instruments such as the NAP (World Bank, 2025).

This mirrors findings from international literature that highlight how, despite growing recognition of heritage vulnerability, policy frameworks remain fragmented and under-resourced, leaving heritage protection marginal in national adaptation agendas (British Council, 2023a). Adger et al. (2013) note that climate governance has long been dominated by technical and financial frames, 'failing to address critical dimensions of risk' linked to identity, practice and place.

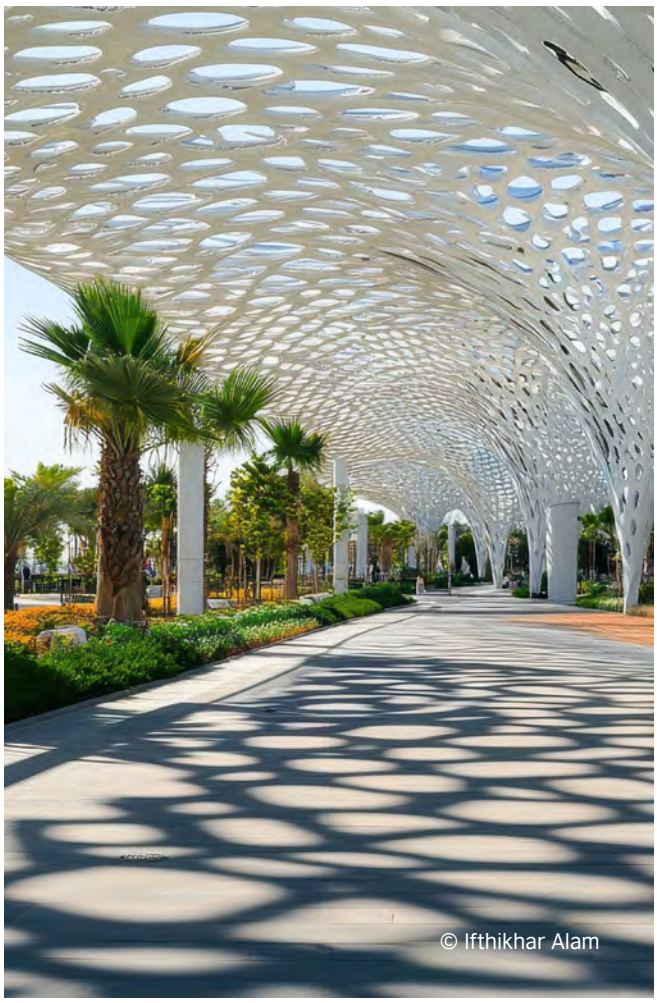
The British Council's Missing Pillar (2020) and Missing Foundation (2023b) highlight how culture is routinely overlooked in policy, while the Climate Heritage Network (2021) identifies culture as an enabling condition missing from most frameworks. Similarly, British Council & Julie's Bicycle (2021) underscore the same gap, showing that cultural institutions often lack mandates and resources to implement climate policy despite strong public engagement (British Council & Julie's Bicycle, 2021).

The reflection session emphasised that stronger governance could break this cycle by establishing a shared national target or 'big goal' — similar to DIFC's One Million Learners initiative — to unite cultural, municipal, and private actors around a common CBCA agenda. Participants also stressed the CBCA must be legible in everyday life, linking governance frameworks to people's daily practices, language, and values.

Governance fragmentation also reproduces geographic and institutional asymmetries. CBCA activity is concentrated in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah — where cultural infrastructure and budgets are strongest — while the northern emirates remain under-represented.

Community organisations reported administrative burdens and eligibility criteria that exclude them, leaving localised practices 'off the books' of national delivery. This reflects what Europa Nostra (2024) calls the persistent 'culture gap': vibrant grassroots resilience that remains structurally invisible.

In summary, governance fragmentation in the UAE reflects a broader global fault line: rhetorical leadership without structural follow-through, showcases standards and portfolios without a delivery framework. Without a national CBCA framework, an inter-ministerial taskforce and procurement reform, CBCA will remain caught in a cycle of innovation that is highly visible yet rarely transferable, and of resilience practices that are rich but not scalable.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5.2 Absence of metrics and evaluation systems

If governance fragmentation is the first systemic barrier to scaling culture-based climate action, the second is the absence of robust and shared measurement frameworks. Across institutions — from museums and universities to creative collectives and heritage authorities — monitoring of CBCA outcomes is inconsistent, largely symbolic and rarely linked to policy or finance systems.

Survey data confirmed this gap: 31 per cent of organisations reported collecting some form of data on CBCA outcomes, yet most relied on audience numbers or anecdotal feedback rather than structured indicators. Reflection session participants reinforced this, noting that CBCA evidence often remains 'too abstract' to engage policymakers or funders. One participant described the mismatch bluntly:

Cultural organisations report exhibitions and visitors, while climate policymakers look for emissions reductions, adaptation outcomes, or resilience dividends.

Without a common language of measurement, culture's contributions remain invisible in national systems. Interviewees acknowledged this openly. One cultural leader remarked,

We cannot tell the story if we can't measure the impact. Without metrics, we're navigating blindfolded.

Another reflected on the disconnect:

We did not have any Key Performance Indicators for our climate art workshop — we just reported who came and what they said. That doesn't translate to climate policy language.

The absence of metrics has three critical consequences:

1 Finance exclusion.

Without measurable indicators, CBCA initiatives cannot demonstrate eligibility for climate finance – whether through the Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund, or emerging Loss and Damage mechanisms. Several stakeholders described encountering this barrier repeatedly:

We cannot get grants if we cannot prove outcomes in their language.

Reflection session participants stressed that without evidence that aligns with climate-finance priorities, culture will remain outside the funding pipeline.

2 Policy invisibility.

Despite rhetorical recognition in frameworks such as NDC 3.0 and the Emirates Declaration, culture's contributions remain anecdotal in national reporting. Without indicators, CBCA is absent from adaptation planning, NAP monitoring and sectoral decarbonisation pathways. This omission weakens both mitigation – for example, decarbonising events or reducing embodied carbon through adaptive reuse – and adaptation – for example, safeguarding heritage and measuring resilience outcomes.

3 Knowledge gaps.

Community-led initiatives generate valuable evidence — oral histories of environmental change, citizen-science biodiversity records, practices of repair and resource frugality — but these are rarely validated or consolidated into a formal evidence base. As one grassroots leader argued,

Stories and practices are data too — they show how people adapt.

Current systems privilege quantitative, technocratic indicators, leaving experiential and narrative forms of resilience knowledge largely invisible.

Globally, the same challenge persists. UNESCO's Culture|2030 Indicators (2019) provide a framework for embedding culture in sustainable development monitoring, yet uptake within climate governance remains limited. The ICOMOS–UNESCO–IPCC Expert Meeting (2021) concluded that without dedicated metrics, culture's contributions to resilience remain 'under-documented and under-valued,' weakening both adaptation planning and global reporting. Europa Nostra (2024) warned that without indicators, the GGA's reference to cultural heritage risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

Other sectors demonstrate what is possible. In the UK, Arts Council England has since 2012 required funded arts organisations to report on their carbon footprint, supported by Julie's Bicycle's Creative Green tools. Over a decade, this has delivered a 25 per cent reduction in energy use and a 50 per cent cut in carbon emissions across the portfolio (ACE & Julie's Bicycle 2024). Crucially, it mainstreamed measurement: today 94 per cent of UK arts organisations embed sustainability in their strategies, and 70 per cent produce climate-themed work. This shows how mandatory, standardised reporting can transform practice within a single decade.

In the UAE, some organisations are experimenting. The Jameel Arts Centre conducts carbon audits; Expo City has adopted ISO 20121-certified sustainable event management; and AUS and Zayed University are piloting research-based indicators. Reflection session participants pointed to these as encouraging but insufficient, stressing the need for sector-wide standards and trusted data systems aligned with national policy and international good practices.

The absence of metrics, therefore, acts as a systemic choke point. Without them, CBCA remains an inspiring practice and a rhetorical commitment rather than a recognised policy deliverable or finance-ready intervention (European Parliament, 2024).

Mitigation contributions – such as reduced carbon footprints and sustainable procurement – and adaptation contributions – such as cultural resilience, heritage safeguarding and community capacity – remain unmeasured and therefore undervalued.

In summary, until CBCA indicators are codified and standardised – encompassing emissions, behavioural change, heritage vulnerability and cultural resilience – the sector will remain visible in exhibitions and declarations but invisible in the systems where climate priorities are tracked, financed and scaled.

5.3 Inclusion and access

The third systemic barrier to scaling culture-based climate action in the UAE concerns who is included, who is excluded and whose knowledge is valued. While CBCA is flourishing within major institutions and cultural hubs, access for under-represented and marginalised groups remains uneven. This reproduces what Europa Nostra (2024) calls the global 'culture gap': the communities most vulnerable to climate impacts are often the least visible in culture–climate frameworks.

The survey data and interviews show that CBCA activity is heavily concentrated in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah, where cultural infrastructure, universities and international events are based. By contrast, initiatives in the northern emirates are fewer, underfunded and less visible. Respondents from these areas described feeling cut off from recognition and resources. One remarked:

We do innovative things, but they do not count because we're not in the system.

This imbalance creates a two-speed CBCA landscape – cosmopolitan showcases at the centre, under-recognised grassroots practice at the margins.

Exclusion is not only geographical or economic but also epistemic. Migrant workers – who form the majority of the UAE's population and are among the most exposed to climate risks – are rarely engaged as co-creators of CBCA.

Grassroots actors generate valuable knowledge through oral histories of environmental change, community mapping and everyday practices of reuse and frugality, yet these contributions are seldom acknowledged within institutional frameworks.

Participants in the reflection session emphasised that inclusion means not only lowering barriers but also creating safe, accessible and participatory spaces. They called for community hubs, maker spaces and cultural labs where diverse groups – including migrants, youth and people of determination – can co-design climate initiatives alongside institutions and policymakers. Without such environments, CBCA risks perpetuating top-down programming in which communities are invited to attend but not to lead.

This exclusion undermines both adaptation and mitigation. On the adaptation side, sidelining grassroots voices erases community-based resilience knowledge and weakens social cohesion. On the mitigation side, exclusion narrows participation in behavioural-change efforts, making it harder to shift consumption patterns at the scale required. As Polletta and Jasper (2001) note, cultural identity and collective values – not only material incentives – drive mobilisation. When identity and participation are restricted, climate action struggles to achieve legitimacy and depth.

Inclusion and access are therefore not just matters of fairness but essential conditions for effective CBCA. Without addressing barriers of geography, language, finance and knowledge recognition, CBCA risks reinforcing rather than reducing inequality – remaining elite, urban and symbolic at the top, while grassroots resilience stays undervalued and underfunded.

Down to Earth 2023.
Courtesy of Art Jameel.
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6. Recommendations

The baseline analysis shows that culture-based climate action in the UAE is dynamic but uneven – characterised by innovative practices that remain constrained by systemic barriers. Yet alongside these challenges lies a clear set of opportunities to institutionalise, scale and internationalise CBCA. If harnessed strategically, these opportunities can transform culture from a parallel conversation into a core pillar of the UAE's climate response.

This chapter identifies six interlinked areas where momentum is strongest and where forward-looking action can achieve the greatest impact: policy and governance; capacity and education; traditional knowledge and values; community mobilisation; digital innovation and the creative economy; and international alliances and leadership. Each of these areas is already active in some form – the task now is to consolidate them into a cohesive system of practice, policy and finance.

The section also highlights the interdependencies between these domains. Governance without finance cannot deliver; capacity without mandates risks fragmentation; and innovation without measurement risks remaining symbolic. Likewise, global leadership will only be credible if matched by effective domestic integration.

Together, these opportunities provide the foundation for a national CBCA ecosystem – one that empowers communities, equips institutions, safeguards heritage, incentivises innovation and strengthens the UAE's international leadership. The roadmap at the end of this chapter sets out a phased pathway for translating these opportunities into systemic change by 2030.

6.1 Policy momentum and national governance

The UAE has already shown strong international leadership by elevating culture within climate negotiations, most visibly through the Emirates Declaration on CBCA and the Group of Friends initiative. The opportunity now is to consolidate this leadership domestically by embedding CBCA into the core climate governance architecture. This means moving beyond symbolic recognition towards codified mandates, regulatory clarity and operational pathways that reach across ministries and emirates.

6.1.1. Establish a national CBCA framework

that explicitly aligns cultural policy with the UAE's NDC, NAP, and Net Zero by 2050 Strategy. This framework should clarify institutional responsibilities, budget allocations and delivery mechanisms.

6.1.2. Launch an inter-ministerial CBCA task force

co-led by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, with active participation from ministries of Education, Infrastructure, Community Empowerment and Finance. Such a body would break down silos and institutionalise the cross-sector collaboration CBCA requires.

6.1.3. Strengthen coordination between emirate-level and federal action

through subnational focal points or culture–climate liaison officers who can translate national policy into municipal planning and local implementation.

6.1.4. Reform procurement and regulatory frameworks

so that CBCA principles — heritage-informed adaptation, embodied carbon standards, low-carbon creative commissioning — are incentivised and rewarded rather than penalised.

6.1.5. Embed culture in performance and accountability systems

ensuring that climate plans, budgets and monitoring frameworks include cultural indicators alongside environmental and economic ones.

International experience shows that such structural reforms are both feasible and catalytic. The G20 Rome Declaration and UNESCO's Mondiacult Declaration provide a strong diplomatic precedent for national institutionalisation.

For the UAE, the next frontier is not further showcases or declarations, but the development of a governance framework that embeds CBCA as a standard element of national climate policy.

By translating its global advocacy into domestic governance systems, the UAE can set a new international benchmark – becoming a country where culture is not a parallel discussion but a central instrument of climate delivery.

6.2 Capacity and education

Building capacity across the education system and cultural workforce is critical if CBCA is to evolve from isolated projects into a sustained national practice. The UAE has already invested in greening education and embedding sustainability in curricula; the next step is to systematically integrate culture–climate linkages across all levels of education, vocational training, and professional practice.

6.2.1. Curriculum integration across all levels of education

Embed CBCA within the Ministry of Education's ongoing sustainability reforms so that climate literacy is taught through cultural as well as scientific lenses.

Introduce modules in heritage studies, arts education and design courses that highlight traditional ecological knowledge, vernacular architecture and creative climate storytelling.

Expand partnerships with UNESCO and universities to ensure CBCA is mainstreamed into both general education and specialised vocational training.

6.2.2. Vocational training and workforce standards

Develop national standards for green skills in the cultural workforce, covering museum operations, heritage site management, creative production and cultural event design.

Align these standards with the UAE's occupational classification system, ensuring that CBCA-related competencies are recognised in job descriptions, recruitment and career progression.

Create accredited training programmes for mid-career cultural professionals – similar to green building certifications – so staff gain the technical and managerial capacity required to deliver.

6.2.3. Formal recognition of CBCA roles and competencies

Appoint designated CBCA coordinators or sustainability officers within major cultural institutions, with clear mandates and resources.

Encourage smaller organisations to assign sustainability roles by linking grant eligibility or recognition schemes to demonstrable capacity.

Ensure job titles and performance evaluations include CBCA responsibilities, making climate action part of professional identity rather than an informal side task.

6.2.4. Transdisciplinary residencies and learning platforms

Create structured spaces where artists, scientists, architects, designers and community leaders collaborate on climate challenges.

Support fellowships and residencies that combine cultural creativity with applied climate science — for example, pairing a heritage architect with an environmental engineer or a theatre group with a behavioural scientist.

Establish UAE-based hubs for culture–climate learning that can also serve as regional convenors, positioning the country as a knowledge centre for CBCA.

6.2.5. Professional development and certification

Launch a national programme of short courses, masterclasses and certification schemes for cultural professionals, covering topics such as carbon auditing for cultural institutions, designing climate-aware exhibition design, and safeguarding heritage from climate impacts.

Partner with existing regional and international initiatives – for example, Julie's Bicycle and the Nordic Green Roadmap (Sørensen & Svensson, 2023) – to adapt proven tools and training models to the UAE context.

Encourage cultural institutions to adopt continuous learning models, making CBCA training a standard annual requirement.

6.2.6. University and research leadership

Incentivise universities to create dedicated CBCA research programmes that focus on documenting traditional practices, testing sustainable materials and measuring creative interventions.

Establish 'living labs' at heritage sites and cultural districts where students, academics and communities can co-design adaptation experiments in real-world settings.

Promote applied research partnerships with international networks – such as ICOMOS, ICCROM and the Climate Heritage Network – to strengthen global–local knowledge exchange.

6.2.7. Youth leadership pipelines

Expand youth fellowships and mentorships in CBCA, ensuring that young Emiratis and residents take active leadership roles in climate–culture initiatives.

Create intergenerational programmes linking elders and youth to document and revitalise traditional ecological knowledge.

Use CBCA competitions, innovation challenges and cultural festivals to identify and nurture the next generation of cultural climate leaders.

Global experience shows how capacity building can transform practice. In the UK, mandatory reporting and climate training integrated into arts-funding requirements have accelerated the transition of cultural institutions towards sustainable operations. The Nordic Green Roadmap for Cultural Institutions shows how sector-wide guidelines can embed low-carbon standards in museum and theatre practice.

For the UAE, comparable measures – adapted to national culture and institutions – would ensure that CBCA becomes a standard professional skill rather than an exceptional add-on.

By investing in capacity and education, the UAE can cultivate a climate-ready cultural workforce able to translate heritage knowledge, creative innovation and community engagement into measurable contributions to resilience. Embedding CBCA across education and training will also nurture new generations of Emirati and resident youth as cultural climate leaders, ensuring continuity and intergenerational transfer.

6.3 Leveraging traditional knowledge and values

Traditional knowledge, intangible heritage and cultural values provide the UAE with a distinct and powerful foundation for climate resilience. Practices such as *falaj* irrigation systems, *barjeel* wind towers, date-palm cultivation, desert pastoralism and Islamic teachings on moderation embody adaptive wisdom developed over centuries of life in arid environments. The opportunity now is to treat this knowledge not only as heritage to be safeguarded but as infrastructure for adaptation and innovation.

6.3.1. Integrating traditional knowledge into national climate frameworks

Embed traditional knowledge explicitly within the UAE's NAP and future NDC updates, including clear references to heritage-informed adaptation measures.

Develop guidance for ministries and municipalities on how traditional practices — such as water harvesting, passive cooling, and material reuse — can inform resilience planning.

Establish task groups under a national CBCA framework to ensure alignment across environment, culture and urban planning.

6.3.2. Systematic documentation and archiving

Launch a national programme to record oral histories, practices and ecological memory, focusing on elders, craftspeople and knowledge holders.

Create multimedia archives – including audio, video and digital platforms – in both Arabic and English to strengthen intergenerational transfer.

Partner with universities to digitise and analyse these archives, transforming them into an open-access knowledge base for designers, educators, and policymakers.

6.3.3. Revitalisation through practice and innovation

Fund demonstration projects that reapply traditional knowledge in contemporary contexts — for example, *falaj*-inspired water reuse systems in schools, *barjeel*-informed passive cooling in housing and palm-based biomaterials in construction.

Use 'living labs' at heritage sites to pilot hybrid solutions that combine ancestral knowledge with new technologies – for example, sensor-enabled *aflaj* or mycelium composites blended with coral stone.

Showcase these innovations at cultural festivals, biennales and international events to position the UAE as a global leader in heritage-driven climate innovation.

6.3.4. Curricula and intergenerational transfer

Incorporate traditional knowledge and cultural values into school curricula, vocational training and higher education.

Create mentorship programmes pairing elders with youth to ensure continuity and community learning.

Highlight Islamic principles of moderation and stewardship as cultural foundations for sustainability campaigns, particularly on water and food waste.

6.3.5. Protecting and adapting intangible heritage

Map climate risks to intangible heritage — including pastoral traditions, seasonal festivals, and oral narratives — and develop adaptation strategies.

Support communities in reinterpreting traditions in climate-smart ways while retaining their cultural meaning.

Encourage adaptive reuse of heritage practices, recognising — as Holtorf (2018) argues — that resilience often lies in transformation rather than rigid preservation.

6.3.6. Positioning traditional knowledge as a driver of innovation

Reframe traditional knowledge as a catalyst for cutting-edge design, research, and development. For example, *sabkha*-derived cements, traditional shading and salt crystallisation can be positioned as globally relevant innovations.

Forge partnerships with international bodies – including UNESCO, UNDP and ICCROM – to showcase UAE examples of heritage-informed climate solutions in global dialogues.

Leverage traditional knowledge to access climate finance under adaptation and non-economic loss and damage streams, where cultural and knowledge-based resilience is increasingly recognised.

By embedding traditional knowledge within policy, education and innovation systems, the UAE can demonstrate that heritage is not merely vulnerable to climate change but a core resource for resilience and adaptation. This approach positions traditional knowledge as both a pillar of national identity and a platform for global innovation, transforming the UAE's cultural memory into a driver of sustainable futures.

6.4 Community mobilisation and inclusion

Communities form the foundation of culture-based climate action. When people see their own stories, languages, and practices reflected in climate initiatives, they are far more likely to engage, sustain, and scale them. The UAE already has strong grassroots momentum — from youth collectives and cultural entrepreneurs to community associations in the northern emirates — and 2025, declared the Year of Community, provides a timely opportunity to embed that energy into national climate delivery. The priority now is to ensure that community engagement moves beyond symbolic participation to meaningful inclusion, equitable access and shared leadership.

6.4.1. Decentralised funding windows for community initiatives

Establish micro-grants and participatory funding schemes that enable grassroots actors, women-led groups, migrant communities and youth collectives to access resources without complex bureaucracy.

Link the Year of Community festival directly to CBCA by allocating a portion of its budget to cultural-climate projects at community and emirate levels.

Encourage municipalities to co-fund or match grassroots CBCA projects to ensure sustainability beyond one-off grants.

6.4.2. Multilingual and culturally accessible engagement

Ensure all major CBCA programmes are available in Arabic, English, and the main languages of migrant communities, reflecting the UAE's cultural diversity.

Develop tailored communication strategies for different audiences, using oral storytelling, visual media and participatory theatre alongside technical outputs.

Incorporate accessibility-by-design into cultural programming – for example, sign-language interpretation, affordable entry and physical accessibility for people of determination.

6.4.3. Community co-design and governance roles

Move from consultation to co-creation: involve community groups from the outset in shaping CBCA strategies, rather than seeking validation for decisions already taken.

Include community representatives on CBCA task forces, advisory boards and monitoring groups to institutionalise shared leadership.

Support community-driven monitoring approaches, where grassroots actors help track local outcomes such as biodiversity, resource use and cultural participation.

6.4.4. Intergenerational and identity-based engagement

Launch intergenerational knowledge-transfer programmes pairing elders with youth to pass on traditional ecological practices.

Support identity-based cultural organisations – such as heritage clubs, diaspora associations and faith-based groups – in linking their activities to climate resilience.

Recognise cultural festivals, rituals, and collective gatherings as CBCA platforms — not just entertainment events — by embedding climate themes and sustainable practices.

6.4.5. Showcasing community innovation

Use national events – such as Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, cultural expos and the Sharjah Triennial – to highlight grassroots CBCA projects alongside flagship initiatives.

Develop a digital platform to document and share community-led culture–climate projects, enabling replication and recognition.

Introduce annual awards for community innovation in CBCA, linked to the UAE's sustainability agenda.

6.4.6. Bridging grassroots and global

Channel local initiatives into international platforms — for instance, supporting youth and community representatives to share CBCA projects at COP30 in Belém and future COPs.

Partner with international networks – including the Climate Heritage Network and UNESCO's Intangible Heritage platforms – to ensure that UAE grassroots examples are shared globally.

Incorporate community-generated knowledge – such as oral histories, participatory mapping and cultural practices – into national climate reporting to demonstrate how everyday practices contribute to resilience.

By embedding inclusion structurally — through funding, governance, communication, and recognition — the UAE can ensure that CBCA extends beyond elite institutions or showcase projects. Instead, it can become a society-wide practice that draws on the energy, knowledge and creativity of communities across all seven emirates. Community mobilisation is not simply a participation exercise but a critical pathway for embedding resilience in daily life and ensuring that climate action is just, inclusive and deeply rooted in cultural identity.

6.5 Digital innovation and creative industries

The UAE's cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are uniquely positioned to act as laboratories for climate innovation. From immersive exhibitions and virtual platforms to experimental materials and sustainable design, the sector has already shown its ability to make climate issues tangible and to model alternative, low-carbon production pathways. The next step is to move from isolated showcases to systematic innovation, equitable access and measurable transformation across the creative economy.

6.5.1. Embedding sustainability standards in cultural production

Introduce green commissioning guidelines for exhibitions, festivals and performances, requiring the use of low-carbon materials, energy-efficient technologies and waste-reduction measures.

Develop preferred supplier lists of sustainable vendors – including lighting, set design and event logistics – to normalise climate-conscious procurement.

Align cultural production with the UAE's Circular Economy Policy, encouraging repair, reuse, and design-for-disassembly across the creative economy.

6.5.2. Scaling digital and immersive technologies for climate literacy

Support museums, cultural centres and community hubs to use virtual reality, augmented reality and interactive storytelling for public climate education, building on the success of Expo City's Terra Pavilion.

Create open-source digital toolkits that smaller organisations can adapt, reducing dependence on expensive proprietary systems.

Expand partnerships with tech incubators and creative start-ups to accelerate climate storytelling and outreach that resonate with youth and diverse audiences.

6.5.3. Bridging showcase innovation with mainstream adoption

Establish innovation-to-policy pipelines so that experimental materials and design methods – for example, salt-based cements, mycelium and adaptive-reuse models – can be validated, standardised and approved for wider use in construction and cultural infrastructure.

Create dedicated funding streams to scale proven innovations beyond exhibitions and biennales, ensuring they become mainstream options in urban planning and cultural practice.

Incentivise contractors and creative small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to adopt sustainable materials by reducing risk through subsidies, demonstration sites or regulatory fast-tracks.

6.5.4. Supporting smaller creative actors

Provide targeted grants and capacity-building programmes for freelancers, SMEs and grassroots creative collectives that often lack the means to experiment with sustainable approaches.

Offer shared infrastructure – such as material libraries and rehearsal spaces equipped with green technologies – accessible to smaller organisations.

Ensure climate-related funding calls and awards are open to community-level and independent artists as well as flagship institutions.

6.5.5. Establishing sector-wide measurement systems

Introduce a national CBCA reporting requirement for publicly funded cultural institutions, modelled on the Arts Council England–Julie's Bicycle framework, to cover carbon footprints, waste reduction and climate-themed programming.

Encourage voluntary reporting in the private creative economy through recognition schemes, tax incentives or certification labels.

Develop sector-specific indicators for the creative economy that measure not only emissions reduction but also behavioural change and cultural influence.

6.5.6. Positioning CCIs as international climate leaders

Highlight UAE creative economy innovations in global cultural diplomacy – from COP30 to UNESCO networks – to reinforce the country's reputation as a hub of sustainable cultural production.

Partner with or co-develop programmes such as the British Council's Making Matters: Circular Cultures (British Council, n.d.) and Human/Nature (British Council, 2024) to exchange practices and design new models collaboratively.

Use flagship events – including Dubai Expo Legacy, Sharjah Biennial and Abu Dhabi Art – to establish benchmarks for sustainable creative production at international scale.

By embedding sustainability standards, creating innovation-to-policy pipelines, and supporting smaller actors, the UAE can transform its creative economy into a driver of climate innovation. Digital storytelling and creative production will not only amplify climate literacy but also demonstrate low-carbon practices that can influence other sectors. This positions the UAE to show how CCIs can move beyond spectacle, becoming system-wide contributors to resilience and decarbonisation.

6.6 International alliances and leadership

The UAE has already established itself as a global leader in championing culture within climate diplomacy. Through the Emirates Declaration on CBCA, the co-founding of the GFCBCA and sustained diplomatic engagement at COP28 and COP29, the country has positioned culture as a central lever of international climate action. The next step is to consolidate this momentum by embedding culture systematically within multilateral frameworks and strengthening South–South and regional alliances.

6.6.1. Institutionalising culture in UNFCCC processes

Champion the establishment of a formal **Work Programme on Culture and Climate Action** under the UNFCCC, ensuring that culture is recognised alongside finance, technology and capacity building.

Integrate CBCA into the GGA's reporting and indicators, particularly around safeguarding heritage and non-economic loss and damage (NELD).

Advocate for inclusion of cultural dimensions in national adaptation planning guidelines and global stocktake frameworks.

6.6.2. Strengthening the GFCBCA coalition

Expand membership and diversify participation, ensuring strong representation from LDCs, SIDS and other climate-vulnerable states.

Shift the GFCBCA from a coalition of visibility to a platform for delivery, implementing joint pilot projects, research collaborations and pooled funding for culture–climate initiatives.

Introduce a rotating chairmanship structure to sustain momentum beyond individual COP presidencies.

6.6.3. South–South and regional cooperation

Forge structured partnerships with countries that prioritise cultural leadership – such as Brazil, Indonesia and Morocco – to demonstrate practical CBCA models in diverse contexts.

Position the UAE as a convening hub for regional dialogues on culture and climate, linking the MENA region with wider Global South networks.

Explore trilateral partnerships – for example, **UAE–Brazil–UNESCO** – to co-design flagship adaptation projects showcasing culture-based solutions.

6.6.4. Global financing and recognition mechanisms

Advocate for culture-based projects to qualify for support under multilateral climate finance mechanisms – including the Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund and Loss and Damage Fund.

Collaborate with development banks and bilateral donors to create dedicated CBCA funding windows that highlight **heritage protection** and the **creative economy** as adaptation investments.

Promote the development of global awards, labels or certification schemes recognising excellence in CBCA implementation.

6.6.5. International cultural diplomacy and soft power

Use UAE-led cultural events – including Expo City programming, Sharjah Biennial, Louvre Abu Dhabi collaborations and the forthcoming openings of the Zayed National Museum, Natural History Museum and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi – as global showcases for climate-conscious cultural leadership.

Encourage UAE cultural institutions — working with partners such as the British Council – to align international collaborations, touring exhibitions and global programmes with sustainability standards. These partnerships can amplify the UAE's cultural diplomacy by connecting Emirati practice with global networks of arts, education and cultural exchange.

Position Emirati heritage-informed design and traditional ecological knowledge as international exemplars of climate adaptation, consolidating the UAE's reputation as both innovator and convener.

By pursuing these priorities, the UAE can move from being a diplomatic advocate for culture in climate action to becoming a systemic architect of how culture is embedded in multilateral climate governance. This approach would not only strengthen its international reputation but also create global pathways for recognition, finance and policy integration that directly benefit domestic CBCA practice.

© Stay A Little Longer, Ramadan 2024, Image courtesy of Alserkal Avenue

6.7 Interdependency: building a systemic CBCA ecosystem

The six opportunity areas outlined in the previous section cannot be pursued in isolation. Each represents an essential element of a wider ecosystem that will determine whether culture-based climate action in the UAE becomes mainstreamed, scalable and resilient. The interdependencies between them underscore the importance of designing CBCA as a whole-system strategy rather than a collection of parallel initiatives.

Governance without capacity cannot deliver. Even the most comprehensive national CBCA framework will falter unless educators, cultural managers and creative practitioners have the skills, roles and institutional backing to implement it. Policy momentum must therefore be matched by investment in professional training, curricula and knowledge-sharing platforms.

Capacity without governance lacks direction. While many cultural actors are eager to develop skills and innovate, the absence of clear mandates and standards risks diffusing effort across fragmented pilots. National frameworks can provide the coherence needed to channel capacity building toward shared objectives.

Traditional knowledge without community mobilisation risks tokenism. Reviving *falaj* irrigation, *barjeel* architecture, and Islamic teachings on stewardship will strengthen resilience only if communities are empowered to practise, adapt and pass them on. Traditional knowledge is not a museum exhibit but a living system — one that depends on participation and ownership.

Community mobilisation without innovation risks being under-resourced. Grassroots actors bring creativity and legitimacy, but without access to digital tools, material innovations or financing pathways their contributions remain fragile. Linking community energy to innovation pipelines can produce scalable, context-sensitive solutions.

Innovation without governance and metrics risks spectacle. Experimental materials, immersive exhibitions and cultural showcases demonstrate potential, but without procurement reform and evaluation systems, they remain episodic rather than embedded. Clear standards and indicators are crucial for transitioning innovation from prototype to mainstream adoption.

International leadership without domestic integration risks hollow diplomacy. The UAE's role in shaping the global CBCA agenda is a major strength, but its credibility depends on embedding the same principles within national systems. Conversely, domestic institutionalisation creates a stronger platform for international influence — showcasing how culture can be treated as a systemic enabler of resilience.

Taken together, these interdependencies indicate that CBCA in the UAE should be approached as a cohesive ecosystem in which governance, education, heritage, community, creativity and diplomacy reinforce one another. Success will depend on creating feedback loops – with global legitimacy strengthening national frameworks, national frameworks empowering local communities and community practice generating evidence for global advocacy.

In this way, CBCA can evolve from a set of inspiring yet fragmented practices into a nationally integrated system – one that trengthens climate resilience, amplifies the UAE's cultural identity and positions the country as a global model for embedding culture at the heart of climate action.

6.8 Roadmap for scaling CBCA in the UAE

	Phase 1 (2025-2026): Institutional Anchoring & Visibility	Phase 2 (2026-2028): Systematisation and Scaling	Phase 3 (2028-2030): Integration and Global Leadership
Priority Actions	Launch a National CBCA Framework aligned with NAP, NDC, and Net Zero. Establish an inter-ministerial CBCA Taskforce with emirate-level focal points. Dedicate Year of Community 2025 funding for grassroots CBCA initiatives (micro-grants, inclusive eligibility). Integrate CBCA into school and university curricula. Pilot a national CBCA indicators toolkit.	Embed CBCA competencies and job roles into the national occupational framework. Introduce green commissioning guidelines and procurement reform across cultural/heritage sectors. Fund "living labs" at heritage sites and cultural districts to test TEK–innovation hybrids. Establish shared digital infrastructure for SMEs and creative collectives. Expand applied research and training partnerships.	Institutionalise CBCA indicators in national climate reporting and SDG monitoring. Secure eligibility for CBCA under international climate finance (Adaptation Fund, GCF, L&D Fund). Position UAE as a regional convening hub for CBCA, hosting annual MENA–Global South forums. Showcase UAE CBCA models at COP30 and subsequent COPs. Advocate for a formal UNFCCC Work Programme on Culture and Climate Action.
Key Actors	Ministry of Culture (MoC); Ministry of Climate Change & Environment (MoCCAE).	MoC; MoCCAE; Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation (MOHRE).	MoC; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA); MoCCAE.
Supporting Actors	Ministry of Education; Ministry of Community Empowerment; Municipalities; British Council; UNESCO.	Universities (AUS, Zayed, NYUAD); ICCROM; Creative SMEs; Municipalities; Private sector (developers, cultural foundations).	GFCBCA member states; UNESCO; British Council; ICCROM; Development banks (World Bank, Islamic Development Bank); UAE cultural institutions (Louvre Abu Dhabi, Sharjah Biennial, Expo City).

Wael Al Awar, Barzakh, Public Art Abu Dhabi Biennial 2024 - 2025. Courtesy DCT Abu Dhabi and the Artist. © Lance Gerber.

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Annexes

Annex A: Survey

Survey Introduction and Consent Statement

Dear Participant,
Thank you for taking the time to participate in this important survey as part of the **Advancing Culture-Based Climate Action in the UAE: A Baseline Study.** This study is commissioned by the UAE Ministry of Culture and British Council and is being led by the Green Box World. It aims to explore the role of culture in fostering climate adaptation, resilience, and sustainable development across the UAE.
Your input is crucial in helping us understand existing initiatives, challenges, and opportunities in culture-based climate action.

Purpose of the Survey:

This survey seeks to gather insights from stakeholders across government, private sector, civil society, academia, and arts organisations to inform a baseline assessment of culture-based climate action in the UAE. The findings will contribute to actionable recommendations for integrating culture into climate strategies at the national and emirate levels.

Confidentiality:

All responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. Data will be aggregated, and no individual or organisation will be identified in the final report without prior consent.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You may choose to skip any questions or withdraw from the survey at any time without penalty.

Estimated Time:

Completing this survey should take approximately **15-20 minutes.**
By proceeding with this survey, you confirm that you:

1. Have been informed about the purpose of the study.
2. Understand that your participation is voluntary.
3. Consent to your responses being used for research purposes.

If you have any questions or concerns about this survey or the study, please feel free to contact us at mohsen@thegbox.org.

Thank you for your valuable contribution to advancing culture-based climate action in the UAE.

Sincerely,
Research Team (Green Box)

Section 1: Respondent and Organisational Details

1. Email Address (Optional, for follow-up if needed):

_____

2. Organisation Name

_____

3. Organisation Type (Select all that apply):

- ☐ Government
- ☐ Academia
- ☐ NGO / Community Organisation
- ☐ Private Sector
- ☐ Cultural Institution
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

4. Geographical Focus (Select all that apply):

- ☐ National (UAE-wide)
- ☐ Emirate-Specific (Please specify): _____
- ☐ Regional (MENA)
- ☐ International

5. Role within Organisation:

- ☐ Leadership/Decision-Maker
- ☐ Expert Advisor _____
- ☐ Researcher/Academic
- ☐ Community/Field Worker
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Section 2: Understanding of Culture-Based Climate Action

7. How does your organisation define 'culture-based climate action'? (Open-ended)

8 Which cultural aspects are central to your climate action initiatives? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Artistic and Creative Practices
- ☐ Tangible Heritage (e.g., historical buildings, artefacts)
- ☐ Intangible Heritage (e.g., traditions, local knowledge systems)
- ☐ Community-led Behaviour Change Initiatives
- ☐ Education and Intergenerational Learning
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Section 3: Current Initiatives and Practices

What percentage of your programme budget is dedicated to culture-based climate action (CBCA)?

- ☐ 0%
- ☐ 1%-10%
- ☐ 11%-30%
- ☐ 31%-50%
- ☐ 51%-100%
- ☐ Not Sure

Please describe the focus of your initiatives: (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Exhibitions
- ☐ Public Education and Awareness Campaigns
- ☐ Preservation and Adaptive Reuse of Cultural Heritage
- ☐ Integration of Traditional Knowledge in Climate Strategies
- ☐ Decarbonising Cultural Practices
- ☐ Recycle/Reuse/Circular Economy
- ☐ Livelihoods and Community Resilience Projects
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Please list any key culture-based climate action initiatives you are aware of, either conducted by your organisation or others: (Open-ended)

_____

Which sectors do your initiatives intersect with? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Policy and Governance
- ☐ Built Environment and Design
- ☐ Energy and Resource Management
- ☐ Agriculture and Food Systems
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Section 4: Challenges and Opportunities

What motivates your organisation to engage in culture-based climate action? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Organisational Mission and Values
- ☐ Policy Mandates
- ☐ Funding Opportunities
- ☐ Public Demand
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

What challenges does your organisation face in implementing these initiatives? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Lack of Funding
- ☐ Limited Public or Stakeholder Interest
- ☐ Fragmented Governance Structures
- ☐ Difficulty Integrating Traditional Knowledge
- ☐ Cross-sectoral Collaboration
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

What opportunities do you see for enhancing culture-based climate action in the UAE? (Open-ended)

Section 5: Impact Measurement and Policy Alignment

Does your organisation measure the impact of its culture-based climate action initiatives?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not Sure

If yes, what metrics or indicators do you use? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Community Engagement Levels
- ☐ Resource Efficiency Improvements
- ☐ Preservation of Heritage Sites
- ☐ Behavioural Change Indicators
- ☐ Economic Benefits (e.g., livelihoods created, cost savings)
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Are you aware of national or emirate-level policies that support culture-based climate action?

- ☐ Yes (Please specify): _____
- ☐ No

How aligned are your initiatives with the UAE's National Adaptation Plan?

- ☐ Fully Aligned
- ☐ Partially Aligned
- ☐ Not Aligned
- ☐ Not Sure

Did COP28 lead to new activities or alignment in your work, or was alignment with international frameworks already happening before?

- ☐ COP28 led to new activities and alignment
- ☐ Alignment with national frameworks was already happening before COP28
- ☐ Not Sure

Section 6: Behavioural Change and Knowledge Systems

How does your organisation promote behavioural change to mainstream climate adaptation efforts through cultural activities? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Public Campaigns and Events
- ☐ Storytelling and Narratives
- ☐ Workshops and Community Dialogues
- ☐ Educational Programmes
- ☐ Other (Please specify): _____

Do your initiatives engage with intergenerational or local knowledge systems?

- ☐ Yes (Please describe briefly): _____
- ☐ No

What tools or strategies do you use to track behavioural change? (Open-ended)

Section 7: Future Directions and Collaboration

What role do you envision for cultural institutions, the private sector, and government in advancing culture-based climate action? (Open-ended)

Would you be interested in participating in further discussions, workshops, or focus groups on this topic?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please share any additional thoughts or comments about this study: (Open-ended)

Annex B: In-depth Interviews and Focus Groups

In-depth Interviews-Consent Protocol

Consent Form for Participation in Interviews/ Focus Groups

Title of Study: Advancing Culture-Based Climate Action in the UAE: Baseline Study

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the role of culture-based climate action (CBCA) in fostering climate resilience, behavioural change, and sustainable development in the UAE. The findings will contribute to actionable recommendations for integrating culture into national and emirate-level climate strategies.

Participant Consent

You are being invited to participate in an interview for this study. Your insights will help shape the understanding of culture's role in climate action and inform future policies and practices.

Voluntary Participation

- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without penalty.
- You may choose to skip any question that you feel uncomfortable answering.

Confidentiality

- All responses will be treated with strict confidentiality.
- Data will be anonymised and reported in a way that prevents identification of individual participants or organisations unless explicit permission is granted.

Duration

The interview is expected to take approximately 45-60 minutes.

Use of Information

- The information collected will be used solely for research purposes.
- Findings will be shared in a final report, presentations, and related publications.
- Anonymised data may be used for academic and policy-related discussions.

Potential Risks and Benefits

- There are no known risks associated with participating in this study.
- Your participation will contribute to advancing culture-based climate action and informing future strategies.

Consent Declaration

By signing this form, you confirm that:
1. You have been informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of your participation.
2. You understand your rights, including the right to withdraw at any time.
3. You consent to the interview being recorded (if applicable) for accurate data collection and analysis.
4. You agree to participate in the study.

In-Depth Interview/ Focus Groups – Suggested Guides

What is Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA)?

Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) refers to integrating cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and creative industries into climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. It includes:

1. Harnessing Culture for Climate Action – Using cultural and heritage-based strategies to enhance resilience and reduce climate vulnerability.
2. Greening the Cultural Sector – Reducing the carbon footprint of arts, tourism, and creative industries while promoting sustainable practices.
3. Valuing Diverse Knowledge Systems – Recognising traditional and local knowledge in shaping climate responses.
4. Protecting Culture from Climate Change – Ensuring climate-resilient infrastructure and safe guarding heritage sites and traditions from climate risks.

CBCA is increasingly recognised by international policymakers as a means for more effective and inclusive climate action that strengthens adaptive capacity, promotes sustainable behaviours, and is. The UAE Ministry of Culture currently leads an initiative advocating for Culture-Based Climate Action at the UNFCCC, and a national initiative, UAE Net Zero by 2050, was launched in 2021. How can we align national climate and global climate strategies? Why Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA)?

1. Policy/Government Stakeholders

Context for Participants

Policymakers play a crucial role in embedding cultural considerations into national climate strategies. CBCA can enhance public engagement, leverage traditional knowledge for resilience, and support climate-friendly policies.

Interview Questions

1. How would you define Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) in the UAE context?
2. What CBCA initiatives exist in your ministry or sector?
3. How does your ministry integrate CBCA into national climate policies like the UAE's NAP and NDCs?
4. What role do traditional knowledge and heritage play in climate resilience?
5. What challenges exist in incorporating CBCA into policy frameworks?
6. How can inter-ministerial collaboration on CBCA be improved?
7. How does your ministry measure the impact of CBCA initiatives?
8. What incentives could encourage private sector engagement in CBCA?
9. What policies or programmes should be prioritised to strengthen CBCA?
10. How can the UAE lead globally in CBCA?

2. Civil Society and NGOs

Context for Participants

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups engage communities in climate action through culture-based approaches. They often work on grassroots initiatives, advocacy, and education to integrate cultural practices into sustainability efforts.

Interview Questions

1. How does your organisation define CBCA, and how is it relevant to your work?
2. What CBCA projects has your organisation undertaken?
3. How do you engage communities in CBCA efforts?
4. What are the biggest challenges in implementing CBCA initiatives?
5. What opportunities exist for scaling CBCA in the UAE?
6. How do you collaborate with other organisations, the government, or the private sector?
7. How do you measure the impact of CBCA initiatives?
8. What policy changes could support civil society's role in CBCA?
9. How can CBCA be more inclusive of marginalised groups?
10. What innovative approaches have you used or seen in CBCA?

3. Academia and Researchers

Context for Participants

Researchers and academics provide critical insights into CBCA by studying traditional knowledge, behavioural change, and sustainable practices. Their work informs policies, programmes, and community-based strategies.

Interview Questions

1. How do you define CBCA in your research?
2. What research gaps exist in understanding CBCA in the UAE?
3. How can traditional knowledge contribute to CBCA?
4. How does academic research influence CBCA policy and practice?
5. What are the biggest barriers to integrating CBCA research into national strategies?
6. How can interdisciplinary collaboration strengthen CBCA research?
7. What are the best ways to measure CBCA outcomes?
8. How can UAE research contribute to global CBCA efforts?
9. What policy recommendations emerge from your research?
10. How can CBCA be integrated into education and public awareness?

4. Private Sector Organisations

Context for Participants

Businesses can integrate CBCA into corporate sustainability by adopting cultural approaches to environmental responsibility, engaging with local traditions, and supporting climate-smart innovations in the creative industries.

Interview Questions

1. How does your organisation understand CBCA, and how does it relate to your sustainability goals?
2. Have you incorporated cultural elements into your sustainability initiatives? If so, how?
3. What challenges do you face in integrating CBCA into your business strategy?
4. What business opportunities can CBCA create?
5. How can CBCA be leveraged to enhance corporate social responsibility?
6. What incentives or policies could encourage private sector involvement in CBCA?
7. How do you measure the impact of cultural sustainability initiatives?
8. What partnerships could strengthen CBCA within the private sector?
9. How does CBCA align with global ESG and sustainability trends?
10. What role should the private sector play in scaling CBCA in the UAE?

5. Arts and Culture Organisations

Context for Participants

Artists, cultural institutions, and creative industries can use storytelling, heritage preservation, and community engagement to inspire climate action and sustainable behaviours.

Interview Questions

1. How does your organisation define CBCA, and how does it fit into your work?
2. What cultural projects or initiatives have you led that relate to climate action?
3. How does your organisation engage communities in CBCA?
4. What role do the arts and creative industries play in shaping climate awareness and action?
5. What challenges do arts organisations face in advancing CBCA?
6. How can the cultural sector collaborate with government, private industry, and NGOs on CBCA?
7. How do you measure the impact of cultural climate initiatives?
8. How can the arts be a driver for behavioural change in climate action?
9. What innovative or digital approaches could enhance CBCA in the arts?
10. What support is needed for cultural organisations to play a stronger role in CBCA?

Concrete Tent by DAAR – Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, Al Madam, Sharjah, UAE. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023. © Danko Stjepanovic. Courtesy of Sharjah Architecture Triennial.

BRITISH COUNCIL

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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