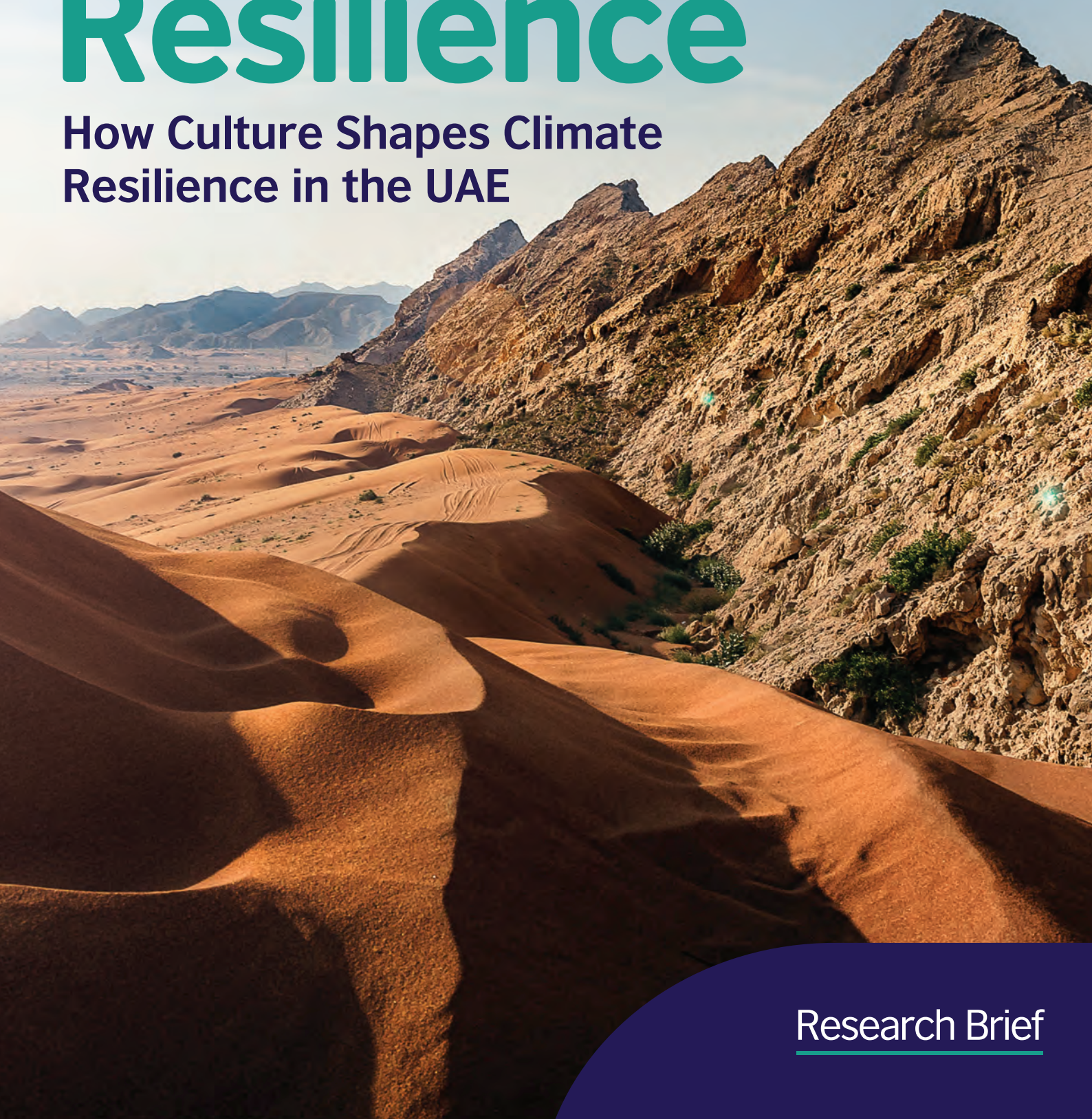


Rooted in Resilience

How Culture Shapes Climate
Resilience in the UAE



Defining Culture-Based Climate Action and Its Strategic Importance

The research brief provides a baseline analysis of the culture and climate nexus in the national landscape of UAE. This research was commissioned by the UAE Ministry of Culture in partnership with the British Council.

Culture-Based Climate Action (CBCA) is an emerging, interdisciplinary framework that integrates cultural and natural heritage, traditional knowledge systems, creative practices, and culture-led innovation into climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building strategies. As articulated by the UAE and Brazil-led informal coalition Group of Friends for Culture Based Climate Action at the UNFCCC (GFCBCA), it recognises that **culture not just as a sector to be safeguarded, but also as a driver of behavioural transformation, a vehicle for climate communication, and a repository of place-based solutions** in response to the urgent, inclusive, people-centric collective climate action that both the COP28 President and High Level Champion called for following the First Global Stocktake in 2023 and which we see echoed today by the COP30 Presidency.

This study represents national-level work supporting the goals of the GFCBCA and the COP30 Action Agenda to mobilise collective, people-centred climate action for resilience. In doing so, it operationalises the GFCBCA's policy-level vision in synergy with the Climate Champions' efforts under the Marrakesh Partnership for Global Climate Action and the Race to Resilience campaign, advancing the 2024 call to shift from plans to implementation and tangible impact for vulnerable communities.

Over the last five years, a growing body of evidence-based and science-backed knowledge produced by academics, civil society, and international organisations such as UNESCO, ICESCO, ICCROM, ICOMOS and ICOM¹ have made the case for the culture sector's capacity to strengthen resilience, avoid maladaptation, and reduce vulnerability to climate change impacts amongst communities most at risk. Which has helped the culture and climate connection gain traction amongst international policy-makers.

Critically, **CBCA contributes to the full spectrum of climate responses—from mitigation to adaptation to addressing non-economic Loss and Damage (L&D).**

On mitigation, CBCA supports decarbonisation through green architectural and landscape design, sustainable cultural production and circulation in the creative industries, and low-carbon museum, exhibition, and festival operations. For adaptation, it mobilises traditional knowledge systems, narrative-driven behaviour change, and locally-situated practices that enable ecosystem-based and culturally anchored responses. In the context of loss and damage, CBCA is essential to recognising and restoring intangible cultural heritage threatened by climate impacts. This emphasis on culture and heritage aligns with the mandate of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD), which is designed to assist particularly vulnerable developing countries in responding to both economic and non economic losses—including damage to cultural heritage—as climate impacts escalate.

At the same time, organisations across the UAE culture sector—from federal and local government institutions to museums and independent, commercial, and NGO entities in tourism, arts, creative industries, and tangible and intangible heritage—have demonstrated a commitment to engaging with climate change. Their activities span CBCA's definition, ranging from the adoption of formal and informal institutional sustainability plans for operations and exhibitions of innovative climate change solutions, to public education programmes aimed at raising awareness of climate impacts and championing sustainable production and consumption practices.

This research is situated within the broader conceptual framing of the UAE's cultural ethos—what many research respondents described as the **DNA of resilience**—and the foundational insight that **culture is not a sideline to climate action but the connective tissue binding identity, memory, adaptive behaviour, built form, governance, and intergenerational learning.**

CBCA is not simply an accessory to climate policy. It is a systems lever, capable of unlocking transformative behaviour change, deep societal engagement, and sustainable development rooted in context. As climate threats intensify, the UAE's ability to mobilise its cultural resources as a pillar of climate change adaptation and mitigation will determine not only its physical resilience, but also its sustainable development and social cohesion.

The title **Rooted in Resilience** reflects this framing: that Emirati traditions of adaptation, from *falaj* irrigation systems to vernacular architecture, represent centuries-old, locally-evolved solutions to environmental variability and resource constraints. Thus, culture-based climate action is not only about introducing new approaches—it is about reviving and systematising what communities already know and value. As the UAE prepares to operationalise its commitments under the Net Zero by 2050 Strategic Initiative, NAP, and NDC 3.0, CBCA must be positioned as a lever for national climate ambition.

CBCA's Contribution to Mitigation, Adaptation, and Loss & Damage, and the UAE's National Commitment

Culture-Based Climate Action is increasingly recognised on the global stage as a vital part of building resilience. At the international level, CBCA aligns with UNESCO's 2023 Executive Board Resolution 217 EX/36—a UAE-led resolution focused on integrating culture and education into climate action—and, this year at Mondiacult 2025, UNESCO's World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development, culture and climate action is one of six priority domains.

CBCA also supports multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 3 on health and wellbeing, SDG 11.4 (safeguarding cultural heritage), SDG 13.3 (climate education and awareness), and SDG 17.17 (cross-sector partnerships). It is also formally recognised within the Global Goal on Adaptation (2/CMA.5)² under the *UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience*, which established cultural heritage as one of seven thematic targets.

The UAE's international leadership on CBCA has been anchored in its efforts to advance culture-climate linkages within UNFCCC processes. At COP28 in 2023, the UAE and Brazil launched GFCBCA to advocate for the anchoring of culture into the UNFCCC process.



² Global Goal on Adaptation (2/CMA.5) – Adopted at COP28 in 2023, this decision outlines the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, which sets thematic targets to guide and measure progress on the Global Goal on Adaptation under the Paris Agreement.

The urgency of embedding CBCA into national climate change strategies is driven by mounting exposure to climate extremes in the UAE³. Domestically, culture is directly referenced in the UAE's nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and in the First National Long-Term Strategy, subtitled Demonstrating Commitment to Net Zero by 2050. The 2050 strategy calls for a national transition to sustainable practices across all sectors. Our study responds to this whole-of-society framing by demonstrating how culture and heritage can act as enablers of both decarbonisation and resilience. The UAE National Adaptation Plan (NAP), launched during COP28, also recognises culture as a component of adaptation planning.

The gap between policy ambition and operational integration suggests an important opportunity to move from symbolic inclusion toward deeper, systemic institutionalisation of CBCA. Strengthening embedded mandates, financing instruments, monitoring frameworks, and capacity support will be critical to ensure that the cultural sector's contributions to climate action – and the value of culture itself – are fully recognised and integrated. While this study establishes a first national baseline, it also underscores the need for further data collection and academic inquiry.

UAE universities and research centres can play a leading role in generating the evidence base required for more robust CBCA reporting, including within future iterations of the UAE's NAP.

Against this backdrop, the study positions CBCA not as a complementary outreach tool, but as a foundational mechanism to realise just and inclusive climate transitions in the UAE. It elevates culture as a global public good at risk from the climate emergency – both a site of vulnerability and an engine of resilience – capable of transforming how climate risks are understood, experienced, and addressed across all society.



³ According to the UAE's First National Long Term Strategy (2024), by 2040, the Arabian Peninsula is projected to be among the most water-stressed regions globally. Temperature rises exceeding 2.4°C by mid-century and extreme rainfall increases of 200% threaten to destabilise both ecological systems and cultural infrastructure. Sea level rise projections of up to 98 cm by 2100 endanger key cultural zones along the coast as well as the built environment where over 85% of the UAE's population resides.



Methodology and Evidence Base

This study applied a multi-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data sources to generate a granular, sector-wide understanding of CBCA practices and enabling conditions in the UAE.

A bilingual (Arabic/English) organisational survey was administered to 45 cultural, educational, and municipal institutions across all seven Emirates. The survey captured indicators related to CBCA conceptual clarity, implementation modalities, cross-sector linkages, policy alignment, barriers to adoption, and measurement practices.

To complement this, over 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with institutional leaders from museums, heritage authorities, architectural firms, design incubators, creative networks, youth organisations, NGOs, academic faculties, and municipal departments. Interviews were structured around a common thematic guide, enabling comparative analysis while accommodating the specific mandates and knowledge domains of diverse respondents.

In parallel, embedded practitioner fieldwork was conducted within the Ministry of Culture, providing reflexive and institutional insights into ongoing CBCA-related initiatives, policy dialogues, and bureaucratic enablers and constraints. Analytical triangulation between these data sources yielded a comprehensive matrix of CBCA engagement.

The research process was deliberately iterative and consultative. It began with public- and private-sector stakeholder dialogue at Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (ADSW) in January 2025, which helped frame the initial priorities and scope of inquiry. The process culminated in the CBCA Reflection Session, co-hosted by the UAE Ministry of Culture and the British Council in July 2025, which shared high-level findings, facilitated Q&A and group discussion, and generated additional actionable recommendations that have been incorporated into the final report.



Current Landscape of CBCA in the UAE

Across the UAE, Culture-Based Climate Action is already unfolding through a rich mosaic of cultural, educational, and civic initiatives. From heritage restoration projects in Al Ain to climate-themed exhibitions in Sharjah and youth-led sustainability festivals in Fujairah, culture-based responses to climate change are active across all seven Emirates.

The study has found that **73%** of the organisations surveyed participate in relevant sustainable practices and serve as a platform for building community awareness of climate change and driving behaviour change for resilience.

Survey responses indicate that **87%** of organisations surveyed are engaged in CBCA-relevant activities—even if not labelled as such—including traditional knowledge preservation, sustainable creative production, educational programming, and greening of cultural infrastructure.

These actions span federal museums, municipal cultural departments, grassroots collectives, and independent artists. Notably, institutions such as the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi, Dubai Culture, Sharjah Art Foundation, Jameel Art Center, Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the NYUAD Art Gallery are increasingly embedding sustainability principles into exhibitions, heritage site management, and public engagement platforms.



Despite this breadth, the scale and integration of CBCA efforts vary widely by Emirate, sector, and institutional capacity.



have a clear definition or understanding of CBCA



are unaware of any national policy mechanism that supports CBCA delivery

While large institutions often have the resources to experiment with green design and public education on climate, smaller organisations particularly in the Northern Emirates report limited access to funding, policy guidance, and cross-sector collaboration. Nonetheless, CBCA is being advanced in both expected and unconventional spaces—from climate storytelling embedded in children's theatre to sustainable heritage crafts incubated in urban design studios.

“

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

Key Insights

Thematic analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from this baseline study revealed six priority clusters through which Culture-Based Climate Action can be systematised and scaled. These thematic clusters reflect not only the lived realities of stakeholders but also key national policy gaps and emerging institutional pathways:

Safeguarding Traditional Knowledge Systems

Traditional knowledge is both a cultural repository and a strategic asset for climate adaptation. This includes long-standing environmental management systems like falaj irrigation, vernacular cooling methods, desert pastoralism, and cultivation of native plants. Despite its relevance, this knowledge is in rapid decline due to generational discontinuities, urbanisation, and insufficient documentation. **53%** of surveyed organisations reported integrating traditional knowledge into their programmes, yet few have dedicated mechanisms to support its intergenerational transmission or protect it as part of national adaptation strategies. Institutional support—such as curriculum integration, heritage mapping, and digital archiving—remains limited.

“

Our ancestors lived in balance with nature. If we lose that memory, we lose our best adaptation tools.”

Embedding Sustainability in Creative Industries and Cultural Production

The UAE’s cultural economy contributes significantly to GDP and employment, and its reach into public consciousness makes it a critical actor in shaping sustainability narratives. Climate-related themes are increasingly present in exhibitions, films, festivals, and performance-based media, but the sector lacks national coordination and financial scaffolding to scale its contributions.

“

We have ideas and goodwill—but no money to execute them at scale.”



47% (n=21) of respondents reported integrating sustainability into creative content, yet less than 20% (n=9) receive public funding or benefit from green procurement schemes. Interviewees consistently pointed to the absence of enabling policies.

“

Music and live culture can really be a way to transmit this message and give people enthusiasm about sustainability.”

In this sense, the cultural and creative industries also serve as a practical example of sustainable production and consumption, with the potential to demonstrate low-carbon models across value chains.

Climate Innovation and Digital Technology

Beyond content, several institutions underscored the enabling role of technology—particularly digital platforms, immersive media, and AI-driven tools—in scaling the visibility and interactivity of Culture-Based Climate Action initiatives. Others highlighted the innovation potential within material supply chains, advocating for low-carbon stage design, sustainable printing, and lifecycle-based procurement for exhibitions and events.

Respondents called for regulatory frameworks and market mechanisms—such as sustainability standards for cultural production, climate-linked awards, and carbon labelling of cultural events—to institutionalise the environmental footprint of the creative sector and catalyse investment in green innovation.

Integrating Heritage-Informed and Low-Carbon Design in the Built Environment

The design and construction sectors, while significant contributors to emissions⁴, also offer immense opportunities for CBCA integration. **80%** of surveyed institutions link their climate work to built environment issues. Yet while innovative projects exist—such as sustainability of the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and dry-stone construction using quarry waste—mainstream uptake is limited by restrictive building codes, risk-averse contractors, and lack of capacity among regulators.

“

“We still treat buildings as disposable. Build, demolish, rebuild—it’s a loop.”



“

“We are rediscovering how our ancestors lived with the land... they were sustainable out of necessity—we can be sustainable by choice.”

Multiple interviewees cited challenges in securing approvals for heritage-based or bioclimatic architectural methods, calling for updates to urban planning laws and greater investment in professional training. Additionally, municipalities and heritage districts require clearer mandates and incentives to embed CBCA in city-level resilience plans.

⁴According to the Third Update of the Second NDC (submitted in July 2023), the building sector in the UAE was responsible for approximately 62MtCO₂e in 2019.

Mainstreaming CBCA into Formal and Informal Education Systems

Cultural institutions and educators alike stressed the need for embedding climate and culture linkages in early education, vocational training, and higher education. While the Ministry of Education has initiated sustainability reforms, Culture-Based Climate Action remains largely absent from national curricula.

“

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

Initiatives like the Al Naliyah Roadshow developed jointly by the UAE Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education and university-led interdisciplinary modules at NYUAD and AUS are commendable, but rely on discretionary leadership rather than systemic mandates.

Several respondents expressed the need for formal recognition of CBCA-related competencies and job roles.

“

“There’s no CBCA job title—it’s always a side hustle added to someone’s already full plate.”

These reflections highlight the gap between ambition and institutional pathways. Others called for national standards for green skills in the cultural workforce and transdisciplinary residencies linking artists, scientists, and community leaders.

The engagement with academics during this research revealed strong appetite for building the evidence base on culture- and heritage-based climate solutions. Academic research in this field can help demonstrate CBCA’s contribution to climate resilience, inform policy integration, and strengthen case-making for investment.



Strengthening Community-Based and Decentralised Cultural Resilience

Culture-Based Climate Action is most impactful when communities are not only beneficiaries but active co-creators of climate solutions.

The study surfaced strong enthusiasm across community-led arts groups, youth collectives, cultural entrepreneurs, and heritage stewards, particularly in the Northern Emirates.

However, these groups frequently lack formal recognition, equitable access to funding, and consistent inclusion in decision-making structures. 2025—declared the UAE Year of Community—offers a critical window for repositioning CBCA as a tool for whole-of-society mobilisation.

Examples such as the Sharjah Architecture Triennial's *Al Manakh Spaces* programme illustrate how design-led and community-engaged cultural initiatives can advance CBCA. These efforts, aligned with the UAE's Year of Community, show how architecture, public space, and cultural storytelling can be leveraged to address climate challenges while reinforcing social cohesion.

Survey data and interviews revealed that while grassroots actors often initiate some of the most innovative climate-cultural programming, they face multiple barriers: administrative complexity in applying for grants, lack of dedicated funding streams for small-scale initiatives, and a sense of detachment from top-down climate policy frameworks.

Many such initiatives reflect bottom-up innovation—merging artistic expression with citizen science, nature-based storytelling, and low-tech, locally grounded responses to climate change. These include community heritage walks linked to biodiversity mapping, youth-run seed exchange festivals, and traditional architecture workshops that double as green jobs incubators.



Several interviewees highlighted the need for decentralised and locally managed funding windows, capacity-building for non-traditional actors, and participatory co-design mechanisms to guide programme delivery. Social enterprises like Climate Tribe, youth-led creative groups, and cultural practitioners from migrant and underrepresented communities underscored the need for multilingual outreach, accessibility-by-design, and embedded community climate storytelling.

“

"CBCA gives us the architecture for action, but what's missing are the doors through which we're invited to lead."



Key Blockers

Across these six clusters, three cross-cutting blockers were identified:



Governance Fragmentation

There is no dedicated inter-ministerial mechanism to coordinate CBCA across federal and Emirate levels. Ministries of Culture, Climate Change and Environment, Community Empowerment (formerly Community Development), Education, Infrastructure, and Municipalities operate in silos, undermining integration. Policy mandates referencing CBCA remain largely rhetorical without mechanisms for operationalisation, accountability, or cross-sector delivery.



Absence of Metrics and Evaluation Systems

Only **31%** of surveyed organisations collect CBCA-related data beyond attendance figures. No shared monitoring and evaluation frameworks exist for behavioural change and cultural vulnerability. Without quantifiable and qualitative indicators, CBCA cannot be meaningfully tracked, reported, or linked to adaptation finance mechanisms like the FRLD or GGA.



Inclusion and Access

Stakeholder mapping indicates that CBCA programming remains concentrated in urban centres, with high barriers to entry for marginalised communities. Language, funding criteria, institutional eligibility rules, and digital divides all limit the accessibility of CBCA platforms.

Taken together, this section of the analysis reveals both the richness and the fragility of Culture-Based Climate Action in the UAE. There is widespread innovation and public interest—but without state-led coordination, structural financing, and metrics of value, these practices remain diffuse and therefore incapable of generating systemic impact. The UAE has the policy infrastructure, international legitimacy, and cultural assets to lead globally on this power lever for embedding climate action in all parts of society. What is needed now is a deep structural investment in the systems and partnerships that can unlock this leadership.

Key Recommendations

The report concludes with a six-pillar roadmap to scale and institutionalise Culture-Based Climate Action:

National Governance and Integration

- Develop a National CBCA Framework embedded in UAE climate policy.
- Launch an inter-ministerial CBCA taskforce in the UAE, co-led by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment.
- Include representatives from the Ministries of Education, Infrastructure, Community Empowerment, and Finance.
- Empower the taskforce to coordinate Emirate-level implementation and integrate CBCA into:
 - Urban development plans
 - Sustainability guidelines
 - National resilience targets
- Pilot Emirate-level alignment mechanisms, such as subnational CBCA focal points and culture–climate liaisons, to bridge national–local governance divides.

Finance and Incentives

- Create a CBCA Innovation Fund, blending finance from government, philanthropy (e.g. cultural foundations), and private actors (via CSR and ESG frameworks).
- Expand green finance tools (sustainability-linked bonds, Waqf-based endowments, public procurement frameworks) to support culture-climate initiatives.
- Adjust building code incentives to reward low-carbon and heritage-informed design (e.g. adobe, coral stone, palm wood, shaded walkability principles).

Capacity and Workforce Development

- Establish a national CBCA skills and learning programme, targeting:
 - Cultural professionals (museum staff, curators, heritage site managers)
 - Urban planners and architects
 - Educators
 - Youth leaders
- Integrate CBCA into:
 - Formal education (curricula, sustainability general education modules, vocational training)
 - Informal learning systems (creative residencies, artist–scientist exchanges)
- Support UAE academic research on CBCA to:
 - Build the evidence base on heritage-based climate solutions
 - Demonstrate CBCA’s contribution to resilience
 - Inform policy integration and investment case-making
- Standardise CBCA-related job roles across government entities and embed climate competencies in cultural job descriptions.



Measurement and Evaluation

- Develop a CBCA Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit, aligned with:
 - Global Goal on Adaptation (2/CMA.5)
 - Non-economic loss metrics
 - SDGs 11.4, 13.1, 13.3, and 17.17
- Use the toolkit to track:
 - Emissions reductions
 - Behavioural shifts
 - Traditional knowledge integration
 - Cultural heritage vulnerability
- Fund nationally coordinated baseline assessments, segmented by Emirate, to establish sectoral benchmarks and measure cultural vulnerability to climate risks.

Equity and Engagement

- Launch a National CBCA Community Grants Scheme targeting grassroots, youth-led, women-led, and migrant-led initiatives.
- Prioritise participatory and co-created programme models, such as:
 - Oral history archiving
 - Local storytelling
 - Participatory mapping
- Develop multilingual outreach strategies and inclusive design guidelines to ensure access for people of determination and underserved communities.
- Partner with faith-based and community media platforms to scale culture–climate narratives rooted in local values and traditions.





Global Alliances and South-South Collaboration

- Position UAE as co-lead for the UNFCCC Work Programme on CBCA.
- Champion CBCA at COP30 (Belém) and Mondiacult 2025.
- Contribute evidence and tools to GFCBCA processes and support regional hubs/ exchanges with countries advancing CBCA (e.g. Brazil, Indonesia, Morocco).
- Expand partnerships with UNESCO, ICCROM, ICESCO, ICOMOS and ICOM and cultural arms of Multilateral Development Banks.
- Strengthen collaboration with international cultural networks (e.g. British Council).
- Explore UAE-based pilots to inform UNFCCC indicators for cultural resilience.

Interdependency

- Governance without finance cannot deliver – mandates and frameworks must be backed by resources.
- Finance without metrics cannot scale – funding must be linked to clear evidence of impact. Metrics without community engagement cannot reflect lived experience – monitoring must capture local realities.
- The UAE now has a clear window of opportunity to transition from CBCA leadership in global discourse to a model of national institutionalisation.
- Achieving this requires:
 - High-level political commitment
 - Codified mandates
 - Catalytic investment
 - Ongoing peer learning

Acknowledgments

Lead Author: Dr Mohsen Gul (The Green Box World Ltd.)

Contributors: Stuart MacDonald, Hanin Aljifri, Dawar Hameed Butt, Ehsan Gul Sher

Ministry of Culture, UAE: Mahnaz Anwar Fancy, Shatha Amin AlMulla

British Council: Monomita Nag-Chowdhury, Dilara Ibrahimova, Dr Maryam Rab, Martin Daltry OBE, Rosanna Lewis, Maharoop Sheri

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