

WEAVING THE CREATIVE THREAD INTO THE FABRIC OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF THE UNESCO CREATIVE CITIES NETWORK

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Abstract: The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) is a global initiative designed to foster sustainable development and innovation through the medium of creativity. It functions as a platform for critical reflection and action, particularly in the context of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with an emphasis on the promotion of sustainable cities and communities. This study aims to provide a comprehensive review of the mechanisms through which the UCCN promotes creativity as a catalyst for sustainable urban development theory in two decades of activities. Based on an analysis of 458 reports available on the UNESCO website until May 2025, this study used a qualitative approach, specifically employing reflexive thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti software to examine reports and documents. The analysis investigates the strategies and policies enacted by member cities, with an emphasis on exemplary practices and innovative methodologies. This investigation is anchored in the mission statement articulated on the UNESCO website, as numerous UCCN members have published their reports in accordance with this mission. The findings revealed that the integration of creativity into sustainable urban development strategies has changed from a peripheral experiment to an emerging global standard. Furthermore, it is essential to develop robust mixed methods evaluation frameworks capable of capturing both tangible environmental and economic metrics, alongside intangible outcomes such as cultural vitality and social well-being. Finally, cultural policy must be explicitly conceptualized and implemented as a mechanism to advance objectives that prioritize equity, address challenges associated with creative city strategies, support diverse populations, and mitigate pressures of displacement.

Keywords: UNESCO Cities Network, cultural and creative industry, sustainable development, urban strategy, policy

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, a growing number of cities have identified themselves as 'creative' (Zhu et al., 2024; Gathen et al., 2021; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Okano & Samson, 2010; Pratt, 2010; Rosi, 2014; Scott, 2006). Creative cities, a concept introduced by Landry in (1995), aim to integrate the creative economy into urban planning and development, thus promoting local development and revitalizing deteriorated urban areas (Guimarães et al., 2021; OECD, 2018; UNCTAD, 2019; UNESCO, 2025a; UNESCO & World Bank, 2021). This strategy is grounded in earlier frameworks of cultural and creative industries (CCIs), which are frequently categorized together in contemporary discourse as CCIs (Qi, 2025). The development of CCIs has been promoted in the UK and Australia since the late 1990s (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 1998). Cultural and creative hubs can serve to stimulate local economies while improving community engagement (Stefanidou et al., 2024). Arcos-Pumarola et al. (2023) revealed the underexplored potential of synergies between two significant economic and creative activities. Qi (2025), Kovaité et al. (2022) and Manzini & Coad (2015) in their reviews have delineated the expanding research domain concerning sustainability within the CCIs. The designation of a "creative city" has gained prominence on a global scale, attributable to the increasing convergence of cultural and economic policy with urban planning, governance, and policymaking (Khoo, 2022). This trend has emerged as larger metropolitan areas have become central to the advancement of the creative economy (O'Connor & Kong, 2009). Cities like Lublin have shown how creative urban sustainability can be achieved by fostering cultural convergence with economic development (Bettlej & Kacerauskas, 2021). Despite the successes, integrating creativity into urban development presents challenges. Some cities struggle to effectively apply creative strategies due to limitations in resources or strategic planning (Satari & As'ad, 2018).

Within the field of urban policy, the concept of a creative city has proliferated rapidly; however, unlike a wildfire, there appears to be a widespread consensus among stakeholders on the desirability of establishing a creative city (Pratt, 2010). The concept of creative city, which serves as both a descriptive framework and a policy objective, has gained significant prominence (Fusco Girard et al., 2012; O'Connor & Kong, 2009). The creative city approach distinguishes itself from the Innovative Knowledge City and Niche Economic Development frameworks primarily through its explicit incorporation of arts, culture and heritage within the strategic planning and overarching visions for urban development (Duxbury, 2004; Scott, 2014). Creative city strategies emphasize the recontextualization of urban cultural artifacts as competitive assets,

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recognizing their economic utility, and utilizing gentrification as a beneficial urban process (Peck, 2005; Moreira et al., 2025). Consultants and scholars, such as Landry (2012) and Florida (2002), have posited that the attraction and retention of creative talent are fundamental to urban economic success within the context of the knowledge economy.

In this context, numerous cities have implemented strategies aimed at fostering a "creative" identity through the establishment of architectural flagship projects, the organization of cultural events, and the development of designated cultural districts. These initiatives are designed to attract investment, stimulate tourism, and recruit the desired creative workforce (Selada et al., 2012; Wiktor-Mach & Radwański, 2014). Furthermore, artists and cultural practitioners play a vital role in urban creativity by critically examining established norms and practices, thus fostering the advancement of more sustainable urban development trajectories (Cheraghi & Rulof., 2023; Ratiu, 2013).

The Creative Cities Network is a privileged partner of UNESCO (UCCN), not only as a platform for reflection on the role of creativity as a leverage for sustainable development, but also as a breeding ground for action and innovation, notably for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, namely 11, which is focused on sustainable cities and communities (Scott, 2006; UNESCO, 2018).

By fostering creativity, innovation, and collaboration among cities, these networks can help them become more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable (Luerdi, 2023; Pearson & Pearson, 2017; Wang et al., 2024; Pedrini et al., 2025). This not only benefits the cities themselves, but also contributes to a more equitable world for all (UNESCO, 2025a).

Cities within the network leverage their creative assets to attract tourism and foster economic growth (Yilmaz et al., 2020). Gathen et al. (2021) posited that the cities designated as part of the UCCN would attract visitors, skilled labor, and investors. The network seeks to improve the creation, production, distribution and dissemination of cultural activities, goods, and services (Sasaki, 2016). Furthermore, it aims to cultivate innovative and participatory strategies for cultural urban development by engaging both the public and private sectors, as well as civil society (Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023; Zhu & Yasami, 2021).

The extensive research examined the theoretical relationships between creative city strategies and sustainable development goals (SDGs) from a variety of perspectives (O'Connor & Kong, 2009; Pratt, 2008; Ratiu, 2013; Scott, 2006; Tay, 2004). Kajzer & Walinga (2017) suggested that culture and creativity can be used effectively to address the challenges associated with sustainability. The UCCN has played a significant role in improving cultural and creative industries, which are crucial for urban development (Moldoveanu & Franc, 2014).

Although previous studies examined CCIs or creative tourism (Pearson & Pearson, 2017), few have empirically analyzed the implementation mechanisms through the analysis of the reflexive content of city reports (Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023; Guimarães et al., 2021; Luerdi, 2023; Skoglund & Laven, 2019).

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of the mechanisms through which the UCCN promotes creativity as a catalyst for sustainable urban development theory in two decades of activities. The analysis will examine the strategies and policies implemented by UCCN member cities, focusing on exemplary practices and innovative methodologies. This analysis is grounded in the mission statement available on the UNESCO website, with many members of the UCCN publishing their reports in alignment with this mission. Furthermore, the paper will address the challenges that cities face in embedding creativity within their development frameworks and propose prospective avenues for further research and policy formulation. Based on the aforementioned goals, the research questions are as follows:

- How do creative cities in different creative fields implement the objectives of the UCCN at the local level?
- What are the key strategies used by UNESCO creative cities to promote intercity and international cooperation within the UCCN?
- How do creative cities engage in communication and awareness raising efforts concerning their designation and the objectives of the UCCN?
- What mechanisms do creative cities have in place for monitoring, evaluation, and research related to their activities and the impact of the UCCN designation?

This study synthesizes various documents to provide a comprehensive view of creativity as a tool for sustainable urban development. Additionally, it systematically analyzes two decades of activities to assess the long-term effects of the UCCN on sustainable urban development. By promoting collaboration and innovation among cities worldwide, the network lays the groundwork for a future where creativity is essential for building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities. The study offers significant implications for the local context of the UCCN, urban managers, policymakers, and cities that are considering membership in the network. This paper also proposes several prospective avenues for further research and policy development. By addressing these areas, the UCCN and its member cities can enhance the role of creativity as a fundamental instrument for achieving genuinely sustainable urban futures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Building on exploratory research conducted on reports of the UCCN context, this study used qualitative data analysis and comparative analysis to examine the promotion of creativity and sustainable urban development. Using an inductive approach and thematic classification, this study identified the main actions associated with urban development and analyzed their trends (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016).

UNESCO Creative Cities Network

UCCN was established in 2004 to promote cooperation with and between cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. UCCN covers more than 105 countries. Until May 2025, 350 cities were part of the network, with 133 (40%) in Europe, 32 (9.4%) in North America, 94 (28%) in Asia, 35 (10.6%) in South America, 13 (3.7%) in Oceania and 26 (7.7%) in Africa (Figure 1).

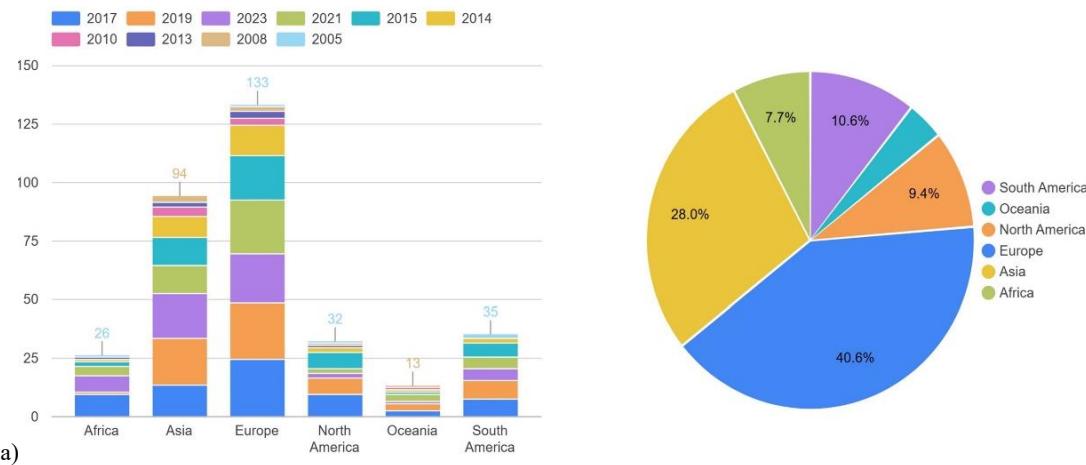


Figure 1. Distribution of UCCN categories based on a bar chart showing absolute values (a), with the continent represented in percentages in a pie chart (b) (Source: Elaborated by the author according to data from the official website of UCCN (UNESCO, 2025c)

By joining this network, cities pledge to prioritize creativity and cultural industries within their development frameworks and promote international collaboration (Rosi, 2014; UNESCO, 2025a). The initiative encompasses seven categories, each signifying a unique facet of a city's cultural and economic development. After two decades of implementation, a total of 66 cities have been designated Creative Cities in the domain of crafts and folk arts (18.09%), 49 in design (14%), 26 in film (7.4%), 56 in gastronomy (16%), 53 in literature (15.1%) and 25 in the arts (7.1%) (Figure 2). The bar chart illustrates that the majority of cities joined the network in 2017 and 2019. The first city to join this network was Edinburgh in the field of literature in 2004, and in 2023, 55 cities were designated as a creative city. The tree map reveals that the country most represented within the network is China, which boasts 18 creative cities in various fields. The Sankey chart indicates that, for example, in the field of music, most cities have joined in recent years.

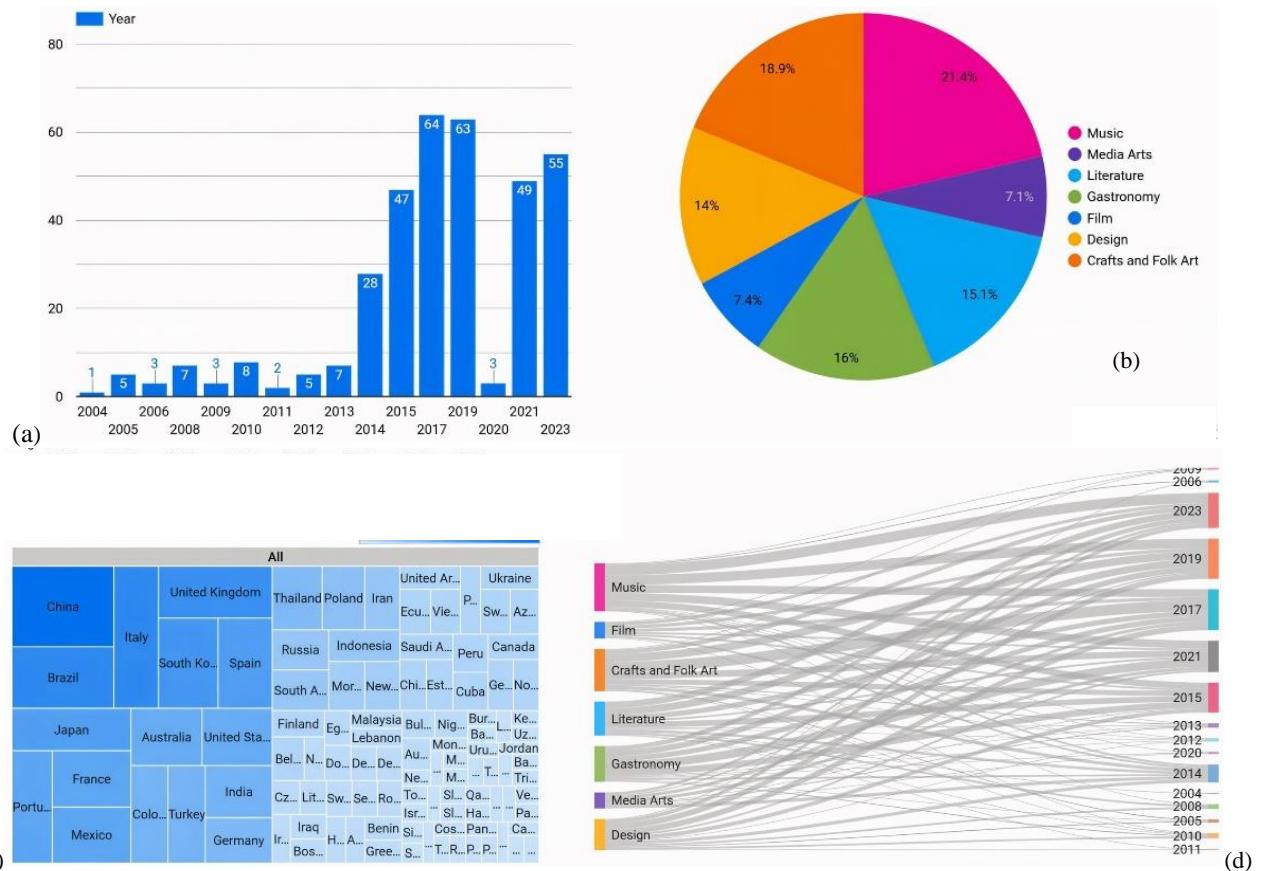


Figure 2. UCCN cities by, (a) year of designation, (b) categories, (c) Sankey chart categories and year, (d) most well-represented countries (Source: Elaborated by the author according to data from official website of UCCN (UNESCO, 2025c)

Regarding geographic diversity, the UCCN comprises cities from around the world, reflecting a diverse array of geographic, cultural, and economic contexts. Although the network is represented in all regions, certain regions exhibit a higher concentration of member cities than others (Figure 3).

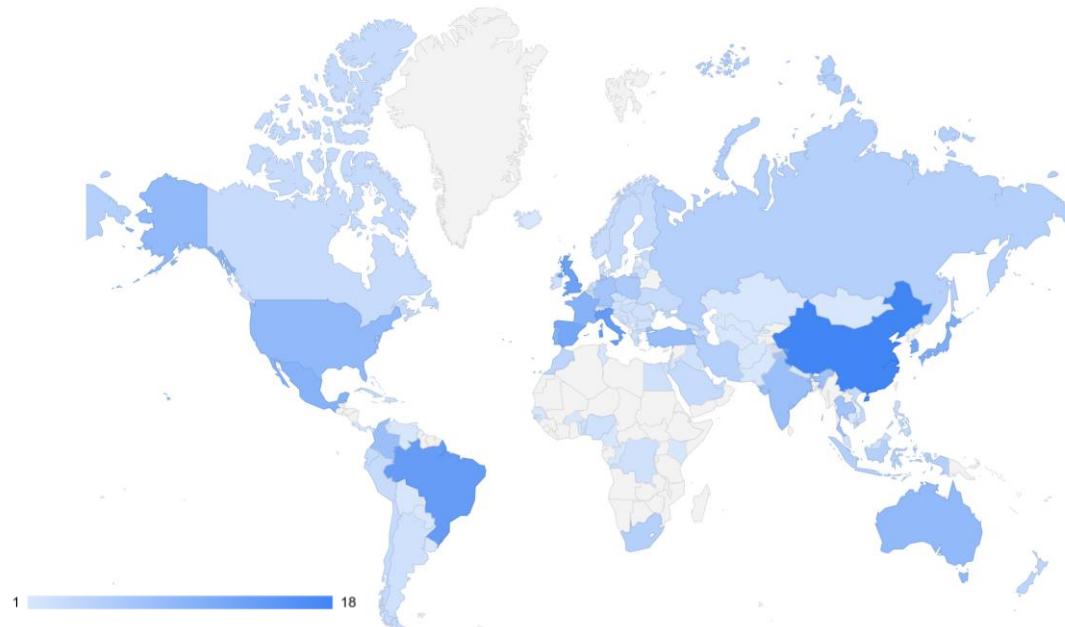


Figure 3. UCCN Geo Map based on country (Source: Elaborated by the author according to data from official website of UCCN; UNESCO, 2025c)

Data Collection

To become a member, cities must show their willingness, commitment, and ability to advance the mission of the network, presenting their cultural and creative assets in conjunction with a feasible four-year action plan that outlines specific projects or policies (UNESCO, 2025b). This stringent process guarantees that the member cities are dedicated to integrating creativity into their urban strategies, aligning with the overall global sustainability objectives. The reports delineate the principal initiatives undertaken and actions implemented, as well as articulate the strategic framework and objectives for the subsequent four-year period associated with the creative sector for which they received UNESCO's Creative Cities designation. These documents are publicly accessible and serve as a valuable repository of examples and a means of monitoring best practices in the development of their creative industries. Monitoring reports provide pertinent data that facilitate the acquisition of a comprehensive understanding of the trends and strategies used by creative cities (Arcos-Pumarola, 2019; Arcos-Pumarola et al., 2023). The data collection method involved systematic retrieval of the city activities implemented by UCCN, as documented in their reports. In May 2025, all accessible monitoring reports were downloaded for an initial review of the material, thereby facilitating the compilation of a comprehensive list of actions undertaken by member cities. Of the 350 member cities, 458 reports were available online; the newest members had not yet published their inaugural reports, while the more established members may have published multiple reports (Table 1).

Table 1. Information on accessible UCCN reports
(Source: Developed by the authors according to the periodic reports of UCCN; UNESCO, 2025d)

Category	Value/Description
Total UCCN Member Cities	350
Monitoring Reports Available	458
First Reports Published	189 (out of 350 members)
Second Reports Published	62 (out of 350 members)
Publish report in 2024	207 (out of 350 members)
Member cohort: Joined 2004-2014	
Total Cities in Cohort	69
Published First Report	67
Published Second Report	52
Publish report in 2024	59
Member cohort: Joined 2015-2023	
Total Cities in Cohort	281
Published First Report	122
Published Second Report	10
Publish report in 2024	148
Total Analyzed	458

Among the 458 reports, 189 represented the first report of UCCN members, and 62 cities had also published a second report. Of the 69 cities that joined in the first decade (2004-2014) in UCCN, 67 cities published their first report, 2 of them did not publish their reports, and 52 cities published their second report. It should be mentioned that these 59 cities published the reports for 2024. Of the 281 cities that joined the UCCN in the second decade (2015-2023), only 122 cities published their reports, only 10 cities published the second report, and 148 cities published a report for 2024 (Figure 4). Visualizations indicate a significant

increase in the number of reports in all creative fields in 2024. This widespread growth may be attributed to a variety of factors, including the implementation of new reporting guidelines, and increased engagement from member cities.

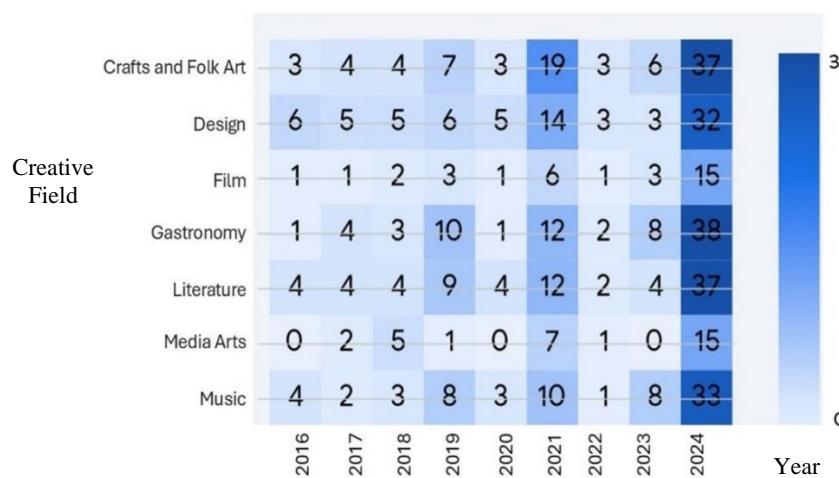


Figure 4. Number of UCCN reports per Creative Field and Year
 (Source: Developed by the author according to the periodic reports of UCCN; UNESCO, 2025d)

Data Analysis

Through a comprehensive review, several themes emerged that revealed commonalities in their fundamental characteristics. In the subsequent study phase, the 458 available 458 reports were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software (version 8) using a reflexive thematic approach based on the mission statement (Table 2) of the Creative Cities Network UNESCO creative cities network (Guimarães et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2025a). Reflexive thematic analysis constitutes a methodological approach that requires researchers to maintain an awareness of their philosophical sensibilities and theoretical assumptions, which must be consistently and transparently integrated throughout the analytic process and the dissemination of research findings (Braun et al., 2016). The coding process involves continual self-reflection, whereby researchers interrogate and critically evaluate the assumptions underlying their interpretations and coding of the data. Themes represent analytic outputs that are cultivated through rigorous intellectual engagement and signify substantial analytic effort. These themes emerge as creative and interpretive narratives about the data, generated at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical frameworks, analytical competencies, and the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Table 2. Mission statement (Objectives and Action Areas) (Source: Guimaraes et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2025a)

Category	Details
Objectives	Strengthen international cooperation between cities that have recognized creativity as a strategic factor of their sustainable development.
	Stimulate and improve initiatives led by member cities to make creativity an essential component of urban development, notably through partnerships involving the public and private sectors and civil society.
	Strengthen the creation, production, distribution and dissemination of cultural activities, goods, and services.
	Develop centers of creativity and innovation and broaden opportunities for creators and professionals in the cultural sector.
	Improve access and participation in cultural life, as well as the enjoyment of cultural goods and services, notably for marginalized or vulnerable groups and individuals.
	Fully integrate culture and creativity into local development strategies and plans.
Areas of Action	Sharing experiences, knowledge and best practices.
	Pilot projects, partnerships and initiatives associating the public and private sectors and civil society.
	Professional and artistic exchange programs and networks.
	Studies, research, and evaluations on the experience of Creative Cities.
	Policies and measures for sustainable urban development.
	Communication and awareness-raising activities.

RESULTS

Through thematic analysis, four primary themes were identified. From these themes, various codes were discerned, providing insights into creativity processes and their contributions to sustainable urban development. Additionally, these themes are aligned with the research objectives and research questions.

Local Implementation Strategies

UNESCO Creative Cities in various creative fields operationalize the UCCN objectives at the local level through a multifaceted array of initiatives, partnerships, and policies. These efforts are strategically designed to incorporate culture and creativity into urban development frameworks and to cultivate a robust creative ecosystem (Figure 5). Cities like Adelaide foster music participation, while Terrassa emphasizes the inclusion of women in the implementation of local SDGs. A significant trend is the establishment of formal coordination bodies, such as Joo Pessoa's "Coordination for Creative Economy," and explicit policy pillars, as seen in Santiago de Cali's ten-year economic development policy. The

UCCN designation acts as a powerful catalyst, transforming culture into a core component of urban planning and economic strategy, recognizing its link to sustainable urban development and inclusive participation. Stersund and Bucheon exemplify this full integration into regional and local development strategies.

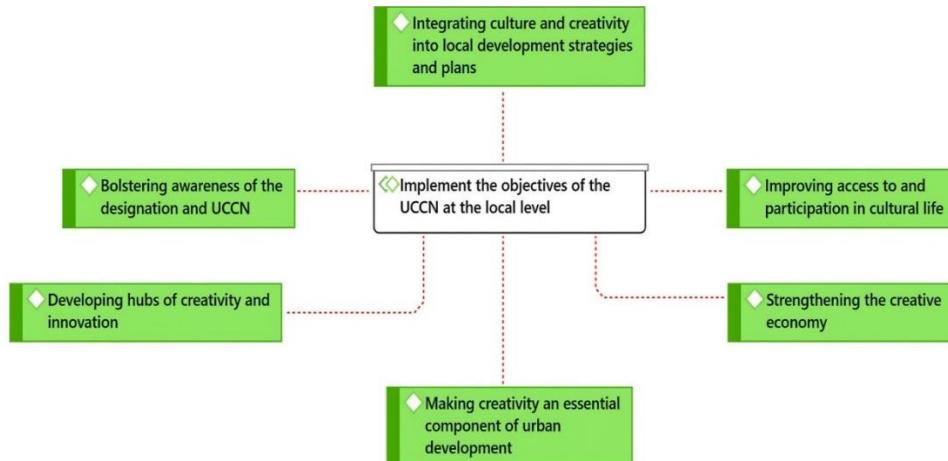


Figure 5. The most prominent codes associated with theme 1 (Source: Author)

Table 3 shows examples of cities integrating culture into local development plans. UCCN actively implements programs and partnerships to support their creative economies and support cultural entrepreneurs, fostering the production and enjoyment of cultural goods and services. Initiatives like Bendigo, Australia's "Gastronomy Residencies" during the pandemic, exemplify a proactive approach to providing direct financial support and building resilience within the creative sector. This strategic focus extends to developing comprehensive entrepreneurial ecosystems, as seen with Jingdezhen, China's cultural and creative base, and Dunedin, New Zealand's university partnerships. This signifies a maturation of urban cultural policy, where cities view cultural workers as vital economic factors that contribute to local prosperity and urban resilience. UCCN are dedicated to enhancing cultural access and participation for all, particularly marginalized groups and young people. Initiatives like Barcelona's reading programs target diverse demographics, including those with special needs, fostering inclusive literary environments. Baghdad's "Spring of Creativity Festival" promotes cross-sectoral interactions, while Edinburgh and Norwich support projects specifically for vulnerable individuals. Sapporo establishes cultural facilities to improve local access.

These cities also prioritize the establishment of physical and programmatic centers to promote creativity, innovation, and opportunities for cultural professionals. Examples include Barcelona, Bangkok, Bilbao (collaborating with universities), Bradford, Bucheon, Cape Town, Shanghai, and Santa Fe's "Siler Yard Arts + Creativity Center." Many cities integrate culture and creativity into education, offering diverse programs for students (at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels) and professionals. This goes beyond traditional arts, emphasizing "design thinking" to cultivate critical thinking and innovative problem-solving skills, as highlighted by Kortrijk, Belgium. UCCN hosts diverse cultural events, such as festivals and exhibitions, to promote local creativity, increase public participation, and revitalize urban spaces. Examples like Baghdad's "Spring of Creativity Festival" highlight cross-sectoral interactions, demonstrating how UCCN cities leverage events for economic stimulus, social benefits, and articulating a distinctive urban identity. Regarding the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusion, by building bridges and fostering mutual understanding, UCCN cities recognize the transformative power in creating cohesive, equitable and resilient urban environments, positioning cultural policy as a critical component of broader social policy. This proactive approach, exemplified by Edinburgh and Norwich, leverages culture to address social inequalities and celebrate urban diversity. In the context of Leveraging Digital Technologies, bidos, Portugal, analyzes digital impact, while Daegu, South Korea, operates a "Metaverse Creator Studio," showcasing a forward-thinking approach.

Table 3. Examples of Cities Integrating Culture into Local Development Plans
(Source: Developed by the author according to the periodic reports of UCCN; UNESCO, 2025d)

City	Country	Specific Initiative/Policy	Creative Field	Brief Description
Adelaide	Australia	Initiatives fostering lifelong appreciation for music	Music	Emphasizes education and participation in music participation.
Terrassa	Spain	Participatory strategies with emphasis on women's inclusion	Film	Recognizes the needs for the implementation of the SDG at local level.
Joo Pessoa	Brazil	Coordination for Creative Economy within City Hall	Crafts and Folk Art	Proposes public policy that integrates culture and creativity into local development.
Burgos	Spain	Incorporating cultural and creative elements into local development policies	Gastronomy	The significance of cultural and creative elements in policies is highlighted.
Santiago de Cali	Colombia	Ten-Year Economic Development Policy	Media Arts	Explicitly includes promotion of the Creative Economy as a fundamental pillar.
Stersund	Sweden	UCCN work as part of the regional development strategy	Gastronomy	Integrates UCCN objectives into broader regional planning.
Bucheon	South Korea	Full integration of culture and creativity into local development strategies	Literature	The aim is to embed culture and creativity comprehensively in urban planning.

Strategies for International Cooperation

UNESCO Creative Cities implements a range of strategic initiatives to enhance intercity and international collaboration within the UCCN. These initiatives are designed to align with the objectives of UCCN, which include strengthening international cooperation, stimulating creativity in urban development, and promoting cultural exchange (Figure 6).

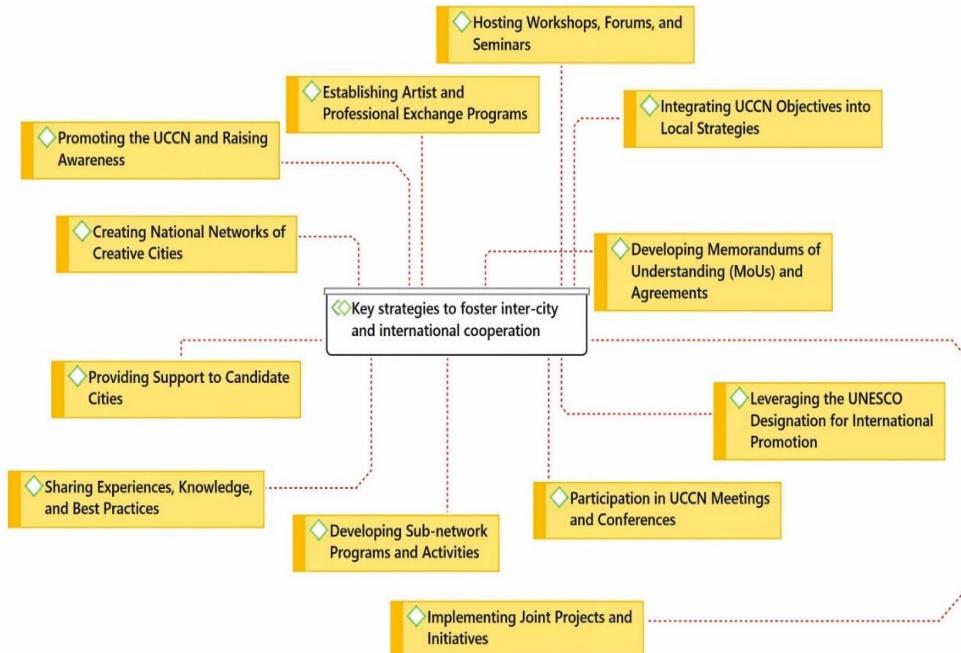


Figure 6. The most prominent codes associated with theme 2 (Source: Author)

Numerous Creative Cities actively participate in annual conferences and other gatherings organized by the UCCN to facilitate networking, exchange information, and explore potential collaborations. These cities organize and participate in residency programs and exchange visits for artists and cultural professionals. Barcelona, Spain, for instance, reserves sections of its literary residencies for authors from other Creative Cities of Literature. Ambon, Indonesia, collaborates with Jinju, South Korea's musician residency program. Similarly, Prague, Czech Republic, has initiated a residential program for foreign writers in partnership with local literary organizations. They collaborate to organize or participating in shared cultural events, such as festivals, biennials, and exhibitions, providing platforms for international exposure.

Examples include the Adelaide Guitar Festival, Australia, featuring artists from Seville, Spain and Asahikawa, Japan, and Fortaleza, Brazil, holding mutual poster exhibitions. Chengdu, China, sends chefs to festivals in other cities such as Melbourne, Australia, Yangzhou, China, and Macao, China. Jinju, South Korea, hosts the World Folk Arts Biennale and Traditional Crafts Biennale with the participation of numerous Creative Cities.

Furthermore, Llria, Spain, partnered with Daegu, South Korea, and London, UK, for LLUM FEST 2023. UCCN cities actively engage in collaborative projects like the "City to City" program, which supports international artistic collaborations, exemplified by Karlsruhe and Cali jointly developing and exhibiting artwork. Granada also initiates numerous international projects with other cities of Literature. This range of collaborations, from bilateral exchanges to network-wide initiatives, signifies a progression towards complex, networked co-creation within the UCCN. The network not only facilitates sharing, but the active production of new cultural content, amplifying individual city efforts on a global platform. Table 4 shows examples of cities participating in collaborative projects.

Table 4. Examples of Cities Engaged in Collaborative Projects
(Source: Developed by the author according to the periodic reports of UCCN (UNESCO, 2025d)

City (Lead/Participant)	Partner City/Network	Type of Collaboration	Creative Field(s)	Brief Description
Barcelona	Other Creative Cities of Literature	Artist Residencies	Literature	Reserve sections of literary residencies for authors from other network cities.
Ambon	Jinju	Musician Residency Program	Music, Crafts & Folk Arts	Collaborates on a musician residency program.
Prague	Local literary organizations	Residential Program	Literature	Initiated a residential program for foreign writers.
Adelaide	Seville	Joint Festival Participation	Music	The Adelaide Guitar Festival features artists from Seville.
Asahikawa	Fortaleza	Mutual Exhibitions	Design	Mutual poster exhibitions.
Chengdu	Melbourne, Yangzhou, Macao	Joint Festival Participation	Gastronomy	Sends chefs to festivals in other cities.
Jinju	Numerous Creative Cities	Hosted Biennale	Crafts & Folk Arts	Hosts the World Folk Art Biennale and Traditional Crafts Biennale.
Llria	Daegu, London	Joint Event	Not specified	Partnered for LLUM FEST 2023.

Karlsruhe	Cali	Joint Artwork Development	Media Arts	Jointly developed and exhibited artwork through the "City to City" project.
Granada	Other Cities of Literature	International Projects	Literature	Initiated numerous international projects in partnership.
Media Arts Cluster	Diverse media arts cities	"CITY TO CITY" initiative	Media Arts	Facilitates pairing artists for co-creation.

Cities establish diverse formal and informal networks, often based on geography or creative field, to strengthen cooperation and facilitate knowledge exchange. Examples include the Victorian, Brazilian (Ecriativa), Spanish, and Nordic-Baltic networks, along with thematic groups like the Italian Gastronomy District. Cities also forge focused bilateral partnerships through twinning agreements or Memoranda of Understanding, such as Bucheon's quadrilateral MoU and Ghent's agreement with Kanazawa. This multi-scalar approach signifies a maturing UCCN ecosystem where cities proactively self-organize. Creative cities form diverse networks, both formal and informal, based on geography or creative field, to strengthen ties and cooperation. Examples include the Victorian Creative Cities Network in Australia, the Brazilian Network of UNESCO Creative Cities (Ecriativa), the Spanish Association of UNESCO Creative Cities, and the newly initiated Nordic-Baltic Network. The District of Creative Cities for Gastronomy also represents a thematic network.

Cities also establish twinning agreements or Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with specific cities for focused cooperation. For example, Bucheon, South Korea, has entered a quadrilateral MoU with Angoulême, France, and other organizations. Ghent, Belgium, has established an MoU with Kanazawa, Japan, recognized as a UCCN of Crafts and Folk Art. Additionally, the Pesaro Rossini Opera Festival, Italy, has formalized a collaboration agreement with Toronto City Opera, Canada. Bologna, Italy, promoted and led the coordination of Italian creative cities of the UNESCO, while Terrassa, Spain, participated in meetings that brought together creative cities in Spain. Regular meetings, ranging from annual UCCN conferences (which all members are committed to attending) and subnetwork meetings to city-hosted conferences on specific themes, are crucial for exchanging ideas, sharing best practices, and planning future collaborations. Changsha, China, is notably involved in the UCCN Annual Conferences and participates in exchanges with other UCCN members.

Bergamo, Italy, for example, organizes an annual International Summit of Creative Cities to strengthen bonds and share experiences. Kanazawa, Japan, hosted the UCCN of Crafts and Folk Art Sub-Network Meeting. Icheon, South Korea, planned to host the "Second International Creative Cities Workshop" to reinforce solidarity between craft cities, and Gwangju, South Korea, held the 2018 UNESCO Media Arts Forum to discuss sustainable cities and society. Macao, China, hosted a meeting with creative cities in China to exchange ideas and best practices. Some established creative cities offer guidance and support to cities applying to join the network; Bologna, Italy, hosted meetings with cities who wanted to become UCCN members to help them understand the objectives and prepare their documents. Bologna's initiative to guide prospective members highlights a mentoring role within the network, demonstrating a commitment to its growth and sustainability. The sharing of experiences, ideas, and resources is a fundamental aspect of UCCN cooperation.

This happens through conferences, forums, dedicated platforms, and collaborative projects. Jinju, South Korea, publishes an International Journal of Crafts and Folk Arts to share forum results and UCCN member practices. Sukhothai, Thailand, collaborated with other Thai creative cities, learning, and sharing resources.

Asahikawa, Japan, has a Support Design City E-Library. Ljubljana, Slovenia, conducted online video conferences to exchange experiences on supporting the cultural sector during crises. Publishing a journal or establishing an electronic library represents a deliberate effort to curate and disseminate best practices systematically, making knowledge accessible beyond immediate conference attendees. Ljubljana's use of online conferences for crisis support highlights the network's adaptability and responsiveness to emerging challenges, leveraging digital tools for real-time knowledge exchange.

Many collaborative efforts are specifically designed to provide local artists and cultural professionals with international exposure, networking opportunities, and access to new markets. Shenzhen, China, 's Design Award for Young Talents, for instance, is an international competition for designers from UCCN cities aimed at encouraging exchange and promoting creative thinking. Montreal, Canada, has invested in initiatives to promote the reach and reputation of its designers internationally within the UCCN. Bergen, Norway, sees UNESCO and gastronomy as the doors that open to international collaboration. Some cities also highlight collaborations that involve multiple creative fields or different sectors within urban development, recognizing the interconnectedness of creativity and sustainable development. For example, Bergamo, Italy's planned initiative involves a joint governance strategy for cities with multiple UNESCO titles (World Heritage, Creative City, Intangible Heritage). Braga, Portugal, launched a joint open call combining Media Arts and Gastronomy with Santa Maria da Feira. Braga's cross-cluster initiative demonstrates an innovative approach to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, recognizing that creative fields can mutually enrich each other and generate novel outcomes.

Communication and Awareness Strategies

UNESCO Creative Cities employs a multifaceted approach to communication and awareness raising regarding its designation and the UCCN objectives. These strategies are designed to inform diverse audiences, including local citizens, stakeholders, national and international partners, and potential network members (Figure 7). Numerous cities actively engage with local, regional, and national media to increase awareness. This engagement includes promoting media coverage of their initiatives and fostering relationships with media outlets. Certain cities organize awareness days to highlight their participation in the UCCN and facilitate interviews with artists involved in UCCN-related activities.

Cities take advantage of a wide array of platforms to reach different audiences and disseminate information. Yamagata, Japan, for instance, uses official brochures to convey the significance and benefits of membership of the UCCN. Cities extensively utilize their websites and social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, and X) as primary channels to

spread information, regularly updating content and increase follower engagement. Some cities are planning to make their dedicated websites more interactive to facilitate online engagement. Austin, USA, intends to hire a social media manager to increase awareness of its initiatives. Beyond digital platforms, traditional media such as local newspapers, radio stations, and television channels are used, often in collaboration with media partners. Public spaces are also used, with notices, posters, billboards, and digital advertising screens in areas like libraries, community centers, subways, and buses used to inform the public, sometimes with signage that includes QR codes. This strategic shift towards a "digital-first" approach, emphasizing real-time updates and interactivity, signifies an adaptation to contemporary communication landscapes.

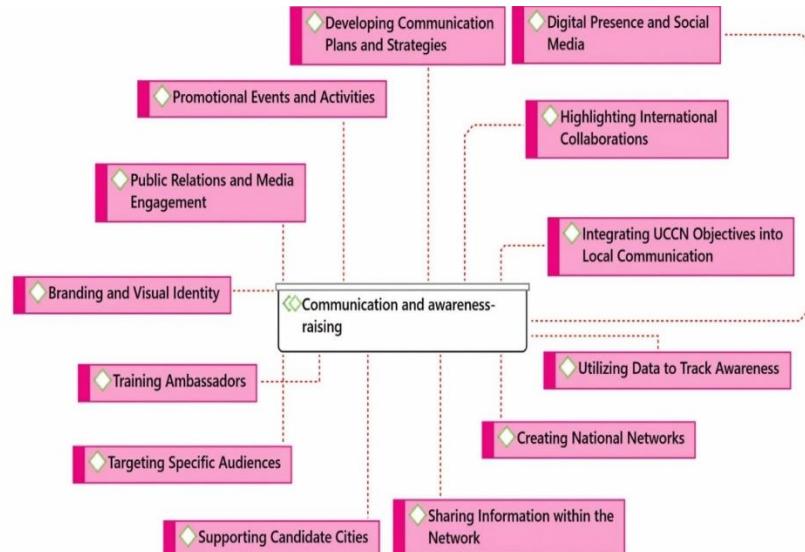


Figure 7. The most prominent codes associated with theme 3 (Source: Author)

Although traditional channels retain relevance, the digital focus aims at broader reach and deeper engagement, moving beyond one-way information dissemination. Table 5 shows examples of city communication channels & content.

Many cities leverage culture and creativity to raise awareness of climate change and promote sustainable practices through exhibitions, festivals, public art, workshops, and educational materials. Austin, USA, for example, aims to expand its SXSW UNESCO Media Arts Exhibition to enhance local awareness, while Hamamatsu, Japan, plans to address the significance of UCCN at both local and external events. Communication efforts are often tailored to specific audiences, including local residents, artists and creative professionals, youth and students, tourists, and various stakeholders (government, partners, businesses, civil society). Bucheon, South Korea, intends to develop public relations strategies tailored to various demographic groups, including citizens, writers, and organizations. Similarly, Prague, Czech Republic, directs its communication initiatives towards partners, both foreign and Czech authors, as well as city residents and tourists. These communication efforts frequently emphasize collaborations with other cities of the UCCN and the value of the international network. Terrassa, Spain, for example, participates in collaborative meetings with other creative cities in Spain to increase awareness of these initiatives.

The UCCN in Australia aims to strengthen its collective offerings and enhance support for the network. Austin, USA, adopted a best practice derived from other US UNESCO Creative Cities, aimed at training artists and organizations to serve as ambassadors for the city and the Network. Training "ambassadors for the city and the network" is a particularly innovative approach, decentralizing communication efforts and creating a ripple effect of awareness. The creation and dissemination of a cohesive visual identity, including logos and visually appealing materials, constitute a prevalent strategy for enhancing the city's brand as a UNESCO Creative City. Cultural partners are frequently encouraged to incorporate the logo "City – UNESCO City of (Field)" into their promotional materials to improve public awareness. The emphasis on a cohesive visual identity and the widespread use of the 'City - UNESCO City of (Field)' logo signifies a deliberate effort to build strong brand recognition for the individual city's designation and, by extension, for the UCCN itself.

Table 5. Examples of Cities' Communication Channels & Content
 (Source: Developed by the author according to the periodic reports of UCCN; UNESCO, 2025d)

City	Key Communication Channels Used	Specific Content Promoted	Key Audience(s) Targeted
Yamagata	Official brochures	Significance and benefits of UCCN membership	General public, stakeholders
Austin	Social networks (planning manager), SXSW Exhibition	UCCN initiatives, Media Arts, city/network ambassadorship	Local citizens, artists, organizations
Bucheon	Public relations strategies	UCCN objectives, initiatives	Citizens, writers, organizations
Prague	Communication initiatives	UCCN objectives, initiatives	Partners, foreign/Czech authors, city residents, tourists
Hamamatsu	Local and external events	Significance of UCCN	Local and external audiences
Guadalajara	UCCN Media Arts website	Communication strategies, best practices	UCCN Media Arts members
Bologna	Meetings with applicant cities	UCCN objectives, application process	Prospective UCCN members
Terrassa	Collaborative Meetings with Spanish creative cities	Awareness of UCCN initiatives	Other creative cities in Spain

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research

UNESCO Creative Cities uses a variety of mechanisms to monitor, evaluation, and investigate their activities and the impacts associated with the designation of UCCN (Figure 8). A fundamental mechanism involves the periodic submission of membership monitoring reports. These documents provide comprehensive accounts of the activities, initiatives, and contributions of a city to the UCCN objectives, typically covering a four-year period. They serve as a formal means for cities to record their effective implementation of the Network's objectives and to evaluate the impact of activities associated with their designation. Bologna, Italy, foresees future initiatives to fully measure the impact of the "UNESCO Creative City" nomination, noting that the issue of impact indicators and the assessment of the art, culture, and creative sector is a necessary step. Bologna also intends to initiate a survey aimed at developing methods, indicators, and standardized criteria for assessing the economic and social impact of the UNESCO nomination and associated initiatives at the local level, particularly within the music industry, and plans to disseminate these findings among other Creative Cities of Music.

Frutillar, Chile, has conducted evaluations of projects within the creative city agenda; however, comprehensive impact assessments that examine the initiatives collectively have not yet been carried out.



Figure 8. The most prominent codes associated with theme 4 (Source: Author)

Many cities invest in Research and Development (R&D) to nurture innovation and new technologies in the cultural sector. Beijing, China's International Center for Creativity and Sustainable Development, for instance, is tasked with conducting research on the creative economy and exploring the interconnections between culture, creativity, and sustainable development. Isfahan, Iran, established a Creativity and Innovation Center after its accession to the network, responsible for studying, identifying, introducing and contributing to policymaking on the concepts of creative cities. Similarly, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, initiated a program focused on the research and revitalization of local traditional musical instruments and songbooks shortly after receiving its designation. Bogotá, Colombia, launched an initiative in 2015 to measure the city's music economy, drawing on the experiences of Australian cities, which culminated in the development of a "City Satellite Account for Culture" aimed at providing data for monitoring the cultural sector's economic performance. Ambon, Indonesia, conducts extensive research with universities focusing on the economic influence of being a City of Music, GIS analysis of tourist attractions, cultural diplomacy, urban spatial planning, vegetation analysis for instrument materials, carbon emissions, and the economic value of music performances.

Bangkok, Thailand, uses the Bangkok City Lab for research and studies that support city development and policy decision-making. Braga, Portugal, collaborates with universities and research centers on R&D focusing on the intersection of technology and art, including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI). Cebu City, Philippines, invests in R&D through partnerships with tech companies for digital solutions and performs cultural data mapping. Fortaleza, Brazil, promotes R&D through the CITILAB program, supporting innovative projects for urban conditions. Kanazawa, Japan, has research institutes for specific crafts and collaborates with higher education on innovative technologies based on traditional techniques. Several cities actively conduct data analysis and disseminate results to support the cultural and creative sectors, informing policy, and promoting transparency.

Areguá, Paraguay, for example, uses a census of Artisans to gather and disseminate relevant qualitative and quantitative information for project development. Asahikawa, Japan, conducts data analyzes and disseminates results through the Asahikawa Creative City Promotion Council, partly through the Design City E-Library. Baguio City, Philippines, performed creative industry mapping and cultural mapping, storing data in an online platform, and plans an e-commerce website that will provide access to marketing data. Ballarat, Australia, conducts an annual survey of the creative sector to understand confidence, economic viability, and mobility, which guides its sector development programs. Bogotá, Colombia, operates the Observatory and Management of Cultural Knowledge, which measures cultural events, monitors citizen perceptions, and analyzes ticket data, also disseminating studies like the Cultural and Creative Economy Satellite Account. Joo Pessoa, Brazil, uses platforms such as Mapas Culturais, conducts surveys, and plans a Creative Economy Observatory to collect and disseminate information. Katowice, Poland, uses a new digital reporting system for cultural institutions that allows data analyses and makes reports public. Lahore, Pakistan, conducts assessments, surveys and impact reports, using a data-driven approach to inform policies. Salvador, Brazil, has mapped its creative ecosystem to identify actors, resources, spaces,

initiatives, and policies. Santiago de Cali, Colombia, established the Creative and Cultural Economy Observatory, which provides information, conducts research, develops knowledge, and facilitates information exchange and collaboration between stakeholders. Table 6 shows examples of cities investing in R&D and data analysis. The widespread adoption of data collection and analysis, as seen in Baguio's online platform, Bogotá's Observatory, and Katowice's digital reporting, indicates a strong move towards building "strategic intelligence" for the cultural and creative sectors. These efforts go beyond simple data collection, to actively using data to inform policy, understand sector dynamics, and even facilitate market access. Making reports public also signals a commitment to transparency and public accountability. The significant number of cities reporting "lack of data" or no analysis highlights a critical challenge and a disparity in data governance capabilities across the network.

Table 6. Examples of Cities Investing in R&D and Data Analysis
(Source: Developed by the author according to the periodic reports of UCCN (UNESCO, 2025d)

City	Type of R&D/Data Analysis Initiative	Key Focus Areas	Outcome/Purpose
Beijing	International Center for Creativity and Sustainable Development	Creative economy, culture-creativity-SDG interconnections	Conducts research to inform policy making.
Isfahan	Creativity and Innovation Center	Creative cities concepts, policymaking contribution	Studies and identifies concepts, contributes to policymaking.
Idanha-a-Nova	Research and revitalization program	Local traditional musical instruments and songbooks	Revitalization of cultural heritage through research.
Bogotá	Initiative to measure music economy, City Satellite Account for Culture with Australian cities (experience sharing)	Music economy, cultural sector economic performance	Provides data for monitoring cultural sector economic performance.
Ambon	Extensive research with universities	Economic influence of the City of Music, GIS, cultural diplomacy, urban planning, carbon emissions, music economic value	Comprehensive understanding of cultural impact.
Bangkok	Bangkok City Lab	City development, policy decision-making, public policy testing	Supports research and studies for urban policy.
Braga	R&D Collaborations with Universities, research centers	Technology and art (AR, VR, AI)	Nurtures innovation at the intersection of technology and art.
Cebu City	R&D through tech partnerships, cultural data mapping with Tech companies	Digital solutions, cultural data mapping	Lays the groundwork for targeted R&D programs.
Fortaleza	CITILAB Program	Innovative projects for urban conditions	Support innovation for urban development.
Kanazawa	Research institutes for specific crafts with Higher education	Innovative technologies based on traditional techniques	Foster innovation in traditional crafts.
Areguá	Census of Artisans	Qualitative and quantitative information for project development	Gather data for project planning.
Asahikawa	Data Analysis and dissemination (Asahikawa Creative City Promotion Council)	Design city promotion	Disseminates results via E-Library.
Baguio City	Creative industry mapping, cultural mapping	Creative industry data, marketing data	Stores data online, plans e-Commerce for marketing access.
Ballarat	Annual survey of creative sector	Confidence, economic viability, and mobility of creative sector	Guides sector development programs.
João Pessoa	Mapas Culturais, surveys, Creative Economy Observatory	Creative ecosystem information	Collects and disseminates information.
Katowice	Digital reporting system, diagnosis study	Cultural institutions data, digital aspects of cultural field	Facilitates data analysis and public reports.
Lahore	Assessments, surveys, impact reports (WCLA)	Cultural resources, digital engagement	Uses a data-driven approach to inform policies.
Salvador	Creative ecosystem mapping	Actors, resources, spaces, initiatives, policies	Identifies growth opportunities and challenges.
Santiago de Cali	Creative and Cultural Economy Observatory with Stakeholders	Information, research, knowledge, information exchange	Provides data, facilitates collaboration.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of UNESCO Creative Cities' strategies for local implementation, international cooperation, communication, and monitoring/evaluation reveals a dynamic and evolving network committed to leveraging culture and creativity for sustainable urban development (Rodrigues & Franco, 2018; UCLG Committee on Culture, 2018; UNESCO, 2016). The consistent reiteration of this fundamental principle among member cities, from Adelaide to York, including global urban centers such as Shanghai and smaller communities like Idanha-a-Nova, highlights the importance and perceived efficacy of this approach. We observe the emergence of a comprehensive understanding in which cultural assets, creative industries, and artistic expression are recognized as essential drivers of progress across multiple dimensions of sustainability, specifically economic, social, environmental, and cultural sustainability (Luerdi, 2023; Pearson & Pearson, 2017; Wang et al., 2024). A significant number of cities explicitly articulate initiatives that aim to embed culture and creativity within their core strategies, plans, and policies. This signals a maturation of cultural policy toward greater accountability, and strategic intelligence (Betlej & Kacerauskas, 2021). The development of dedicated research centers, cultural observatories and the pursuit of standardized impact indicators reflect a commitment to evidence-based decision making, aiming to quantify the tangible benefits of cultural investment and

the UCCN designation itself (Yilmaz et al., 2020). On the other hand, the designation UCCN serves as a powerful catalyst, driving the strategic institutionalization of culture and creativity within the core urban governance and long-term development plans (Khoo, 2022). Cities are progressively moving beyond isolated cultural projects to establish systemic policy frameworks, evident in the creation of dedicated offices, explicit policy pillars within economic strategies, and direct alignment with global sustainable development goals. This profound change underscores a deepening recognition of culture as an indispensable component of urban planning and economic strategy, rather than a peripheral amenity (Moldoveanu & Franc, 2014).

The network serves as a crucial platform for intercity learning and collaboration, a benefit explicitly acknowledged by cities (Sasaki, 2016; Pedrini et al., 2025). This collaborative aspect is essential for the dissemination of innovative practices, the exchange of solutions to common challenges -such as climate change, as noted by Graz - and the cultivation of collective momentum. In an increasingly interconnected world facing shared global challenges, city-to-city diplomacy and knowledge transfer, supported by a collective focus on creativity and sustainability, represent a significant form of soft power and practical problem solving (Selada et al., 2012; Wiktor-Mach & Radwaski, 2014). The emergence of formal regional and national networks, along with the emphasis on network-wide initiatives and structured knowledge transfer mechanisms, demonstrates a sophisticated approach to collective learning and the utilization of shared resources. This collaborative environment significantly increases international visibility and opportunities for local creative professionals, positioning the UCCN as a vital platform for cultural diplomacy and the internationalization of creative talent (Figure 9).

This structured approach maximizes impact and fosters deep and sustainable partnerships, effectively expanding the market reach for all involved (Stefanidou et al., 2024). Cities employ increasingly sophisticated, multi-platform, and targeted communication strategies. These efforts extend beyond mere promotion to articulate the UCCN's value proposition, engage diverse audiences (from local residents to international tourists and artists), and leverage the network's collective prestige for both local legitimacy and global recognition. The strategic use of digital channels, coupled with personalized messaging, underscores a commitment to fostering community ownership and ensuring the long-term relevance of UCCN initiatives. Various cities prioritize increasing citizen and urban managers about the importance of culture and creativity in sustainable development (Kajzer Mitchell & Walinga, 2017). Initiatives such as Seoul's upcycling workshops aimed at promoting awareness of the SDGs, Heidelberg's commitment to Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2016), and Tsuruoka's focus on ESD illustrate the critical importance of cultivating a culture of sustainability (Kovait et al., 2022) and equipping stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and skills (UNESCO, 2025c).

This educational dimension is vital to ensure sustained commitment and widespread participation (Stefanidou et al., 2024). This illustrates a nuanced understanding that various creative domains possess distinct capacities to address specific dimensions (Selada et al., 2012) of the sustainability challenge, encompassing environmental resilience (for example, green design, sustainable food systems), as well as social inclusion and economic diversification (UNCTAD, 2019).



Figure 9. The UCCN Collaboration Pathway

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper has presented a comprehensive review of the mechanisms through which the UCCN has actively promoted creativity as a catalyst for sustainable urban development over the past two decades. The analysis demonstrates that the UCCN's success is a direct result of effective "local implementation strategies", which empower member cities to adapt global principles to their specific cultural and economic contexts. Furthermore, this paper emphasizes the critical significance of "strategies for international cooperation", illustrating how the network's collaborative platform facilitates essential knowledge exchange and the dissemination of best practices. Additionally, the study highlights the role of robust "communication and awareness strategies" in fostering civic engagement and aligning diverse stakeholders. Although numerous cities of this network exhibit sophisticated strategies in research and development, as well as data analytics, there exist pronounced differences in the maturity of these frameworks across the network. A substantial number of cities have reported a lack of information or insufficient investment in research, indicating an uneven distribution of capabilities. This presents a critical opportunity for the UCCN to facilitate targeted capacity-building and knowledge transfer programs, ensuring that all members can effectively leverage research for strategic planning and innovation, thus mitigating the potential 'information rich / information poor' divide.

In examining the reconciliation of policy and practice, the reports highlight instances in which ambitious policy objectives, such as comprehensive impact measurement, remain in the nascent phases of implementation. This underscores the need for sustained attention to the operationalization of these aspirations, necessitating the translation of strategic objectives into quantifiable outcomes and consistent performance across all member cities. In light of the ongoing digital transformation across various sectors, the use of digital tools for communication is becoming increasingly prevalent. However, the comprehensive potential of these tools to enhance innovation, improve accessibility, and generate data-driven insights in alignment with the objectives of the UCCN remains a developing opportunity. Further research and investment in advanced digital solutions have the potential to facilitate new modalities of creative production, consumption, and engagement. Furthermore, to maintain momentum and demonstrate long-term value, UCCN faces the critical challenge of maintaining the initial impetus generated by its designation while illustrating measurable and sustained contributions to

urban sustainability and quality of life. This endeavor requires continuous adaptation, innovation, and a proactive strategy to validate the enduring significance of culture and creativity in the treatment of complex urban challenges.

Implications for Urban Theory and Practice: The recurring pattern identified among the cities within the UCCN has substantial implications for the conceptualization and management of urban environments.

The Cultural Turn Solidified: This evidence robustly reinforces the "cultural turn" within urban studies and planning (Scott, 2014). It illustrates that culture is increasingly perceived not only as a byproduct of economic activity or as a phenomenon restricted to particular districts, but rather as a fundamental dimension intricately interwoven with the economic, social, and environmental of urban areas (Qi, 2025; G. F. Rodrigues et al., 2024). The concept of a creative city extends beyond the simple attraction of talent or branding; it increasingly encompasses the strategic use of intrinsic cultural resources and creative processes to effectively address complex urban challenges, including sustainability-related issues (Landry, 2012).

Operationalizing Sustainability through Creativity The examples provided illustrate the significant ways in which creativity contributes to the achievement of sustainability goals. Design thinking has the potential to produce more resource-efficient products, services, and urban environments (Manzini & Coad, 2015; O'Connor & Kong, 2009; Pratt, 2008; Tay, 2004). Cultural activities serve to improve social cohesion, facilitate intercultural dialogue, and promote community engagement, all of which are essential components of social sustainability (Duxbury, 2021; Ratiu, 2013). Furthermore, creative industries can offer diverse, locally rooted economic opportunities, thus bolstering economic resilience (Arcos-Pumarola, 2019; Stefanidou et al., 2024). Narrative forms, such as literature and film, can effectively raise awareness of environmental challenges and encourage behavioral transformation. Additionally, gastronomy can advocate for sustainable food systems. In summary, creativity equips individuals and communities with the necessary tools and processes for innovation, adaptation, and participation, which are crucial to successfully navigating the transition toward sustainability.

Rethinking Governance and Planning: Integration of creativity requires the development of innovative governance models that are characterized by collaboration, cross-sectoral engagement, and adaptability (Khoo, 2022; O'Connor & Kong, 2009; Wang et al., 2024; Pedrini et al., 2025). This paradigm shift requires the dismantling of traditional departmental silos, such as those that exist between the planning, economic development, culture and environmental sectors and the cultivation of partnerships among public institutions, private enterprises, cultural organizations, and community groups (Ratiu, 2013; UCLG Committee on Culture, 2018). Cities such as Lyon, noted for its cultural policies that promote localized solutions, and Saint-Étienne, which employs design management in its public policy initiatives, exemplify these emerging governance frameworks (UNESCO, 2025c).

Marketing and Branding Strategies: Cities are significantly improving their digital footprint to promote cultural initiatives, events, and assets. A primary strategy involves establishing dedicated websites and leveraging social media platforms. For instance, Fortaleza uses Instagram and its website, while Burgos is improving its website and actively using its Facebook page. Hannover integrates various online platforms, including cultural program websites and the city council's social media. Additionally, cities are creating online marketplaces to boost local creative economies, as seen with Baguio City's planned e-commerce site for creatives and Cape Town's support. Digitalization extends to preserving and sharing cultural heritage through digital archives, virtual museums, and online exhibitions, exemplified by Bangkok's digital archives and Belo Horizonte's virtual museum circuits and YouTube channel. Social networks are also widely used for direct promotion and engagement, with cities such as Viljandi and Zahlé actively using these channels. Beyond establishing an online presence, cities are strategically developing their branding and employing various communication channels. This includes adopting heritage crafts as city brands, creating specific brands for initiatives like Dénia's Bancalet for agri-food products, and reinforcing overall creative city branding, as Idanha-a-Nova is doing. Communication efforts involve engaging with various media outlets, launching targeted campaigns, and implementing integrated communication strategies across different city departments and platforms, as demonstrated by Curitiba and Hannover. Marketing activities focus on promoting community assets to tourists, developing comprehensive marketing plans, and participating in national and international events. Crucially, cities are investing in digital transformation by providing training in digital skills and marketing to creatives and the public, offering consultation and support to businesses, and providing grants for digital adoption.

Navigating the Future Deeper Integration

The evidence presented by the UCCN strongly indicates that the integration of creativity into sustainable urban development strategies has transitioned from a peripheral experiment to an emerging global standard. For professionals and scholars in city and regional management, advancing this agenda requires a deeper understanding and a more sophisticated application of these methodologies. Progress in this domain requires comprehensive comparative case studies that extend beyond mere descriptive accounts to critically examine the mechanisms, impacts, and potential trade-offs involved. It is essential to develop robust mixed methods evaluation frameworks capable of capturing both tangible environmental and economic metrics, alongside intangible outcomes such as cultural vitality and social well-being. Crucially, future initiatives must be guided by a robust commitment to equity and ongoing critical reflection. It is essential to proactively address the potential equity challenges inherent in creative city strategies by designing initiatives that are intentionally inclusive, demonstrably benefit diverse populations, actively support grassroots creativity, and implement measures to mitigate displacement pressures often associated with urban regeneration. In this context, cultural policy must be explicitly conceived and executed as a tool to advance the objectives of social justice. Furthermore, both researchers and practitioners need to adopt a critical perspective, consistently interrogating

who ultimately benefits from these strategies. Conversely, how can unintended negative consequences, whether social, economic, or environmental, be anticipated and mitigated in a manner that is both sustainable and effective?

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