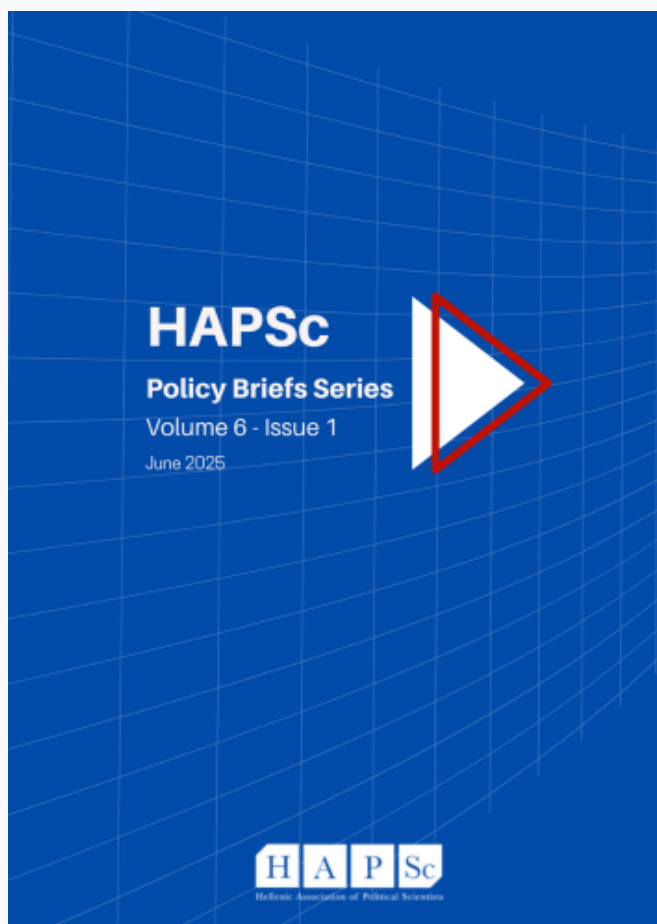


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Culture and Resilience in Dialogue: Achieving the SDGs through Cultural Diversity - A Case Study of El Sistema Greece¹

Eirini Vakalopoulou²

Abstract

El Sistema Greece (ESG) is a music education initiative aimed at fostering social inclusion by providing access to music education for all youth, including children from marginalized communities. Inspired by Venezuela's original El Sistema, ESG was established in Greece in 2016 with the mission of promoting educational and social inclusion through musical engagement. El Sistema Greece Youth Choir, as the program's primary vocal ensemble, plays a central role in creating a supportive and safe environment for the personal and artistic development of its members. In close collaboration with the El Sistema Greece Youth Orchestra - founded in November 2017 and offering music training to individuals aged 10 to 26 - ESG extends its reach through joint performances and partnerships with other institutions. These collaborations aim to broaden access to structured music education and cultivate creative expression, while simultaneously promoting social equity. This research, conducted between November 2024 and January 2025, adopts a case study approach to examine the intercultural music program of ESG. The primary research questions investigate the program's impact on participants' social inclusion, skills development, and self-esteem, and further explore how music can contribute to sustainability and social cohesion in multicultural settings. The study analyzes ESG's alignment with seven United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs): Good health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4.7), gender equality (SDG 5), reduced inequalities (SDG 10.2), safeguarding of cultural heritage (SDG 11.4), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17).

Keywords: El Sistema; Sustainability; Cultural Resilience; Education; Greece.

Introduction

The contemporary world is grappling with a range of compounding crises (including armed conflicts, environmental disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic) that have significantly hindered progress toward achieving quality education and several other SDGs, such as good health and well-being, gender equality, peaceful and inclusive societies. These urgent global challenges underscore the critical need for proactive strategies and inclusive policy frameworks that prioritize equality, equitable access to quality education, and the fostering of intercultural dialogue in increasingly diverse societies. Equally essential is the cultivation of cultural humility and the capacity to live harmoniously with “the other.”

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The urgency of these issues is heightened by rising migration, displacement, and cultural diversity, all of which demand stronger intercultural competence and inclusive governance. Climate change further compounds these challenges by intensifying extreme weather events, undermining agricultural productivity, and triggering food insecurity and forced displacement, especially in vulnerable regions such as Nigeria and Pakistan. In parallel, the degradation of marine ecosystems - including coral reef loss and the depletion of marine resources - threatens the livelihoods of coastal communities reliant on fishing and tourism, exacerbating poverty, driving migration, and fueling social instability (Groundswell, 2018; Alevizos et al., 2024).

Armed conflict also severely undermines SDG progress. The war in Ukraine, for example, has had profound impacts on multiple fronts: targeted attacks on healthcare infrastructure have worsened physical and mental health outcomes, particularly for children; the destruction of schools and unsafe learning environments have disrupted education; and the displacement of populations has overwhelmed host countries' education and health systems. Women and girls, in particular, face heightened risks of gender-based violence and limited access to essential services. These consequences illustrate how conflict undermines development and highlight the necessity of international cooperation, human rights protection, and peacebuilding efforts to sustain progress (UNU MERIT, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic, marked by widespread lockdowns and exacerbated by existing social inequalities, has dramatically reshaped the global education landscape. While the shift to remote learning helped sustain educational continuity, it also deepened disparities - especially for girls in low-income, rural settings - who often faced limited access to digital infrastructure and increased domestic responsibilities. These conditions contributed to elevated dropout rates, early pregnancies, child labor, and child marriage (Alevizos et al., 2023a). Similarly, marginalized groups such as Hispanics in the United States were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, facing systemic racism, limited healthcare access, educational disruptions, and heightened economic vulnerabilities (Alevizos et al., 2025). For lower socioeconomic populations more broadly, the lack of digital tools and healthcare access both impeded learning and increased vulnerability to the virus, resulting in higher mortality and long-term educational setbacks (Alevizos et al., 2023b).

In this complex landscape of mounting inequalities, migration pressures, and deteriorating education systems, the active promotion of the SDGs remains more vital than ever. A noteworthy example is El Sistema Greece, a social initiative that leverages the power of music to promote integration and intercultural dialogue among native, migrant, and refugee youth. Drawing on participatory observations and interviews with educators and students involved in the program, this study

highlights the initiative's impactful role in enhancing access to quality education, fostering social cohesion, promoting gender equality (particularly by empowering girls) and supporting the inclusion of marginalized communities.

Integrating Intercultural Education and Cultural Heritage into the Sustainability Agenda

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights the importance of preserving traditional and non-material cultural expressions as key components of cultural identity and human diversity. It promotes social cohesion and mutual understanding while addressing the adverse effects of globalization through international cooperation and public awareness (Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development, 2022). In alignment with this, UNESCO also recognizes culture as a fundamental driver of sustainable development, contributing to poverty reduction, social inclusion, and urban development (United Nations, 2024).

Education rooted in intercultural values plays a central role in fostering global citizenship, where individuals are encouraged to see others not through lenses of wealth or vulnerability but as equals with shared human potential. This approach promotes self-reflection, autonomy, and active civic engagement, empowering individuals to overcome social isolation and form their personal identity (Taguieff, 2013; Freire, 1992). The interconnection between culture and education strengthens this dynamic, enhancing dialogue, critical thinking, and youth development. Artistic expression contributes to inclusive education, creativity, and well-being, while stimulating exploration and opportunities in the cultural and creative sectors (UNESCO, 2023).

Moreover, cultural diversity is a vital force for enhancing civic participation, fostering social justice, and improving educational outcomes. As acknowledged during the EU's 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome and embedded in the EU Strategic Agenda (2019–2024) and the 2030 Agenda, culture is central to European identity, cohesion, and solidarity (Ferran et al., 2021; Vries, 2020). The present research focuses on SDG 11.4, examining how music, especially in multicultural societies, serves as a transformative tool for tradition and helps promote cultural awareness in both participants' home countries and host communities.

United Nations 2030 Agenda and Culture

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda - the first universal plan spanning all sectors - maps out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, calling on states to balance economic progress, social cohesion and environmental protection (Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, 2015). Within this framework the UN identifies culture as “a critical

enabler of transformation,” capable of fostering intercultural understanding, mutual respect and global citizenship - elements that accelerate the achievement of multiple SDGs. Recognizing that cultural diversity strengthens social and economic development, the European Union has integrated culture into its development strategies, stressing that safeguarding cultural heritage is inseparable from implementing the SDGs (Vries, 2020).

Agenda 21 for culture, adopted in 2004 by cities and local authorities worldwide, promotes human rights, cultural diversity, and sustainability while strengthening cooperation for cultural development. The website agenda21culture.net, provides educational resources and fosters interaction among different cultural identities, supporting social justice and the inclusion of refugees and migrants. UCLG documents over 130 examples linking culture to the 17 SDGs, organized in the Agenda 21 Good Practices Database. These demonstrate the crucial role of culture in developing sustainable, inclusive societies (SDG 11.4: Culture and Heritage for more sustainable, inclusive and open cities and societies report 2017; UCLG 2018).

Culture as the Fourth Pillar in the UN’s Agenda of Sustainability

Habermas (1987) and Zheng et al. (2021) emphasize culture as a core element alongside individuals and society, essential for sustainable development. Hawkes (2001) proposes culture as the fourth sustainability pillar, vital in public planning for sustainable communities. Cultural sustainability preserves heritage and diversity, supporting social, environmental, and economic goals (Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Table 1 in the appendix illustrates the interaction between culture and the SDGs. Culture lies at the center. Viewed functionally, it drives the growth of cultural industries. Viewed constitutively, it shapes a society’s values, beliefs, and rules. In both roles, culture can be a direct driver of the SDGs and a mediator that links cultural values to wider sustainability targets (Zheng et al., 2021).

Multiculturalism and Migration in Europe

Multiculturalism and migration play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and justice in Europe, balancing assimilation with respect for cultural diversity (Colomer & Catalani, 2020). The 2015 European migration crisis triggered massive refugee flows, giving rise to new forms of cultural hybridity influenced by globalization and deterritorialization (UNHCR, 2023). This cultural hybridity led to the emergence of the concept of superdiversity, which highlights the complex legal and social inequalities migrants face, affecting their access to rights and services (Vertovec, 2007, 2023).

The increase in refugees arriving in Greece (45,942 between 2022 and 2023) reflects ongoing conflicts and climate-induced migration, emphasizing the importance of intangible cultural heritage and intercultural education for building resilience and promoting social integration (Operational Data Portal, 2024; ICOMOS, 2019; Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development, 2022). EU policies aim to preserve cultural heritage while embracing diversity, fostering inclusive societies where all citizens can participate equally (Cong, 2019).

Music and Interfaith Dialogue

Music from the Arabian Peninsula, shaped by Byzantine and Persian influences, fosters dialogue between Christian and Muslim communities by creating shared human experiences that enhance understanding and cooperation. Religion deeply influences musical traditions, with musicians balancing faith and art, leading to innovative intercultural expressions that promote humanitarian values. In intercultural education, tolerance requires active respect for differences, reciprocity fosters cooperation through valuing diversity, and political awareness encourages civic participation, all crucial for building just multicultural societies (Hattar, 2015; Keats, 2006).

Intercultural Music Participation and Integration

Collective music making can help migrants and refugees navigate adaptation challenges—language barriers, social isolation, even xenophobia—by providing a shared, culturally safe space that nurtures belonging and social cohesion. When education favors cultural humility over mere competence, it protects personal identities and reduces power imbalances, using music to build empathy and mutual respect. In practice, teachers can invite students to share their own musical traditions and collaborate with professional musicians, modeling inclusive approaches that heighten cultural sensitivity in an increasingly globalized world. Grounded in humility, safety, and empathy, such music initiatives become powerful catalysts for intercultural understanding (Crooke et al., 2017; Biffio, 2017; Melizzo, 2017).

Table 2's ICME framework presents intercultural music making as a universal human practice, with music itself acting as a bridge across cultural divides. When conditions such as cultural humility, cultural safety, and an explicit awareness of power relations are in place, participation strengthens social cohesion and affirms multiple heritages. However, the same encounters can backfire: tokenistic “support” for minority groups or a patronizing form of empathy may emerge whenever exchanges proceed without genuine respect and understanding (Crooke et al., 2024).

Music carries universal emotional qualities that let people voice their feelings and confront inner conflicts, creating a safe space for self-discovery and for working through individual or collective trauma while also tightening social bonds. Music education ties musical practice to social rights, asking how particular genres and aesthetics both foster—and are shaped by—intercultural understanding (Sami, 2023; Van de Vyver et al., 2019).

Berry's theory (1980) distinguishes acculturation, which involves integration into the dominant culture, from enculturation, referring to the individual's internal cognitive changes, highlighting education's role in promoting empathy and reducing intercultural tensions. Berry and Sam (2010) outline four adaptation strategies: integration (maintaining identity while interacting), assimilation (adopting the dominant culture and losing cultural elements), separation (maintaining identity with limited interaction), and marginalization (loss of identity and social exclusion). Educational programs that encourage integration and intercultural dialogue contribute to social cohesion.

Resilient Heritage and Music

Migration can leave communities with an “embodied absence,” where discontinued practices reopen space for new cultural expressions and relationships. Within this context, resilient heritage stresses involving migrants and refugees in heritage processes, since active participation helps them restore and reshape their identities in new social and cultural settings (Colomer & Catalani, 2020; Brandellero, 2020). By introducing fresh ideas and practices, migration simultaneously enriches host cultures, encouraging social cohesion and innovation (Vertovec, 2023). Music heritage, in particular, remains dynamic and adaptive: it survives through ongoing re-creation and collaboration among diverse cultural communities, sustaining both the practices and the people who embody them (Van Zanten, 2004).

Music Sustainability

Music sustainability refers to the condition that allows musical genres to grow, evolve, and survive over time (Schippers & Grand, 2016). Titon (2015) describes music as a “renewable resource,” emphasizing the role of ethnomusicology in linking music with environmental and economic sustainability. Global challenges (such as climate change, rapid technological change, and social conflict) threaten communities capacity to sustain and transmit their cultural practices. Cultural sustainability therefore centers on safeguarding cultural values under these pressures, which makes the sustainability of music an increasingly urgent concern for communities, organizations, and researchers worldwide (Giri & Grant, 2025).

Findings from Participatory Observation within ESG Program

Participatory observation of the El Sistema Greece music education program revealed recurring patterns linked to social inclusion, collaboration, and psychosocial well-being, showing progress toward the chosen SDGs. Educators create a safe, supportive setting that boosts students' psychological resilience through positive reinforcement and culturally safe practices. They stress respect and responsibility to build social awareness and collective duty. Group work - orchestras and choirs - nurtures belonging and mutual support. For refugee and migrant children, music normalizes emotions and empowers them; song texts convey inclusion and hope. Humor helps engagement and memorization. Music functions as a "common language," blending diverse cultural identities without erasing them. Public performances, such as the Christmas concert (December 2024) at the Stavros Niarchos Cultural Center, embody global solidarity and cultural empowerment, mixing familiar Disney songs with traditional and world repertoire to reinforce social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

Student Findings on Selected SDGs

The interviewed students - originating from Nigeria, Egypt, Albania, Georgia, the Philippines, and Greece - highlight the role of music in enhancing their mental well-being. Students reporting that music serves as a means of relaxation, stress relief, and a vehicle for self-expression, thereby contributing to improved self-esteem and emotional health (SDG 3). Students express strong aspirations to pursue music professionally, emphasizing the value of lifelong learning and skill development. The program promotes intercultural competence by offering direction and motivation, while requests for more diverse instruments highlight the need for cultural preservation and gender equity (SDG 4.7). Both girls and boys articulate feminist views and support gender equality in music (SDG 5). Music is recognized as a unifying force that fosters emotional well-being, inclusion, and intercultural solidarity, with students valuing multicultural interaction and feeling empowered to create safe, welcoming environments for peers from diverse backgrounds (SDG 10.2). While integrating into Greek society, students maintain their cultural identities and actively engage with their heritage through music, family traditions, and international connections, promoting cultural sustainability and innovation through musical hybridization (SDG 11.4). Furthermore, students report experiencing a peaceful and inclusive environment within the El Sistema program, recognizing music's role in fostering collaboration, democracy, and intercultural understanding, and advocating for public performances and collaborations beyond the program (SDG 16 & 17).

Teacher's Findings on Selected SDGs

All five interviewed teachers - one greek man and four greek women - reported that music delivers therapeutic benefits for students. It lets them express emotions, boosts self-esteem, and gives a sense of freedom and hope, directly supporting SDG 3. They guide students through diverse musical traditions, fostering intercultural competence and a global identity. Requests for culturally diverse instruments reflect a desire for preservation and inclusivity, underlining the educator's role in shaping lifelong learning and social values (SDG 4.7). El Sistema educators actively contribute to gender equality by empowering girls in mixed-gender environments, enhancing their confidence and ensuring their voices are heard. By challenging traditional stereotypes and fostering respect for female capabilities, educators create inclusive learning spaces where all students can thrive regardless of gender (SDG 5). They cultivate inclusive spaces where students feel safe to express their sexual orientation and identity. Music activities support authentic self-expression, promoting acceptance and reducing inequalities. Teachers play a key role in shaping social attitudes and fostering intercultural solidarity through music (SDG 10.2).

They support students in maintaining connections to their cultural and religious roots through music. This process enhances adaptability and openness to diversity. Drawing from collective memory theory (Halbwachs, 2013), educators utilize music as a cultural bridge that fosters belonging, resilience, and intergenerational continuity (SDG 11.4). Empathy, cultivated by teachers, is central to promoting peace, nonviolence, and social responsibility. Through music, educators guide children in managing emotions, respecting boundaries, and caring for others. They avoid overemphasis on difference, instead fostering inclusive and peaceful classrooms (Reardon & Cabezudo, 2002) (SDG 16).

While private institutions such as the Stavros Niarchos Foundation provide resources, teachers report limited public sector engagement—particularly from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Migration. This gap highlights the need for stronger public partnerships and policy initiatives to sustain multicultural music education programs (SDG 17). Furthermore, as digital transformation becomes increasingly central to the nonprofit sector, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into program evaluation, resource management, and impact assessment may significantly strengthen the efficiency and scalability of social initiatives like El Sistema Greece. AI technologies offer promising tools for real-time data analysis, predictive modeling, and targeted intervention, which could support NGOs in achieving the SDGs more effectively (Efthymiou et al., 2023).

Conclusions

The research findings highlight the ongoing need and enthusiasm among participants for transforming intangible cultural heritage and performing music from various countries. This process supports the healthy reproduction of social fabric through cultural blending. It goes beyond renewing artistic forms, as cultural education promotes active involvement in creating a sustainable culture. Through education, individuals develop openness and receptivity towards the “other,” boosting intercultural understanding and solidarity.

Cultural resilience emerges from creating new cultural codes, showing culture as dynamic and evolving. Rich intercultural experiences promote sustainability by proving diversity and transformation are key to building a sustainable cultural framework beyond homogeneous groups. Multiculturalism fosters creativity and innovation, as diverse views generate new ideas and solutions, enhancing mutual respect and understanding.

Cultural revival in multicultural settings and use of universal musical references strengthen resilience and sustainability. This is vital in societies with many migrants and refugees where cultures coexist and interact. Music, as intangible cultural heritage, bridges understanding and acceptance of the “other,” reinforcing collective identity and solidarity. Education plays a key role by exposing people to diverse musical traditions, reducing stereotypes and prejudice.

Thus, transformation within intercultural frameworks helps preserve cultural heritage and creates a sustainable, dynamic social fabric. Artistic interaction enables communities to achieve sustainable cultural development that honors diversity and fosters harmony and resilience.

The study stresses the importance of universal musical references as bridges connecting cultures and promoting understanding. Empathy is essential, not only defining boundaries but also supporting intercultural exchange. Cultural safety and humility underpin musical interfaith dialogue and student communication, improving collaboration and solidarity. Shared memories, homeland visits, customs, and national identity through practices like food encourage cultural coexistence. Music-driven transformation of intangible culture preserves heritage and sustains roots.

Music education is vital for mental well-being and personal growth, offering displaced individuals in camps through El Sistema a chance to reclaim their voice and creativity. The idea of “global citizenship” is strengthened by musical blends and global songs, nurturing unity and shared identity. Educators play a crucial role, especially in empowering girls, promoting gender equality, and challenging stereotypes. Intercultural competence and empathy encourage global skill development, aiding a more inclusive, resilient society.

Overall, this study of El Sistema's intercultural music program shows clear potential to advance several SDGs. Participatory observation and interviews with teachers and students revealed consistent evidence of success. Key drivers for meeting SDGs 3, 4.7, 5, 10.2, 11.4, 16, and 17 include the children's strong willingness and persistence, their intercultural skills, ambition, freedom, equality, peaceful coexistence, friendship, access to quality education, and cooperation within musical ensembles.

Future research could look at the long-term effects of different intercultural activities—like arts programs, community discussions, and inclusive teaching methods—on how migrants and refugees adjust and feel included. Comparing these approaches in different cultural and geographic settings could help us understand what works best. Studies could show how broad intercultural education not only helps build social connections and inclusion but also strengthens communities and supports progress toward the SDGs. By finding practices based on evidence and suited to local contexts, future work can help create education systems that are fairer, more inclusive, and respectful of different cultures around the world.

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