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Sustainability in Cultural Policy in the Nordic Countries

Policy brief

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Sustainability in Cultural Policy in the Nordic Countries

Introduction	4
Key Sustainability Themes in Nordic Cultural Policies	5
Sustainable Conditions for Cultural Work and Sector Development	6
Sustainability Through Cultural Dialogue, Participation and Inclusion	8
Sustainable Community Building Using Historic Environments, Cultural Heritage and Architecture	10
Green Transition in the Cultural Sector	12
Sustainability Principles in Cultural Policy Budgeting	13
Concluding Remarks	15
Sources for Further Reading	17
About this publication	25

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Introduction

In this policy brief, Kulturanalys Norden provides an overview of how sustainability is integrated into the cultural policies of the Nordic governments. The focus of the policy brief is on political governance and initiatives that explicitly aim to contribute to social, economic, or environmental sustainability. The analysis is based on government budgets (2023–2025) and on current policy documents, strategies, and policy goals of relevance to cultural policy.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015. Since then, the Sustainable Development Goals for economic, social, and environmental sustainability (UN, 2015) have become central to sustainability work across the world. Except for Target 11.4—on protecting the world's cultural and natural heritage—culture has received limited attention in this context. However, in recent years, the UN (2021) has emphasised culture as a driver of sustainable development, and UNESCO (n.d.) has highlighted the cross-cutting role of culture in promoting more sustainable ways of living. In addition, several international sustainability initiatives have focused specifically on the cultural sector. These include efforts to strengthen international cooperation on culture and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021) and to integrate sustainability into the management of cultural and world heritage sites (UNESCO, 2015; ICOMOS, n.d.). In Europe, culture is pointed out as an urgent area for policy initiatives regarding sustainable transition (Culture Action Europe, 2024).

Sustainable development is also a key priority within Nordic cultural cooperation. The Cooperation Programme for Cultural Policy (2025–2030) of the Nordic Council of Ministers is described as contributing to their overarching *Vision 2030* of a green, competitive, and socially sustainable Nordic Region. The programme contains several goals outlining how culture and cultural actors in the Nordic Region are to support this ambition (Nordiska ministerrådet, 2019; 2024). The goals include strengthening the cultural sector in becoming more inclusive and competitive, as well as supporting the development of climate-friendly cultural productions. Another Nordic initiative is the *Nordic Green Roadmap*, which provides guidance for how cultural institutions in the Nordic region can improve their environmental sustainability (Nordiska ministerrådet, 2023). Given how sustainability is an evident priority within Nordic cultural cooperation, this policy brief examines how the Nordic governments incorporate sustainable development into their cultural policies.

Key Sustainability Themes in Nordic Cultural Policies

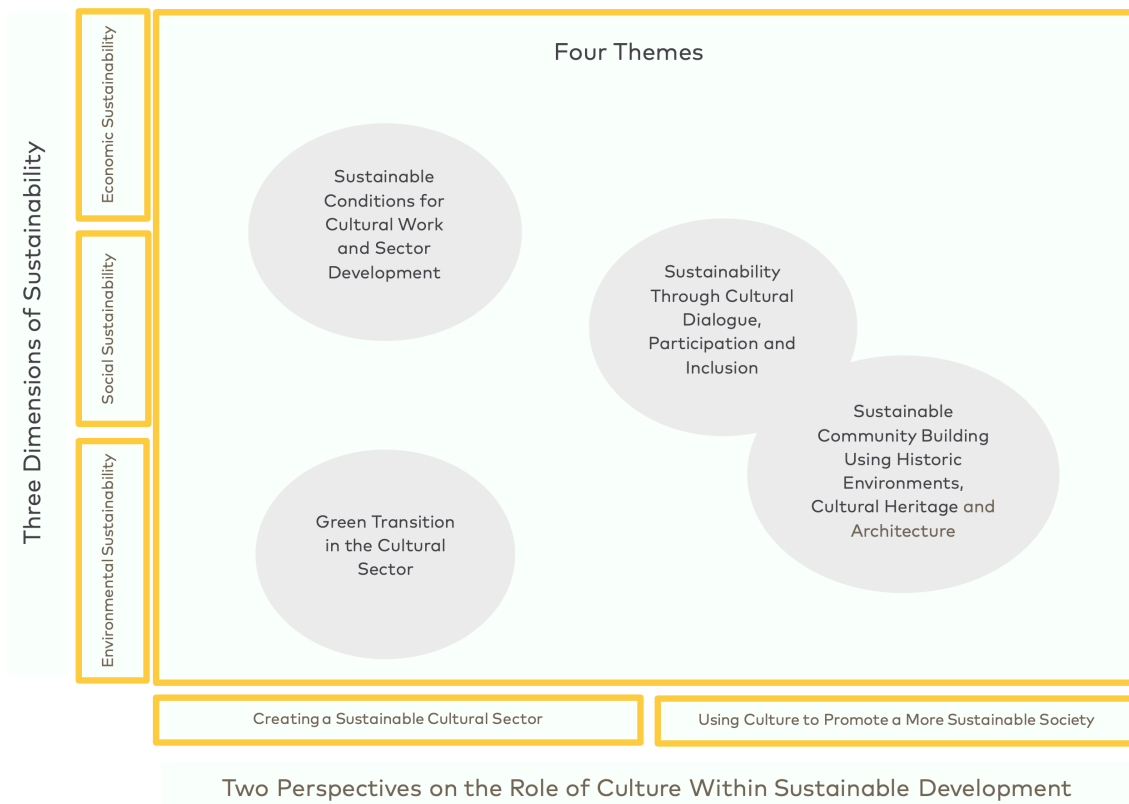
The UN (2015) underscores how the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development consist of three interconnected and mutually dependent dimensions—economic, social and environmental sustainability. The national cultural policies of the Nordic governments contain ambitions and initiatives relating to all three dimensions of sustainability. These dimensions are often connected to key elements of cultural policy, such as artistic creation, access to culture for all, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the development of cultural infrastructure (see Kulturanalys Norden, 2018). It is also common for the different sustainability dimensions to be approached in an integrated way.

Working with this policy brief, we identified four themes as particularly central to the political work on culture and sustainability of the Nordic governments:

- [Sustainable Conditions for Cultural Work and Sector Development](#)
- [Sustainability Through Cultural Dialogue, Participation and Inclusion](#)
- [Sustainable Community Building Using Historic Environments, Cultural Heritage and Architecture](#)
- [Green Transition in the Cultural Sector](#)

The policy brief focuses on these four themes. However, some governments also link sustainability to their work on cultural tourism (Finnish Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, 2023) and international cultural cooperation (Norwegian Kultur- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2025; Finnish Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, 2024; Danish Kulturministeriets departement, 2023).

The initiatives related to the four central themes are connected to the three dimensions of sustainability in different ways. They also reflect two overarching perspectives on the role of culture in the sustainable transition. One of them revolves around the idea of culture as an instrumental tool for promoting sustainability at the societal level. The other perspective focuses on making the cultural sector itself more sustainable—for example, by improving working conditions and strengthening cultural sub-sectors.



Sustainable Conditions for Cultural Work and Sector Development

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The visual arts will become a competitive and sustainable industry that creates value and job opportunities throughout the country.

(own translation from Icelandic, Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2023, p. 17)

A recurring theme in the cultural sustainability work of the Nordic governments is the desire to foster sustainable working conditions within the cultural sector. In its cultural policy report, the Danish government, for example, stresses the need for

artistic education programmes to better promote the well-being of students and a sustainable working life (Kulturministeriets departement, 2023). Likewise, the Finnish government states in its cultural policy report their ambition to implement clear, sustainable, and flexible funding criteria to reduce financial insecurity among arts and culture practitioners (Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, 2024). Several Nordic governments have also developed political strategies with similar objectives. In these policies, perspectives regarding working conditions are often intertwined with goals for the sustainable growth and business development of the cultural sector. For instance, the cultural policy strategy of the provincial government of Åland contains several measures to improve the economic conditions among professionals in arts and culture. These include legislating on grants and subsidies as part of a comprehensive cultural legislation (Ålands landskapsregering, 2024). Furthermore, the Swedish Ministry of Culture has put forward a strategy for businesses in the cultural and creative industries, aiming to nurture sustainable growth and competitive business development across the entire sector. The strategy is particularly focused on creating support for entrepreneurs in the cultural sector, for example, through guidance and social safety nets (Kulturdepartementet, 2023/24:111).

Some of the Nordic governments have developed policies for specific cultural areas containing similar sustainability themes. The Icelandic Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs has presented a visual arts strategy, where one of the main objectives is to make the visual arts sector competitive, sustainable, and capable of generating jobs nationwide. The strategy includes proposals such as new remuneration and incentive schemes, designing economic indicators for the sector, and a review of current copyright and tax legislation (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2023).

The Ministry of Education and Culture in Iceland has also developed a national film policy, focusing on creating more sustainable, equal, and family-friendly working environments for film workers, as well as on strengthening the competitive position of Icelandic film (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020). Likewise, sustainability is a guiding principle in Swedish film policy. In the bill on film adopted by the Swedish government (prop. 2015/16:132), the focus is, however, on establishing long-term, sustainable, and predictable financial support for film productions.

Sustainability Through Cultural Dialogue, Participation and Inclusion

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Throughout life, everyone has access to quality education, arts, culture and other forms of learning that promote the flourishing of each and all of us together.

(own translation from Swedish (Åland), Bärkraft.ax, 2023, p. 16)

Among several of the Nordic governments, inclusion and broadened participation in cultural activities remain key concerns within cultural policies related to sustainability. To some extent, these aspects are highlighted within efforts to reach out and raise public awareness of sustainability issues. For example, the Finnish sustainability strategy is underlining the role of art and culture consumption in strengthening eco-social education (Finlands kommission för hållbar utveckling, 2022). The Icelandic Museums Council has furthermore developed a policy for museum work, emphasising the social responsibilities of museums in the sustainable transition. Icelandic museums are expected to actively engage diverse social groups in their activities and use exhibitions and outreach efforts to raise awareness and encourage dialogue about the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Safnaráð, 2021).

In many cases, cultural participation is seen not only as a tool to raise awareness, but also as a direct contributor to social sustainability, cohesion, and well-being at a societal level. The Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality, for example, has developed a strategy to support voluntary cultural engagement. The focus of the strategy is to improve the conditions for cultural volunteering, ensure access to appropriate facilities across the country, diversify participation in cultural life, and strengthen collaboration between professional and voluntary actors. By doing so, the ministry is arguing that the strategy supports the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals related to good health and well-being, reduced inequalities, and sustainable cities and communities (Kultur- og likestillings-departementet, 2023). The Cultural Policy Strategy for 2025, issued by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, in turn, reflects on the importance of engaging

social groups with low participation in cultural activities and ensuring that participation in arts and culture remains affordable, to foster a more sustainable cultural life (Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, 2017). In the most recent state budgets, the Finnish government also describes their collective cultural policy measures as means of achieving a more sustainable development by promoting human well-being, participation, and equal access to cultural rights (Statsbudgeten, 2023; 2024; 2025).

The idea of cultural participation promoting social sustainability is also present in Swedish and Ålandic policies. The National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development put forward by the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation recognises participation in cultural and leisure activities as central to sustainability (Näringsdepartementet, skr. 2020/21:133). Similarly, the Ålandic Development and Sustainability Agenda stresses that everyone should have access to high quality education, arts, and culture that “promote the flourishing of each and all of us together” (Bärkraft.ax, 2023, p. 16). In its budget proposal, the provincial government of Åland then outlines plans to develop a library programme that anchors the Development and Sustainability Agenda (Bärkraft.ax, 2023) in library services (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023). Similarly, the Swedish Ministry of Culture has developed a library strategy, reinforcing the role of public libraries for supporting social sustainability through increased reading, language development, democratic engagement, and community participation (Kulturdepartementet, 2022). The Swedish Government’s (skr. 2024/25:66) report on their contribution to the 2030 Agenda argues that their introduction of a leisure card for children and youth can help support the Sustainable Development Goal of good and equal health by improving access to leisure activities, for example within arts and culture. A similar rationale underpins the Ålandic initiative *ÅL-IN Fritid*, which aims to provide more children and young people with meaningful, sustainable leisure opportunities within sports, culture, and civic associations (Ålands landskapsregering, 2024).

Finally, the Finnish government has initiated an effort to make the cultural sector more socially sustainable and inclusive by commissioning a working group to develop a proposal of how to increase diversity and the inclusion of individuals with a foreign background in arts and culture. The working group recommends developing tools to help cultural organisations assess cultural diversity and sustainability, and to adapt their work accordingly. It also points out the need to identify, acknowledge and address discriminating structures and recruitment practices within cultural institutions (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

Sustainable Community Building Using Historic Environments, Cultural Heritage and Architecture

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Cultural heritage and historic environments form a cornerstone of sustainable community building. We all depend on, and participate in, the creation of the environment we live in.

(own translation from Swedish, Prop. 2012/13:96, p. 36)

Across the Nordic region, multiple governments declare that cultural heritage, historic environments, and architecture are key resources for achieving both environmental and social sustainability. In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture has a Cultural Heritage Strategy, aiming to make cultural heritage a more prominent societal asset by 2030. The strategy envisions cultural heritage as a platform for bringing people together and a driver of a more sustainable future. It includes policy goals such as promoting low-carbon conservation methods, securing public funding for the policy area, and using cultural heritage as a tool for human well-being (Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, 2022). Similarly, the provincial government of Åland emphasises both environmental and social values in its goals to make the cultural heritage sector more sustainable. In its Cultural Policy Strategy, the government puts forward an aim to channel sustainable development using cultural heritage resources by increasing the visibility of historic environments and reviving traditional craftsmanship (Ålands landskapsregering, 2024). Furthermore, the 2025 budget proposal sets out a goal to ensure that the cultural heritage and its significance for the identity of Ålandic residents is communicated, preserved, and developed in a sustainable way. This motivates efforts to review legislation for cultural heritage, strengthen the knowledge base on historic environments, and provide restoration support for buildings of cultural and historical value (Ålands landskapsregering, 2025).

In Sweden, the National Cultural Policy Bill (prop. 2009/10:3) articulates the need for an integrated perspective on nature and culture, encouraging greater alignment between cultural and environmental policy through work on historic environments. The national objectives for the historic environments of the Swedish government (prop. 2012/13:96) also contain various aims related to participation and

community to ensure that historic environments are managed in a socially sustainable manner. In Norway, sustainability initiatives within the field of historic environments mainly refer to environmental aspects. The Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment introduced historic environments as a new policy area, aiming to strengthen the link between cultural and environmental policy by supporting a more sustainable development through holistic community planning (Klima- og miljødepartementet, 2020). The Norwegian government has also initiated a commission to develop a legislation for historic environments, which includes proposals to embed sustainability goals for long-term management of natural resources into the new legislation (NOU 2025:3). To support these ambitions, the Ministry of Climate and Environment has developed two strategies to preserve agricultural and coastal historic environments, aiming to contribute to environmental sustainability (Klima- og miljødepartementet, 2025a; 2025b).

Architecture and design policies across the Nordic countries recognise the importance of built environments in the sustainable development, pertaining to both social and environmental values. In the Cultural Policy Report of the Danish government, the potential of architecture to foster a more sustainable and cohesive society is emphasised (Kulturministeriets departement, 2023). Furthermore, the Danish government has tasked a commission with developing recommendations on how this can be achieved. The commission report stresses the need to update architectural quality principles to properly handle the sustainability challenges of today. It also notes a strong connection between architectural aesthetics and sustainability, pointing to how aesthetically pleasing environments are often better cared for (Ekspertgruppen for national arkitekturpolitik, 2024). Comparably, the Swedish policy goals for architecture and design contain an overarching vision of the field contributing to a sustainable, equal and less segregated society with carefully designed living environments. The policy also underscores that sustainability and design quality must not be compromised by short-term economic interests (prop. 2017/18:110). Similarly, the Finnish Government has developed an architectural policy programme, placing ecological, social, economic, and cultural sustainability at the centre of the built environment (Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, Miljöministeriet & Arbets- och näringsministeriet, 2022), while in Iceland, the Ministry of Culture and Business Affairs has presented a design and architecture strategy, aiming to make the area more responsive to sustainability and public health (Menningar- og viðskiptaráðuneyti, 2021).

Green Transition in the Cultural Sector

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It is important that the cultural sector also works actively to achieve the government's climate goals.

(own translation from Norwegian, Kultur- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2023, p. 39)

Several Nordic governments address the role of the cultural sector for enabling an environmentally sustainable transition. The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, for example, acknowledges the importance of culture in “rethinking values, practices and societal models required by the ecological transition”. This as cultural practice largely revolves around intangible production and thus enables the sector to support both economic growth and sustainability (Undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, 2022, p. 8). The Icelandic Ministry of Education and Culture proposes in its film strategy the establishment of a working group to draft a declaration for sustainable filmmaking. This initiative would allow companies in the film industry to sign a sustainability statement regarding both environmental and social dimensions, and to report on their goals and progress (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2020). In its strategy for the arts sector, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality declares that art and artists play an important part in the green transition. The Ministry also highlights the strong commitment to climate and sustainability issues present within the arts and culture sector, and brings attention to recent field initiatives aimed at reducing the sector’s climate footprint (Kultur- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2023).

Furthermore, the Norwegian government has tasked the agency Arts and Culture Norway with developing a climate and environment programme for the cultural sector. The programme is designed to provide skills training, introduce environmental requirements for recipients of public cultural funding, and develop a programme for green transition within the sector (Kulturdirektoratet, 2025). For 2025, Arts and Culture Norway has been allocated NOK 1 million to support this work (Kultur- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2024). In Denmark, the government has established a new Centre for Sustainability in the Cultural Sector, housed within Kulturens Analyseinstitut. The centre is intended to stimulate public debate and generate practical solutions for integrating sustainability into the cultural sector (Kulturministeriet, 2023).

Sustainability Principles in Cultural Policy Budgeting

Most sustainability efforts within Nordic cultural policy are articulated in strategic documents and policy objectives. A review of the governments' national budgets (2023–2025) reveals few concrete initiatives explicitly targeting sustainability within the cultural sector, although several sustainability-related policy goals are identified. In Sweden, the government (prop. 2024/25:1; 2023/24:1; 2022/23:1) reiterates sustainability-oriented objectives derived from the national goals for the historic environment (prop. 2012/13:96) as well as for architecture and design (prop. 2017/18:110), as guiding budgeting principles for these areas. In Åland, recent government budgets have included goals regarding sustainable historic environment management within the Department of Education and Culture (Ålands landskapsregering, 2024), as well as efforts to ensure the quality of sustainability work in the daily operations of the Åland Museum (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023). The Danish government, in turn, outlines how the Green Museum will contribute to sustainability in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Finansministeriet, 2023; 2024; 2025), and how the Agency for Culture and Palaces will support energy efficiency through sustainable building solutions (Finansministeriet, 2023; 2024). For 2025, the Danish government has also allocated DKK 3 million to each of the two regional arts funds—serving Jutland and the islands—with the aim of enhancing the geographical distribution of cultural initiatives and fostering economically sustainable cultural organisations across the country (Finansministeriet, 2025).

Several Nordic governments have introduced sustainability-related conditionings in their financial allocations to public agencies, authorities and cultural activities. In Norway, the government stipulates that funding to cultural authorities, initiatives and funds must support the development of an innovative, sustainable, and diverse cultural landscape (Prop. 1 S 2024/2025; 2023/2024). Similarly, the Finnish government requires that state-supported agencies and activities in the cultural field are aligned with national guidelines on sustainable development and the national strategy for supporting the 2030 Agenda (Statsbudgeten, 2024; 2025; Finlands kommission för hållbar utveckling, 2022). In 2023, the Ålandic government launched a EUR 230,000 investment in cultural and artistic projects, with selection

criteria that prioritised alignment with the national Development and Sustainability Agenda (Bärkraft.ax, 2023). Additionally, these grants aimed to promote sustainable consumption patterns, for example, through funding conservation grants for buildings of great value to cultural heritage. The same year, the government of Åland allocated EUR 2,107,000 to association activities and individual practitioners in the cultural sector, where considerations such as sustainability, innovation, gender equality and accessibility influenced the allocation process (Ålands landskapsregering, 2023). However, none of these economic conditionings contain further information on how these priorities more specifically influence funding decisions, or what specific requirements must be met by the parties concerned in order to obtain governmental funding.

Concluding Remarks

Sustainability has become a common feature in cultural policy work in the Nordic countries. In government policy documents, various national interpretations emerge regarding the role of culture in sustainable development. This review highlights how cultural policy efforts related to sustainability primarily focus on social and environmental values. These dimensions are often closely linked—for example, in areas concerning cultural heritage and the historic environments. Economic aspects of sustainability are less prominent in the analysed policies, appearing mainly in policies on business development, funding systems and economic conditions for practitioners within the cultural sector.

Kulturanalys Norden (2023) has previously observed that the Nordic countries have a tradition of pursuing cultural policies where arts and culture are seen as instrumental resources, contributing to societal benefits. This perspective is especially evident in sustainability initiatives related to cultural heritage and architecture, where reusing existing resources is often emphasised. The same logic appears in efforts to improve access to culture and broaden cultural participation, which are typically framed in terms of fostering values such as community, inclusion, and well-being to increase the social sustainability on a societal level.

At the same time, many Nordic governments express ambitions for the cultural sector itself to become more sustainable. This includes improving working conditions for artists and cultural professionals, as well as making more environmentally conscious choices within the everyday practices of the sector. The diversity of interpretations illustrates the multiple ways in which cultural policy can support the sustainable transition, without exerting political influence over artistic content. There are also points of overlap between the two overarching perspectives on the role of culture within sustainable development. For instance, a more sustainable cultural sector can contribute to a more sustainable societal development overall. Hence, the policy initiatives examined in this policy brief, to varying degrees, relate to both perspectives.

While many initiatives aim to facilitate sustainable development, these efforts are often framed as general goals and strategies. In several cases, these strategies include concrete proposals for action. Yet, the concept of sustainability is in many policies used in broad and visionary terms, and it often remains unclear how the policy intentions are to be implemented in order to effectively promote

sustainability. The Nordic governments' sustainability-related budgeting principles and financial conditionings within expenditure on culture tend to be vague and ambiguous as well. While we have not conducted a comprehensive survey of sustainability-related activities in the cultural sector, we have, however, noted multiple examples of when everyday practices of cultural authorities and cultural institutions in the Nordic countries, are clearly characterised by the promotion of sustainability.

With this policy brief, Kulturanalys Norden has shed light on ongoing cultural policy efforts regarding sustainability. Several important questions lie ahead though—such as how the cultural sector can actively contribute to sustainable development while also protecting artistic freedom and the intrinsic value of culture. Equally present is the need to explore how sustainability is being pursued in practice across cultural institutions and activities.

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Kulturanalys Norden has not been able to identify any current national cultural policy strategies or initiatives from the Faroe Islands aimed at promoting sustainability.

Greenland

Kulturanalys Norden has not been able to identify any current national cultural policy strategies or initiatives in Greenland aimed at promoting sustainability. However, the budget for the fiscal year of 2025 reflects an overarching sustainability theme, though no explicit references to sustainability can be found within the expenditure area of relevance to culture.

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