DEVELOPMENT OF THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK AND VALUE OUTPUT FOR THE PROJECT BSR CULTURAL PEARLS

SUMMARY OF THE FINAL EVALUATION TECHNICAL REPORT

BSR CULTURAL PEARLS

November 2025
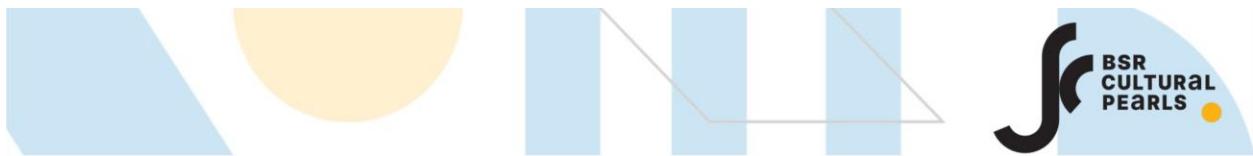
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Executive summary

The BSR Cultural Pearls initiative positions culture as an instrument for community resilience across small and mid-sized municipalities in the Baltic Sea Region. Operating in 2023–2025 with combined Interreg and partner funding, the programme confers an annual title and supports the co-creation and delivery of Culture and Resilience Action Plans (CuReAPs). This evaluation develops and applies a structured framework to appraise the programme's contribution to community development, health and well-being, and innovation capacity; it covers first-round title holders in 2024 (Jakobstad/Pietarsaari, Kiel, Rūjiena and Svendborg) and second-round awardees in 2025 (Alytus District, Helsingborg, Kaskinen/Kaskö, Peipsiääre, Płock and Smiltene).

The evaluation adopts a theory-of-change approach, complemented by mixed methods. Primary data comprise semi-structured interviews with 2024 Pearl municipalities conducted approximately one year post-title; interviews and working sessions with 2025 municipalities; and focus groups with mentoring organisations and project partners. Secondary sources include CuReAPs, Seed Money work plans, internal evaluation materials and public documentation. The framework formalises 27 outcome areas across three dimensions—community development, health and well-being, and innovation capacity—operationalised through 66 indicators (43 qualitative, 23 quantitative) and aligned tools for municipal surveys and mentor-guided community discussions, enabling consistent evidence to capture across different local capacities.

Key findings

Short-term impact

In the immediate term, the programme is relevant where it mobilises locally resonant entry points and lowers participation thresholds. Municipalities report strengthened community ties through inclusive formats such as place stewardship, intergenerational storytelling, youth hackathons, outreach to underserved neighbourhoods and activation of under-used cultural assets. Perceived gains include increased pride and belonging among participants, new or revitalised social spaces, and thicker interfaces between residents and administrations. Health and well-being effects are primarily psychosocial and proximate (confidence, motivation, reduced isolation) arising from visible, achievable participation. Innovation capacity is expressed in revised working methods: participatory planning routines, cross-departmental cooperation, resident panels, and the first steps towards mainstreaming outreach models within municipal strategy. The mentoring and peer-learning spine is repeatedly cited as catalytic when application processes felt onerous or local buy-in was uncertain.

Medium- to long-term effects

One year on, durable legacies are evident where municipalities used the title to consolidate pre-existing strategies rather than to launch disconnected novelties. In such contexts, episodic participation has matured into patterned engagement—annual bar-camps, intergenerational theatre, and youth producer pathways—supported by administrative adoption of participatory methods. Programme effects at this horizon can be read along three axes: enhanced visibility and reputation within a "cultural resilience" frame; integration of resilience concepts and participatory approaches into municipal discourse and planning; and the use of the title as a social resource that renews local pride and identity. Where structural constraints persist (transport deficits, building condition, budget ceilings), legacies remain more contingent but are still visible in the persistence of community-led spaces, narrative projects and emergent civic competencies stewarded by local NGOs and volunteers.

Challenges and lessons

Stakeholders converge on five cross-cutting challenges. First, conceptual ambiguity: "social resilience" can read as abstract without locally meaningful framing; municipalities often re-articulated it as community strength, cohesion or agency to secure buy-in. Second, capacity and time: compressed planning windows and thin staffing impede early co-creation, advance programming with cultural institutions and outreach beyond "usual suspects". Third, access and infrastructure: in several places, transport and venue condition limit reach and inclusion. Fourth, the network's tangibility: while enthusiasm for mentoring and exchange is strong, international connectivity can feel inspirational yet intangible without portable collaboration formats. Fifth, monitoring: municipalities value pragmatic, light-touch instruments to evidence change beyond anecdote. Lessons learned emphasise starting from existing assets and strategies, designing low-threshold entry points that entrust residents with genuine responsibility, and treating mentoring and peer exchange as core architecture rather than ancillary support.

Recommendations

Sustainability hinges on converting episodic success into institutional habit. The report proposes extending timelines—both for application and delivery—to allow genuine co-creation, advance programming with cultural institutions and iterative monitoring; embedding standard participatory methods (resident panels, annual civic rituals, youth leadership pathways) within departmental routines; and resourcing continuity through modest multi-annual envelopes and dedicated mentoring capacity. Communication should be strengthened through a shared narrative and toolkit that translate resilience into accessible, locally relevant language, alongside a light regional communications spine to amplify municipal stories. Evidence generation should prioritise repeatable, low-burden measures synchronised with municipal rhythms (short before/after prompts on belonging and agency; small cohort follow-ups at three and twelve months; optional photo/audio diaries). Critically, the Baltic Sea Region wide network should be operationalised as a

diffusion mechanism by curating a small number of "travelling practices" each year—ready-to-adopt modules with concise guidance, co-crediting protocols and light central coordination—so that international exchange yields visible street-level outcomes.

Acknowledgements

List of stakeholders consulted

Cultural Pearls Y1

Jakobstad-Pietarsaari (FI) - Päivi Rosnell.

Jakobstad-Pietarsaari (FI) - Johan Lithén.

Kiel (DE) - Annette Wiese-Krukowska.

Kiel (DE) - Anne Czichowski.

Kiel (DE) - Janna Sellmer.

Rūjiena (LV) - Madara Seile.

Rūjiena (LV) - Lelde Ābele.

Svendborg (DK) - Pernille Laier Larsen.

Cultural Pearls Y2

Alytus District (LT) – Andrė Zenevičienė.

Kaskinen – Kaskö (FI) – Elina Virta.

Kaskinen – Kaskö (FI) – Jonas Söderlund.

Helsingborg (SE) – Ola Jacobson.

Peipsiääre (EE) – Liis Lainemäe.
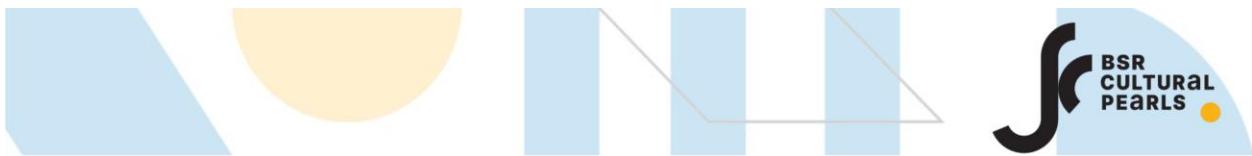
Płock (PL) – Inga Kujawa Zawadzka.

Smiltene (LV) – Evija Dzvinko.

Project mentoring organisations

Regional Council of Ostrobothnia (represented by Pia Blomstrom).

Vidzeme Planning Region (represented by Lelde Ābele and Liene Jakobsone).

Baltic Sea Cultural Centre (represented by Krystyna Wroblevska and Magdalena Zakrzewska).

Heinrich Boll Foundation Schleswig-Holstein (represented by Fynn-Ole Eisenhuth and Lea Luekemeier).

Creative Estonia (represented by Eva Leemet, Tiiu Allikmäe and Kersti Kilg).

Varde Municipality (represented by Peter Holm Lindgaard and Marie Federsen).

Alytus city municipality administration (represented by Kristina Daugeleviciene and Neringa Rinkeviciute and Ineta Dimsiene).

Skåne County (represented by Jenny Tingvall Kornmacher).

Project partners

Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat (Lead partner, represented by Felix Schartner Giertta).

NDPC (represented by Kristīne Lipiņa and Krista Petajajarvi).

Danish Cultural Institute (represented by Žanete Eglīte and Andra Jakoviča).

Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Areas, European Affairs and Consumer Proection of Land Schleswig-Holstein (represented by Kaarina Williams, Lena Backes and Franziska Kapteina).

ARS BALTICA (represented by Egija Saļņikova and Marcus Hagemann);
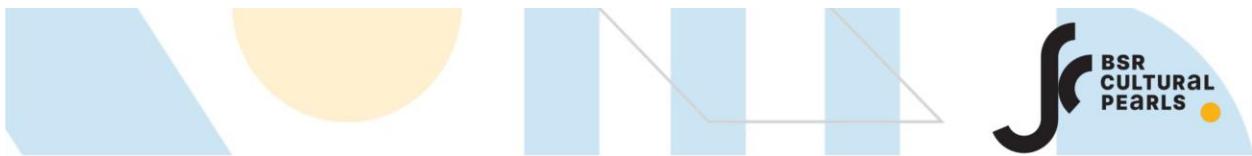
1. Short background and context of the BSR Cultural Pearls project

The BSR Cultural Pearls project is an innovative initiative aimed at enhancing social cohesion in smaller cities and municipalities across the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). By leveraging the unique assets of culture and creativity, this project seeks to address pressing societal challenges, such as urbanization, demographic shifts, and economic downturns, while fostering a sense of belonging and community identity.

For the current duration (2023-2025), the project operates under a budget of EUR 3.5 million of which 80 percent, or EUR 2.8 million, come from the Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme and the remaining 20 percent from the project partners: Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) – lead partner; Alytus municipality (LV); ARS BALTIC (DE); Baltic Sea Cultural Centre (PL); Danish Cultural Institute (DK); Heinrich Böll Foundation Schleswig-Holstein (DE); Loov Eesti/Creative Estonia (EE); Northern Dimension Partnership on Culture; Regional Council of Ostrobothnia (FI); Ministry of Justice, European Affairs and Consumer Protection of Land Schleswig-Holstein (DE); Varde Municipality (DK); Vidzeme Planning Region (LV).

Since its inception in January 2023, the project has successfully engaged municipalities in designing and implementing Culture and Resilience Action Plans (CuReAPs). These plans prioritize cultural activities as a means of strengthening community ties, addressing local challenges, and promoting sustainable development.

The annual award, titled "BSR Cultural Pearls," is conferred to municipalities that demonstrate exceptional commitment to cultural resilience through well-developed action plans. The BSR Cultural Pearls title recipients for the year 2024 were Svendborg (Denmark), Kiel (Germany), Jakobstad/Pietarsaari (Finland), and Rūjiena (Latvia). These cities exemplify the program's objectives by tackling language barriers, empowering youth, addressing demographic challenges, and fostering community belonging. The international jury chose Smiltene (Latvia), Helsingborg (Sweden), Peipsiääre (Estonia), Płock (Poland), Alytus District (Lithuania), and Kaskinen – Kaskö (Finland) from among 14 candidates to be awarded the title for the year 2025.

2. Methodology

2.1. Assignment approach and rationale

The approach adopted for the development of the evaluation framework and the value output of the BSR Cultural Pearls was grounded in the foundational understanding that cultural initiatives have the potential to significantly enhance social resilience within communities. To achieve this, the evaluation framework integrated insights derived from an

extensive literature review, which examined methodologies for assessing cultural impacts in fostering resilience, innovation, and sustainable community development.

The assignment spanned two distinct rounds of implementation. Phase 1 centred on developing and refining the evaluation framework while gathering data from the first round of Pearls title recipients. Phase 2 built upon these foundations to assess longer-term impacts and explore the broader implications of cultural interventions for social resilience. During Phase 2, additional deliverables were developed to consolidate the project's value outputs and to support future Cultural Pearls cycles.

This Evaluation Report is structured around three components:

1. **Component A:** Evaluation of the relevance and effectiveness of the BSR Cultural Pearls' actions and the results achieved in the **short-term**

2. **Component B:** Evaluation of the relevance and effectiveness of the BSR Cultural Peals' action and of the impacts achieved in the **medium to long term**

3. Component C: Evaluation of the **main challenges and bottlenecks** identified by relevant stakeholders

2.2. Evaluation Dimensions and Outcomes cluster – quick glance

I. Community development

Community Development is all about strengthening the social fabric of a place. It focuses on building trust, pride, and shared values so that people feel connected and empowered to shape their future together. This includes creating opportunities for learning, encouraging dialogue - even on difficult issues - and fostering inclusion and diversity. It also means helping communities develop a shared vision, resolve conflicts constructively, and feel responsible for their municipality.

To measure progress, the framework looks at things like:

- How many cultural activities highlight local heritage and identity.
- Whether people feel more proud of their community and more aligned on common values.
- Increases in skills, openness to dialogue, and participation in decision-making.
- Signs of trust, social cohesion, and a sense of responsibility toward the place.

In short, **the goal is to turn cultural engagement into stronger, more resilient communities where people feel they belong and can act together.**

II. Health and Well-being

Health and Well-being is about making communities feel healthier, happier, and more connected. This dimension looks at how cultural projects improve everyday life—by creating welcoming public spaces, offering opportunities for personal growth (like volunteering), and strengthening the sense of belonging. It also focuses on building supportive relationships, boosting confidence and motivation, and reducing stress, loneliness, and isolation.

To measure progress, indicators include:

- How many public or green spaces were created or revitalized.
- Whether people feel more included and supported.
- Increases in confidence and motivation to act.
- Reductions in anxiety and isolation, and more time spent in positive social interactions.

In short, **the goal is to use culture as a tool for well-being—helping people feel safe, valued, and connected in their communities.**

III. Innovation capacity

Innovation Capacity is about helping communities and municipalities become more creative, collaborative, and adaptable. This dimension looks at whether cultural projects spark new ideas, strengthen networks, and encourage openness to change. It includes building skills, creating spaces for interaction, promoting multicultural integration, and involving people in decision-making. It also measures partnerships with research institutions, multi-stakeholder governance, and cross-sector collaboration.

To track progress, indicators focus on:

- New initiatives inspired by the project.
- Participation in networks and joint events.
- Inclusive decision-making and shared leadership.
- Continued collaborations and interdisciplinary approaches.
- Increased willingness to innovate and adapt.

In short, **the goal is to turn cultural engagement into a driver of innovation—making municipalities more flexible, connected, and ready to co-create solutions for the future.**

3. Evaluation findings

What was done:
Through mentoring, peer learning, and seed funding, municipalities activated cultural assets, designed inclusive formats, and embedded participatory practices into local governance. The project also delivered practical tools—such as the Self-Assessment Kit and evaluation framework—to help cities measure and sustain impact.

Did it work?
Yes. Evidence shows strengthened community ties, increased pride and belonging, and psychosocial benefits such as confidence and reduced isolation. Municipalities adopted participatory governance methods, improved cross-sector collaboration, and began integrating resilience concepts into policy. Innovation capacity grew through new partnerships, interdisciplinary approaches, and recurring civic rituals. Where continuity was supported, cultural action matured into institutional routines.

What's next:
Scale the model by extending timelines and securing multi-year support to convert episodic success into lasting practice. Strengthen advocacy with a clear narrative that translates "resilience" into accessible language. Operationalise the Baltic-wide network as a diffusion mechanism for ready-to-adopt practices. Embed monitoring through light, repeatable measures and promote the use of the Self-Assessment Tool to back stories with evidence. Ultimately, position culture as a strategic lever for inclusive, democratic, and resilient communities.

3.1. Relevance and effectiveness of the BSR Cultural Pearls' actions and the results achieved in the short-term

Community development

The four 2024 Pearls managed to impact positively on the community development of their respective communities. The award made inhabitants feel proud of themselves, their community, and their heritage. Many of the interventions highlighted the local heritage of the municipalities, such as the Old Fire Station in the case of Jakobstad/Petersaari. In the case of Rūjiena, the award provided the chance for previously unexplored cross-border exchange, which was received very positively by the inhabitants. In the case of Kiel, the sense of pride was especially fostered in children, who experienced co-creation for the first time during interventions such as the Children's Sailing Picture Parade. In Svendborg, activities such as the urban mapping with FLUK Arrt School or the nature immersion with Passion for Nature contributed to feelings of rootedness in youth members and enhanced their sense of local identity. The projects provided participants with new skills and created moments of knowledge transfer. The challenges within the communities were thematised as part of the interventions, i.e. through the engagement of the expert Miriam Attias (a specialist in

neighbourhood integration in multicultural cities) in the municipality of Jakobstad/Pietersaari. Through this workshop, the municipality reached important conclusions that will shape the course of future integration activities, particularly in relation to the dynamics that ensure successful integration of inhabitants. Jakobstad/Pietersaari excelled in promoting co-creation and co-design using the town's resident panel. All the municipalities produced targeted activities that directly focused on the identified target groups, and so the project activities and events were perfectly aligned with the challenges experienced by these groups. As a result of the interventions, the inhabitants of the communities felt more empowered to use their voice to shape cultural initiatives. All the awardees successfully implemented activities targeted at developing a shared vision and imaginary for the future, such as through Rūjiena's Riga 8 street project or the Inclusive Concert Series in Kiel. As per the conducted consultations, participants to the implemented activities felt more connected to and included in the community, and the activities increased the level of trust. Especially the municipalities that focused their efforts on the development of communitarian spaces (such as the Old Fire Station in Jakobstad/Pietersaari) reported that inhabitants felt a greater sense of responsibility towards the community after implementing the project. In the case of Svendborg, the project successfully tackled the difficult task of engaging youth members affected by loneliness.

Across the six 2025 Pearls, the programme has been most immediately legible in the ways it brought residents into shared spaces, both physical and conversational, and, in doing so, shifted local narratives from passivity to participation. In Alytus District, participatory events were consciously designed to draw in groups that do not typically engage in cultural life, which in turn fostered confidence, belonging and a renewed sense of community spirit; the cumulative impression locally is that such inclusive formats are now more likely to recur, normalising culture as a routine means of coming together. In Helsingborg, targeted formats such as intergenerational storytelling and youth dialogues opened practical channels between residents and the city administration, allowing young people and seniors to interact with policy conversations on their own terms and to see their experiences reflected in the city's development discourse. Kaskinen/Kaskö's experience was notable for the way a single flagship action (the wooden house and construction fair) became a focal point for civic pride, catalysing cooperation across municipal departments and drawing in residents who had initially been sceptical; the fair also helped bridge between newer and longer standing populations.

In Peipsiääre, community development took the form of structured youth engagement around a Hackathon process, with dialogue and feedback sessions that gave the municipality a clearer view of how younger residents envisage the region's future; although broader intergroup relationships are still emerging, the new conversations are seen as a foundation for further connections and recurring participation. Płock's "culture to go" approach put residents in outlying communities at the centre of planning from the outset, creating a strong sense of ownership and forging new relationships among neighbours who had previously lacked collaborative habits; the municipality now regards these ties as a

platform for subsequent local initiatives. Smiltene, meanwhile, used the revitalisation of the Jāņukalns openair stage to couple hands-on stewardship with cultural programming: low threshold cleanup actions, residence panels and cross institutional collaboration together strengthened trust, generated a shared sense of achievement and reestablished the site as a gathering point that attracts visitors as well as locals.

The picture that emerges is of relevance grounded in locally resonant entry points: architecture in Kaskinen/Kaskö, neighbourhood level access in Płock, youth voice in Peipsiääre, place based stewardship in Smiltenem, and of effectiveness expressed through the practicalities of participation and the ease with which residents could find a role. Even where awareness of the Pearl label itself was modest, as in a large city such as Helsingborg, the programme's formats still established connective tissue between communities and institutions that had been harder to cultivate through routine municipal channels.

Health and wellbeing

Through the implementation of the BSR Cultural Pearls award, the four 2024 Pearls could significantly enhance the health and well-being of their communities. In the case of Rūjiena, a new public space was created, and in the case of Jakobstad/Pietersaari, an old public space was revitalised. The cleaning of Riga 8 street in Rūjiena successfully involved the community and because of it, an area of the municipality was cleaned and a cultural space for theatre improvisation was established. The sustainability of the project was ensured through the community's creation of their own NGO to manage the space. In Jakobstad/Pietersaari, the renovation of the Old Fire Station was received with great enthusiasm, and it is now used for different communal purposes. In all the municipalities, the projects created significant opportunities for personal development. Especially notable is Svendborg's CultureConnection initiative, a 12-week programme for young people experiencing discontent or mental distress, as well as the Milife co-creating event that engaged hundreds of 7th-grade students. Another notable example is Kiel's Kick-Off Barcamp "Kieler Kulturkraft 2024", which brought together around 120 participants of the social and cultural sector to promote exchange and strengthen the cultural ecosystem of the city, as well as its social cohesion. The four municipalities reported that the implemented activities enhanced the sense of belonging of the community members. In addition, in some cases, the BSR Cultural Pearls award title set the spark to secure further funding that guarantees the sustainability of the implemented projects. Instances of community-led initiatives underline the ability of the BSR Cultural Pearls project to strengthen community belonging. Furthermore, the four awardees managed to propose activities that enhanced the development of strong relationships, i.e. through initiatives such as Rūjiena's 'Meet Your Neighbour'. Especially in the case of children who got to try out new things (i.e. being on a boat for the first time), the Kieler municipality reported that the personal confidence of participants increased.

Short term wellbeing outcomes are necessarily impressionistic at this stage, yet there is consistent qualitative evidence that inclusive, participatory cultural activity has lifted morale, deepened belonging and provided residents with credible ways to contribute to

local life. Regarding the 2025 Pearls, in Alytus District, participants reported renewed confidence and togetherness as a direct effect of being invited in, rather than spoken at; this social encouragement was as important as the content of the events themselves. Helsingborg's teams are cautious about attributing population level change in a city of its size, but those directly involved—particularly seniors and young people—described increased pride and a stronger sense of belonging, which the municipality now sees as a base for sustained participation.

Kaskinen/Kaskö presents perhaps the clearest affective shift: residents articulated a move from resignation to optimism, with the fair functioning as proof that positive change is possible and worth repeating; new ties across age groups and between established and newer residents strengthened that effect. In Peipsiääre, the very act of listening to youth and integrating their views into municipal planning appears to have been wellbeing enhancing in its own right, signalling that local futures are not decided at a distance. Płock's early codesign process similarly cultivated a sense of agency, reflected in high participation and a reported uplift in ownership among residents in culturally underserved areas. Smiltene's combination of collective labour and culture—people of different generations cleaning, planting and then returning to a reanimated stage for performances—has been associated locally with stronger belonging, pride and more frequent, low friction interactions between residents, municipal teams and cultural organisations.

While none of the cases claim measurable health outcomes at this juncture, the proximity of cultural action to everyday life, and the way participation was scaffolded to be achievable and visible, seem to have produced immediate psychosocial benefits. Where ambition outstripped communication—most evident in the difficulty some municipalities faced in translating the concept of "social resilience" into locally meaningful language—wellbeing gains were still observable among active participants, suggesting that narrative framing can follow practice so long as the practice remains grounded in resident priorities.

Innovation capacity

The BSR Cultural Pearls award leveraged on and increased the innovation capacities of the four municipalities. As a result of the project activities, the municipalities could gain a deeper understanding of the shared societal issues that the municipality and its community are facing. Notably, the BSR Cultural Pearls award allowed some of them to scope the extent of intervention needed in the field of social resilience. The BSR Cultural Pearls Award allowed the municipalities to put the spotlight on this topic, which generated important insights into what areas need further attention. As previously mentioned, some projects initiated during the award year inspired community members to develop new independent initiatives. The workshops conducted as part of the activities allowed municipalities and community members to gain new skills, knowledge and methods to effectively address shared challenges in all the three communities. As a result of the project, the organisations took part in local and informal networks, starting with the BSR Cultural Pearls' own events. Some of these events provided the space for the Cultural Pearls to exchange on their action plans and to create a network of professionals, which was perceived very positively by
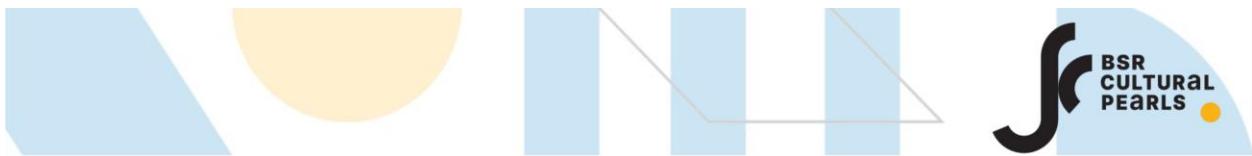
municipalities. Multiculturality was explicitly promoted in most of the municipalities. In Jakobstad/Pietersaari, the community was already familiar and open to multiculturalism, but this experience provided them with specific tools for active integration. In the case of Rūjiena, the BSR Cultural Pearls programme facilitated the cross-border exhibition with Estonia. Initially hesitant to engage in co-creation activities, the community members ultimately became motivated to collaborate in the development of their own cultural project: the theatre improvisation space. Finally, the municipalities were able to engage CCS professionals and local actors through the award, as well as education centres. In Svendborg, for example, the municipality worked closely with the FLUK Art School the Svendborg Library, the Harders Music Scene and the NGO Passion for Nature to shape their activities. This network and these collaborations can be leveraged in further initiatives.

Analysing the 2025 awardees, the programme's most distinctive short-term contribution to innovation capacity lies in how it has reframed relationships between departments, between institutions and residents, and between localities and international peers, thereby expanding the repertoire of what municipalities consider possible. Alytus District describes the Pearl as a rare platform for international networking which, when combined with inclusive methods, generated collaborations that go beyond preexisting municipal structures. Helsingborg reports that "resilience" has entered the working vocabulary of the administration, providing a conceptual throughline for future inclusion and city development work and a prompt for more participatory design. Kaskinen/Kaskö points to strengthened interdepartmental cooperation and a change in administrative attitudes—from scepticism to proactive engagement—once the award created both a mandate and a motivation to act; resident feedback has already seeded thinking about how to institutionalise recurring, resilience-oriented events.

Peipsiääre highlights cross sector partnerships forged through the Hackathon planning, with the process itself functioning as a platform for public dialogue; the municipality sees in this the scaffolding for recurring events and a more porous relationship with external stakeholders. In Płock, although the web of partners did not dramatically widen, existing collaborations deepened and a "culture to go" model is being positioned for mainstreaming within city strategy, normalising the extension of cultural provision to underserved areas as a standard municipal function rather than a project exception. Smiltene demonstrates how practical tools (community surveys, a digital heritage route and continued mentorship) can be combined with resident led governance (such as residence panels) to build municipal competence for inclusive cultural planning and delivery.

At a programme level, mentoring, webinars and the peer network are repeatedly cited as accelerants, especially where application processes initially felt onerous or where internal buy in was uncertain; in several cases, these supports shifted projects from disengagement to confident implementation and, crucially, opened doors to sustained cross border learning beyond the immediate Pearl cycle. The immediate innovation, then, is not only in discrete products or events but in the governance routines, language and partnerships that now underpin municipalities' approach to culture led resilience.

> **To sum up:**
> In the short term, the BSR Cultural Pearls project has proven highly relevant and effective where actions were grounded in locally meaningful entry points and inclusive formats. Evidence shows strengthened community ties, psychosocial benefits such as confidence and belonging, and the adoption of participatory governance methods. Innovation capacity emerged through new collaborations and revised working routines, supported by mentoring and peer learning. While awareness of the Pearl label varied, the programme consistently delivered visible, achievable participation that catalysed civic engagement and seeded institutional change.

3.2. Relevance and effectiveness of the BSR Cultural Peals' action and of the impacts achieved in the medium to long term

A year on, the most persuasive signs of relevance are found where the Pearl has been used to reinforce and mature preexisting strategies, and where participation has been tied to specific places, practices and partnerships that people care about. Svendborg is exemplary in this respect: the title added political weight to youth centred culture as a route to resilience, helped secure further funding, and has been folded back into municipal planning so that cultural spaces operate as hubs for leadership, volunteering and skills acquisition. The course that introduces young people to roles in NGOs and cultural institutions signals a shift from "project participation" to durable civic pathways, while visible creative outputs such as murals continue to make young people's agency tangible.

Kiel's trajectory is one of consolidation: while not producing many brand-new cross sector collaborations, it has normalised participatory methods within the Creative City department and maintained several actions beyond the title year. The recurring bar camp format and the theatre against loneliness remain active, the latter valued for its intergenerational character; even one-off street level artworks and wall tiles function as civic reminders, extending the project's mnemonic footprint in daily life. Political attention to social resilience has grown, suggesting that the Pearl's vocabulary has travelled into institutional priorities.

Jakobstad's experience speaks to visibility, networks and community anchoring. The title year is associated with a stronger cultural profile for the city and a sense of closer connection between residents, the municipality and local cultural life. Although the physical renovation of the Old Fire Station has not yet begun, the building is programmed actively with concerts, social dances, weddings and even a disco for older residents -transforming a planned asset into a living venue while capital works are prepared. The "cultural friend" system, which pairs residents with similar interests to encourage attendance and counter loneliness, indicates a wellbeing-oriented strand that can outlast the project cycle. At the municipal level, interdepartmental collaborations have widened and the city's network across the Baltic Sea Region has thickened, with invitations to join wider platforms reinforcing reputation and reach.

Rūjiena offers a more contingent picture, where community energy and ingenuity have generated a legacy under difficult structural conditions. The establishment of Rīgas Street 8 as a cultural hub, stewarded by a resident led NGO, has persisted as a recognisable place for concerts, quizzes and meetings. The cross-border storytelling initiative, Postcards from the Border, continues through exhibitions and a bilingual website, keeping everyday narratives of the Latvian Estonian borderlands in circulation. Yet transport barriers, limited budgets and infrastructure need temper the scale of effect, and the language of cultural or social resilience has not fully landed in wider municipal priorities. The case nonetheless shows how small towns can broaden their own understanding of culture from events to shared narratives and skills, while signalling that continuity requires multiyear support and better integration into policy and budgets.

Across these varied contexts, the programme's longer arc is visible in three intertwined areas: first, in the enhancement of local reputation and visibility within a cultural resilience frame; second, in the degree to which resilience concepts and participatory methods have been embedded in administrative routines; and third, in how the title has been used as a social resource to renew pride and identity. The framework questions that anchor these areas (on visibility and reputation, strategic integration and perceived value) remain a useful lens for reading the legacy each Pearl is assembling.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the Cultural Pearls initiative has generated a discernible legacy, although its depth and configuration vary according to municipal scale, resource endowment and pre-existing strategic orientation. Where a clear trajectory from the award year to current practice can be observed, community development appears to have transitioned from episodic participation to more structured and recurrent forms of engagement. Kiel exemplifies this pattern: the institutionalisation of participatory planning within the Creative City department, coupled with the continuation of annual bar camps and intergenerational theatre projects, has embedded civic rituals that sustain collective interaction and cultural co-production.

In Svendborg, the progression from youth involvement to youth leadership and volunteering—both within cultural institutions and civil society organisations—signals a qualitative shift in innovation capacity. This evolution is underpinned by cross-sectoral partnerships and supplementary funding streams, enabling young residents to acquire competencies and confidence to initiate and deliver cultural interventions autonomously.

Jakobstad illustrates a pragmatic form of legacy, where the activation of the Old Fire Station as a cultural venue, despite pending structural renovations, has maintained civic visibility. The introduction of the "cultural friend" scheme constitutes a low-threshold social innovation aimed at mitigating isolation and reinforcing cultural participation. While modest in scale, such mechanisms create enabling conditions for sustained impact if adequately resourced. Rūjiena demonstrates resilience through adaptive strategies: a locally constituted NGO continues to animate Rīgas Street 8 as a cultural hub, while cross-border storytelling initiatives preserve intangible heritage and foster identity work. These gains coexist with structural constraints—transport deficits, infrastructural deterioration and

fiscal limitations—yet the foundational scaffolding for long-term continuity is evident, contingent upon municipal integration and multi-annual support.

In synthesis, where the Pearl designation has functioned as a lever for institutional learning and routinised participatory practice rather than as a symbolic accolade, there are credible indications of durable social resilience and innovation capacity. Conversely, in contexts where systemic constraints remain unresolved, the legacy is more fragile, though still manifest in the persistence of community-led spaces, narrative-based projects and emergent civic competences.

Engagement with cultural and creative sector actors remains substantively active, albeit with variations in intensity and scope. In Kiel, the pattern is one of consolidation rather than expansion: existing collaborations have deepened through iterative activities, and participatory modalities have become embedded within municipal operational routines. This suggests a transition from project-based engagement to procedural normalisation, even if the breadth of partnerships has not significantly widened.

Svendborg reports the establishment of new partnerships and the mobilisation of additional resources for cultural and social projects. Cultural spaces have been strategically positioned as platforms for youth-led coordination with institutions and NGOs, while the introduction of structured volunteering pathways formalises a continuum from participation to contribution, thereby reinforcing the sector's civic infrastructure.

Jakobstad's award year catalysed a heterogeneous constellation of cultural actors that includes museum services and technical departments generating synergies perceived as transferable to future initiatives. The municipality's integration into regional networks and receipt of external recognition further amplify its cultural profile and partnership potential. In Rūjiena, the NGO stewarding Rīgas Street 8 sustains a nexus between residents, cultural organisers and municipal stakeholders, while the bilingual storytelling platform maintains transnational collaboration among artists, curators and community historians. Here, the principal challenge is not the absence of activity but its precariousness: continuity is heavily reliant on voluntary labour in the absence of dedicated financial and infrastructural support.

Taken collectively, the cultural and creative sectors exhibit ongoing mobilisation, particularly where municipalities have institutionalised participatory governance and provided tangible platforms (physical venues, recurring programmes, and structured events) that incentivise sustained engagement. Where such anchoring mechanisms are weaker, stakeholder reflections converge on similar prescriptions: enhanced inter-Pearl connectivity, augmented communication capacity to amplify collaborative outputs, and, critically, multi-annual resourcing to prevent the erosion of civic creativity through over-reliance on discretionary effort.

To sum up:
One year on, the programme's impact is most durable where municipalities leveraged the Pearl title to consolidate existing strategies and embed participatory practices into administrative routines. Legacies include recurring civic rituals, youth leadership

pathways, and cultural spaces functioning as hubs for skills and volunteering. The initiative has enhanced local visibility, normalised resilience-oriented planning, and fostered cross-sector partnerships. However, continuity remains contingent on structural conditions and multiannual support. Where institutionalisation has occurred, there are credible signs of lasting social resilience and innovation capacity beyond the award cycle.

3.3. Main challenges and bottlenecks identified by relevant stakeholders

A first, persistent challenge is conceptual: several municipalities struggled to translate "social resilience" into locally resonant language and actionable formats. In Helsingborg, the term required careful framing to be meaningful to residents, and awareness of the Pearl itself remained uneven across a large urban population; yet once specific intergenerational and youth dialogues were in motion, the underlying practice travelled more easily than the label. Peipsiääre reported a similar vocabulary gap, particularly in outreach to young people, where schools are few and the term "resilience" did not map neatly onto everyday concerns; concerted listening through hackathon dialogues helped bridge that distance, but only after additional effort within the municipality to secure internal buy in.

The second aspect is operational and organisational. Small and midsized authorities repeatedly cite tight budgets, thin staffing and bureaucratic friction as bottlenecks. Some municipalities judged the budget modest and at times unevenly allocated, with governance issues absorbing time that could have been directed to participants. From another angle, a municipality attested that engaging beyond the "usual suspects," coordinating across a winter hiatus and tailoring formats to both youth and seniors stretched limited resources and municipal procedures. Larger cities are not immune: as one of them affirmed it would have welcomed additional human resources and a stronger connective tissue between Pearls to better exploit the network and heighten international visibility.

A third theme concerns access and infrastructure. For example, Rūjiena's cultural hub at Rīgas Street 8 has community legitimacy but sits within a constrained physical and transport environment; poor connections from surrounding villages and the building's condition limit reach, while outmigration and an ageing population intensify the inclusion challenge. The result is a set of target success stories whose structural impact depends on multiyear support and municipal anchoring. Kaskinen-Kaskö offers a counterpoint: a single flagship action, the wooden house and construction fair, became a civic magnet and reset local mood, but it also revealed how quickly momentum can stall if events are not institutionalised and if scepticism within administrations is not actively worked through. Mentoring helped them over a complicated application and clarified expectations, underlining the importance of timely, practical guidance.

A fourth pattern is about networks and learning. Stakeholders praise the mentoring and webinars for demystifying processes and providing peer reassurance, yet several note that

the international network can feel inspiring but abstract if not translated into concrete collaboration opportunities. One of the teams, for instance, valued the exposure but found it harder to activate the network for specific, coproduced ventures; the insight prompted them to double down on strengthening existing local strategies where the Pearl could add real weight, particularly around youth leadership and cross sector working.

Finally, monitoring and evidence posed a quiet, consistent difficulty. Municipalities can describe palpable shifts in pride, belonging and participation among those directly involved, but population level effects are harder to verify without repeated measures and simple instruments embedded in routine practice. Svendborg explicitly notes the challenge of assessing broader change even where individual trajectories such as confidence, skills, and volunteer engagement are evident; Helsingborg is careful not to overclaim citywide impact despite strong qualitative feedback from seniors and youth. These cautionary notes are less a weakness than an honest signal that providing future Pearls with performance monitoring and assessment tools is extremely valuable not only from the funding agencies perspective, but also to back the narrative with tangible impacts.

Across these challenges, the lessons are remarkably convergent. Start from what already has traction locally and use the Pearl to strengthen and legitimise it; build visible, shared achievements that residents can own, then stitch those achievements into policy, budgets and departmental routines. Trust residents with genuine responsibility and design low threshold entry points; where that was attempted, communities responded with energy and engagement.

Finally, treat mentoring and peer exchange not as addons but as the project's backbone. Their role in capacity-building, problem-solving and adaptive learning was repeatedly cited as decisive in overcoming implementation bottlenecks. The network dimension amplifies this effect: inter-Pearl connectivity and cross-border exchange have emerged as critical enablers of knowledge transfer, innovation diffusion and reputational capital. Strengthening this network through regular interaction, thematic collaborations and integration with complementary European platforms represents a strategic lever for consolidating the project's relevance and sustainability over time.

The next iteration of the programme will benefit most from measures that convert episodic success into institutional habit. The first is to secure continuity through light, multiyear scaffolding. The Pearls experiences show how one-year bursts of activity plant seeds but struggle to mature without predictable municipal lines or dedicated micro funds; modest, multiannual envelopes tied to simple milestones would allow local champions to plan, reduce volunteer burnout and stabilise partnerships with cultural and social actors. Jakobstad's ongoing activation of the Old Fire Station, complete with social formats like the cultural friend system, suggests that even before capital works are complete, programmatic continuity can anchor a place in people's routines; securing the staffing and small grant ecology around such activation would lock in gains.

A second measure is to embed participation in the machinery of city administration. Kiel's institutionalisation of participatory planning within the Creative City department, and

Svendborg's integration of youth leadership pathways into cultural spaces and NGO volunteering, indicate how a shift in working methods outlasts individual projects. Codifying these methods ensures that engagement remains a default rather than an exception, and it creates predictable platforms onto which international partners can be integrated into.

Third, communication deserves strategic investment at two levels: locally, several Pearls ask for a clearer, shared story and a practical toolkit to translate "resilience" into everyday language; where municipalities struggled to convey the value of the title, awareness and pride lagged the substance of the work. A communications kit cocreated with past Pearls using plain language frames, visual assets, population specific examples and a guide to local media could raise recognition without adding administrative load. Regionally, a public relations and communications campaign could amplify city narratives, recycling them across the Baltic network and making the international dimension feel real, as Kiel proposed.

Fourth, facilitate the application process by providing annotated exemplars, a short "first mile" clinic with mentors, and a checklist that maps requirements to typical municipal data sources.

Fifth, make evidence easy and useful. Municipalities ask for small sets of repeated measures aligned with their capacities: attendance by neighbourhood and age band; simple before and after prompts on belonging and agency; a light follow-up at three and twelve months for a rotating sample of participants; and a photo or audio diary option to capture narrative change. The municipalities' difficulty in tracing system level effects despite rich individual stories argues for such pragmatic tools that can be embedded in routine practice and revisited annually.

Finally, the Baltic-wide network must be operationalised in ways that generate tangible, locally relevant outcomes. While the evaluative evidence confirms a clear appetite for transnational exchange, some stakeholders observed that international connectivity often remains limited. That would transform the network from a symbolic layer into a functional mechanism for innovation diffusion, enabling municipalities to co-credit and co-own practices while reinforcing the programme's identity as a collaborative ecosystem. Existing exemplars of activities already concluded can offer viable prototypes for this portability strategy.

4. What's next

The BSR Cultural Pearls project is not only about awarding titles - it is also about building lasting capacity for cultural resilience. As the project moves forward in next iterations, its focus is on delivering practical tools that make monitoring, evaluation, and continuous learning part of everyday practice for municipalities.

These tools include:

- Self-Assessment Tool – enabling Pearls to track progress and reflect on achievements in a structured, user-friendly way.
- Practical Guide – offering step-by-step instructions, templates, and checklists to embed evaluation into planning and delivery.
- Survey Templates and Evaluation Framework – simplifying data collection and making impact measurement accessible.
- Value Proposition Materials – helping municipalities advocate for culture as a driver of resilience and secure future support.

Together, these resources aim to **turn evaluation into action**, ensuring that lessons learned inform future strategies, strengthen institutional routines, and foster peer learning across the Baltic Sea Region. The next phase is about scaling these tools, supporting their adoption, and using evidence to advocate for culture-driven resilience at local, regional, and European levels.
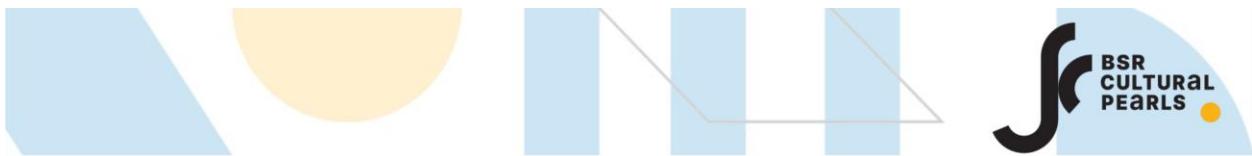
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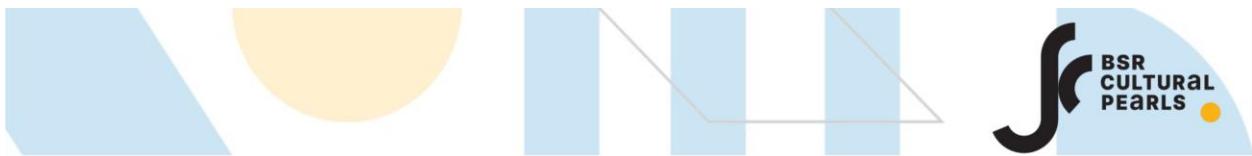
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6. Annex – Literature review findings

For knowledge-sharing purposes, we are presenting the findings of the literature review as an annex to this summary version of the report. This annex provides additional context and insights that informed the design of this assignment. We believe that BSR Cultural Pearls and other stakeholders can benefit from understanding the rationale behind the selection of the Theory of Change approach, as it underpins the evaluation framework and methodology applied throughout this process.

The research team undertook an extensive literature review consisting of a total of 44 sources. The sources identified included both internal and external sources to the project. Of the sources identified, 39 were external sources and 5 were sources internal to the project, either developed and published or made available to the research team by NDPC. Of the external sources, 28 were academic papers, one was a preliminary study, 1 was a guidebook, 6 were reports, 2 were books, and 1 was a website. All the sources had been published in the last twenty years, with publications spanning from 2005 to 2024, and most of the sources were published in the last ten years. The sources internal to the project were found on the BSR Cultural Pearls Resources website. Internal unpublished documents were provided by NDPC via a secure link. Academic resources were collected from academic databases using Boolean operators and including terms such as "evaluation" AND "social", etc.

6.1. The social dimension of impact

The Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) are an important sector worldwide. Not only do they represent a significant part of the economy, but they directly improve the lives of people, they foster sustainable urban development, support creativity and culture, and advocate for the implementation of the 2030 agenda. Apart from their tangible value (in the form of tangible outputs such as artworks or artisanal products), the CCIs have an important intangible value. They actively promote values such as social inclusion, encourage dialogue and foster community engagement. In addition, sustainable human development is often driven and enabled by culture[2].

According to Dick Stanley, the social effects of culture, arts, and heritage can be broadly summarised in six effects: enhancing understanding and capacity for action; creating and retaining identity, modifying values and preferences for collective choice, building social cohesion, contributing to community development, and fostering civic participation[3].
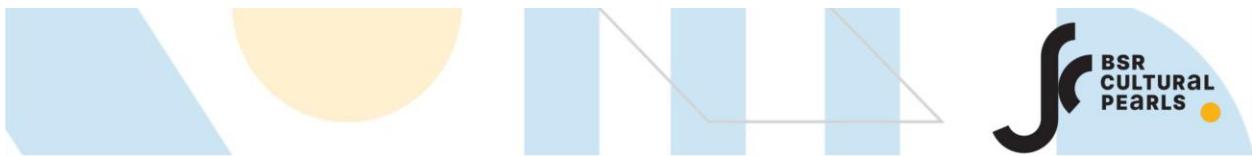
In the BSR Cultural Pearls project, culture is understood as a mean to strengthen communities, as well as a tool to provide communities with the capacities to be active, inclusive, and engaged. Culture is especially powerful in that it fosters engagement in community members, ideally also reaching those that usually do not participate in public events[4.] This capacity of culture to drive social interactions is useful to foster social resilience. Here, the project understands social resilience as

> " the ability of individuals, communities, and societies to withstand and recover from social, economic and environmental shocks and stresses. It involves capacity to adapt and learn from these challenges as well as to maintain or improve social and economic well-being. In simple terms, social resilience is about a community's ability to overcome hardship together."[5]

In the Baltic Sea Region, common challenges include climate change, urbanization, economic downturn, segregation, aging society or political tensions.[6]

6.2. Measuring social impact

Measuring the social impact of cultural interventions is difficult and complex, because the value of such interventions is difficult to monetise. This is especially true for cases in which value is produced indirectly, or where value cannot be measured[7]. At the same time, it is crucial for social enterprises to assess their social impact. Funders are interested in getting guidance on the optimal allocation of their limited resources, and they are concerned about accountability[8]. Concurrently, organisations are expected to be transparent about their social activities by all their stakeholders, and to provide information on their impact in a valid and reliable manner[9].

In the CCIs, stakeholders have struggled to find the right evaluation methodologies and approaches for their projects[10]. In contrast to most programme evaluations, CCI programmes have an added layer of difficulty: their multiple strands (economic, political and social) make it difficult to evaluate projects holistically. In addition, these network constellations are co-constructed in a collaborative process by diverse stakeholders, and they evolve over the course of the initiative[11]. Because of this complex setting, most of the cultural evaluations face value tensions in the evaluation process, that need to be addressed for the project to run smoothly[12].

The European Commission funded project UNCHARTED, listed three types of tensions that can arise in evaluation processes in their report "Conflicting dynamic of valuation in the cultural sphere" (2023):

a. Variation in valuation: A tension exists between cultural evaluations (which focus on emotions, expressions, and sensations) and social evaluations (which focus on identity, political, and relational). The resolution of this type of conflict is contingent on habits, individual contexts and content.

b. Axial tension between actors: Cultural projects tend to include actors from diverse backgrounds, involved at different stages of the evaluation process, and with potentially conflicting personal values and interests. The possible solutions are twofold: on the one hand, evaluators can choose to exclude one of the actors supporting one of the poles of the debate. However, this leads to polarisation. On the other hand, evaluators can choose to integrate different value regimes and reframe the conflictual situation into positive terms.

c. Evaluative tool tension: In the case that stakeholders do not agree on the methodology and appropriate indicators for an evaluation, this can cause evaluative tool tensions. This tension can be resolved by adapting the format and the dynamic of the evaluation through the mediation of public managers and making the evaluation a participatory and accessible process.[13]

These factors have led to the development of some standardised tools that are commonly employed in evaluations of cultural projects, adapted to specific needs and aimed at reducing tensions. Tools commonly employed in evaluations include qualifications, professional criteria, evaluation guides, quantitative indicators, and qualitative indicators[14]. In general, evaluation tools become more diversified the more actors and organisations are involved in the process of evaluation. In addition, evaluation tools become more specialised when external actors carry out the evaluation, and when projects count on funding.

The most widespread methodologies are Theory of Change (ToC), the Most Significant Change, Social Impact Assessment, and Social Return on Investment.

Theory of change

ToC is a useful tool to evaluate the overall functioning of a given project. According to Moon, Chan & Kershaw, "a ToC starts with long-term goals and then uses backward mapping to identify the preconditions and interventions necessary to achieve that goal. It is completed to understand how, when and why good is being done."[15]
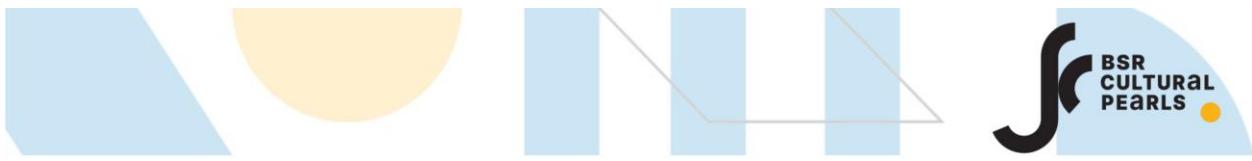
This approach for evaluating cultural projects in the CCIs is carried out in three stages:

i. Surfacing and articulating a ToC
ii. Measuring the project's activities and intended outcomes
iii. Analysing and interpreting the results of an evaluation, including their implications for adjusting the initiative's ToC and its allocation of resources.[16]

For the CCIs, Connell & Kubisch define a ToC evaluation as "a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes, and contexts of the initiative".[17] According to the authors, a good ToC should include three attributes:

i. It should be **plausible**. Project stakeholders should ask whether the available evidence and common sense suggest that the activities (should they be implemented) will lead to the desired outcomes.
ii. It should be **doable**. Project stakeholders should understand whether the initiative possesses the necessary economic, technical, political, institutional and human resources needed to carry out the initiative.
iii. It should be **testable**. Project stakeholders should make sure that the ToC is specific and complete enough that an evaluator can track its progress in credible and useful ways.[18]

The authors recommend including the following questions into the planning process:

– *What longer-term outcomes does the CCI seek to accomplish?*
– *What interim outcomes and contextual conditions are necessary and sufficient to produce those longer-term outcomes, beginning with penultimate outcomes and moving through intermediate to early outcomes?*
– *What activities should be initiated and what contextual supports are necessary to achieve the early and intermediate outcomes?*
– *What resources are required to implement the activities and maintain the contextual supports necessary for the activities to be effective, and how does the initiative gain the commitment of those resources?[19]*

Table: Advantages and disadvantages of employing the ToC methodology for CCI project evaluations:

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES

Provides a clear framework (explanation of complex pathways + identification of assumptions)	Over-simplification risk (causal explanation when interlinked)
Facilitates stakeholder alignment (and thus reduces potential tensions)	Resource intensive
Well adapted for monitoring and evaluation (provides structure for measurement and identifies gaps	Potential for conflict
Builds accountability	Challenges in Measurement

The ToC methodology presents several advantages for their use in evaluations but also disadvantages. One significant advantage is that it supports the idea that projects should be evaluated as processes. With this approach, evaluators try to understand not only if activities produced change, but also how and why[20]. Through it, evaluators can identify more clearly what to measure, which helps to guide choices about the right moment and the right tools to measure the identified elements. In addition, a ToC clarifies accountability adjudication. If a ToC is explicit, the accountability structure will also be explicit and consensually validated. By articulating a ToC in the beginning of a project and achieving an agreement on the theory by all the stakeholders, tensions associated to causal attribution of impact can be reduced. According to the authors, this builds accountability, facilitates evaluating the project, and supports stakeholder alignment.

However, ToC also presents several disadvantages. Evaluating CCI projects is a complicated enterprise, mainly because of the different planes of impact (social, economic, or political) present, as well as potentially differing values and interests that different stakeholders might have. In an evaluation scenario, this can lead to challenges in measuring the project. A possible problem might be the attempt to mitigate this complication by overly simplifying the evaluation context and deriving causal explanations for interlinked matters. Disagreements between stakeholders might arise when identifying intermediate outcomes, which can be a politically loaded process[21].