

Key Insights from *Creating Futures:* *Rethinking Cultural Institutions,* *Infrastructure, and Investment*



April 13 to 18, 2026

Salzburg, Austria

These key insights emerged from the Salzburg Global session on *“Creating Futures: Rethinking Cultural Institutions, Infrastructure, and Investment”* in April 2026.

Over the course of a week at Salzburg Global, more than 45 institutional leaders, cultural funders, policymakers, and creative-economy actors from over 25 countries collectively grappled with a fundamental question: *What does cultural infrastructure that is sustainable, sovereign, and equitable actually look like?*

The Culture, Arts and Society session, *“Creating Futures: Rethinking Cultural Institutions, Infrastructure, and Investment”* moved from diagnosis to visioning to prototyping: Opening discussions identified the structural problems the field has stopped naming out loud, mid-week thought experiments and workshops stress-tested alternative futures, and the closing days produced concrete tools and outputs designed to be adapted, tested, and scaled in global and local contexts.

Of the many ideas shared by Fellows, the following four insights emerged as key threads tying together conversations throughout the session.

All included quotes were shared by Fellows under the Chatham House rule during the Salzburg Global session, and have been anonymized to protect their privacy.



Culture is civic infrastructure, not a sector to defend

Fellows urged for a shift away from a narrow view of “culture-as-sector” toward a more comprehensive view of “culture-as-infrastructure.” Instead of justifying the value of culture to ministries, funders, and markets in purely economic terms, culture should be recognized for its foundational role in civic life, similarly to transport, education, environment, or public health. **This is a strategic shift, not merely a rhetorical one. If culture is infrastructure, it is no longer a discretionary line item; it is a precondition for cohesive, resilient societies that the rest of policy agendas depend on.**

The idea that “art is not a sector, it’s embedded across sectors” was translated by a working group into a proposed Cultural Intelligence Platform: a tool to map cultural assets, track value beyond economic indicators, and make culture legible to policymakers and planners as infrastructure rather than as charity.

“We are moving from the notion of culture as a sector to culture as civic infrastructure, intangible and tangible. We are moving from the perception that culture is deficit-based to culture as an asset-based, resource-based approach.”

“If culture can be embedded in society, we don’t need to make a case for it. That is the key shift. If you get cultural value mainstreamed, the rest will follow.”

What’s Needed:

- Re-pitching and repositioning culture in, and as integral to, cross-sectoral conversations: trade, urban planning, health, education, climate - not just inside cultural ministry budget cycles.
- Treating “intangible” assets (imagination, ritual, empathy, connection, intergenerational knowledge) as core and fundamental infrastructure, not just “soft” add-ons or nice-to-haves.
- Building shared measurement: the Cultural Intelligence Platform proposal exists precisely because policymakers cannot fund what they cannot see or measure.

Sustainable funding means building the ecosystem, not just moving capital

Fellows shifted the conversation on funding from “how do we get more money” to “how do we change the conditions under which money flows.” Three threads converged here. Cultural Sovereignty explored how whoever funds you defines you: When external capital sets an agenda, it influences identity and direction. Resource-Mobilization Literacy refers to how the field lacks a shared vocabulary for discussing funding, which keeps practitioners trapped in a donor-grantee logic that limits ambition and leverage. Ecosystem Capacity becomes a challenge when data, coalitions, and investable enterprises cannot be called upon once funders arrive. Building this form of infrastructure should be a constant and continuous priority in order to utilize new funding efficiently.

One working group codified this into a three-pillar methodology: making the case, building coalitions, and mobilizing capital. The insights were applied first to Tunisia and Malta as test contexts, and explicitly framed as iterative rather than sequential.

“Independence is the resource. The sovereignty is related to who is financing us. Our freedom is who owns the businesses and who is funding.”

“The impact-investment infrastructure for culture doesn’t exist in much of the world. Before capital can flow, the ecosystem has to be built.”

What’s Needed:

- Moving from grant-tinkering to systemic decentralization by handing decisions and funds to regional, artist-led partnerships.
- Building upon examples such as that of a creator-marketing platform using fair-pay and fair algorithmic infrastructure on the for-profit side: 24-hour creator payments, minimum pricing to prevent under-bidding, and objective ranking criteria designed to correct demographic bias.
- Developing a tool, such as the ecosystem-building matrix produced by one of the working groups, which will be adapted locally to map case-making, coalitions, and investable enterprises in unique contexts.
- Coordinating across ministries so culture is budgeted alongside trade, finance, and reconstruction, and sharpened by voices from post-conflict, post-revolution, and high-emigration contexts.



3

Governance is not neutral: Power must be made visible, and actively redistributed

Across the week, governance was reframed not as structural, but rather as relational and political. Who holds power, when, and at whose cost? Fellows articulated that power must move: "It's not a static state... at different times, different groups must hold the power." But power that moves also requires someone willing to release it. It is emotional work as much as procedural, and discussions named it as the genuine sticking point within many institutions.

Fellows reflected on feeling powerless at times in their work. Two instruments emerged from the working groups: a Hidden Agenda game that surfaces the competing accountabilities sitting silently around any board table, and Groundwork Griot, a trust diagnostic that scores institutions differently depending on which community is answering by design. Both are conversation-forcing instruments, built on the wager that you cannot design guaranteed honesty into a structure, but design tools that make it costly to avoid.

"There's a fear that is often one of the big vulnerabilities in letting go... people failing to grasp it because they couldn't imagine it, because we'd been so ingrained in a system of institutional or tight power holding."

"I wanted this bold future, but there were no voices from the communities we were trying to deal with in the room able to make that decision together."

What's Needed:

- Identifying and supporting trust before designing the process. It's crucial to see that an institution's trust is not a single score but multiple factors, depending on which community is answering. Trust assessment becomes a precondition for governance reform, not its by-product.
- Addressing varying accountabilities, not suppressing them. Every board sits on competing loyalties, such as staff protection, donor comfort, artist visibility, government caution, or legal caution. Good governance design is not about removing these tensions but about making them visible before decisions are taken.
- Bringing missing voices into the room before bold decisions, not after. Ideas and projects can end up with less impact than anticipated if the communities they affect were not represented at the decision point. The implication is structural: representation precedes ambition.
- Treating internal critique as part of governance, not a threat to it. The discussions surfaced two adjacent silencing dynamics: sectoral "go along to get along" solidarity, and self-censorship by leaders trying to keep institutions afloat. Both are real and unsolved, and both undermine governance honesty. Cultures of speech inside institutions are the cultural complement to the design decisions above.



Invisible labor must be named, valued, and protected

The question of “whose labor counts?” is central. Fellows raised a major gap that needs to be addressed: Markets do not see, measure, or reward cultural labor, and the people who hold the field together are systematically disposable. **Invisible labor here refers to the unpaid, informal scaffolding that holds the cultural field together: the producers, connectors, mentors, intermediaries, and translators whose work is expected as a personal commitment to the field rather than recognized as a profession.**

The cost is not evenly distributed. This labor is disproportionately performed by women, racialized workers, those from the Global South, and early-career professionals; the people who lack the salaried base from which “personal commitment” becomes possible. **Because the work is relational rather than transactional, markets struggle to see, measure, or reward it. The people who hold the field together remain systematically disposable, even as they become more essential.**

The shift Fellows proposed is structural rather than aspirational: Move this work from invisible to named, because, as one Fellow put it, you cannot defend what has no name. Labor needs to shift from informal to contracted, and from individual sacrifice to structurally protected.

A working group of Fellows is developing the Fair Culture Toolkit, a multilingual movement with practical tools: fee calculators, IP toolkits, contract templates, fair-pay benchmarks, and ready-to-localize campaigns. It is embedded in existing cultural networks, anchored in UNESCO instruments already on the table, and designed to be picked up locally rather than waiting for a global settlement.

“Many cultural workers are systematically excluded, even while being invited into the narrative of inclusion. The question becomes not only who is invited, but who is actually able to arrive, to stay, and to sustain a presence within the sector.”

“As long as it’s not named, as long as it’s not defined, we will not be able to defend it.”



*“Fair culture equals fair work equals fair pay equals fair play.
When culture is fair, everyone benefits.”*

What’s Needed:

- Naming the value chain: The professions that hold the field together are under-researched and unnamed. Without a clear perspective, there is no advocacy.
- Building practical infrastructure, not declarations: Fee calculators, IP toolkits, fair-pay benchmarks, and contract templates should be distributed multilingually and embedded into existing cultural networks.
- Financially supporting cultural workers to attend trainings, conferences, and convenings. The rooms where the field shapes its own future cannot be reserved for those whose salaries already cover the travel. Funded participation is a precondition for representative decision-making, not a perk.

From Diagnosis to Tools

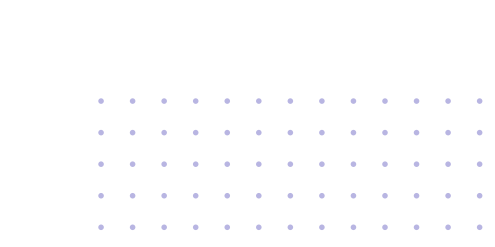
A distinguishing feature of this Salzburg Global session was that it did not stop at principle. By the end of the week, every working group had a prototype on the table: not finished products, but instruments that Fellows will continue to adapt, test, and scale in local contexts. Our digital report provides comprehensive descriptions of these five working group outputs.

The session's closing framing was deliberate: participants left as Salzburg Global Fellows, with a shared commitment to take this work into their own institutions, networks, and policy environments. The session's most important sentiment, in the end, is one of the simplest:

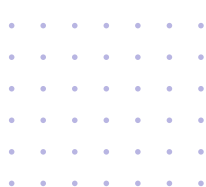
"These are exactly the times where we need people who dare to hope, dare to dream, dare to think differently, and connect across differences."

[Explore our full digital report here.](#)





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