



Report on ESG framework for cultural sector



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Report on ESG framework for cultural sector (GLAM focused)

ESG4GLAM project

Written by: UNS (Doc. dr Danijela Ćirić Lalić, Milena Savković, Bojana Savić)

Revised by: Steering Committee



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Introduction

The increasing prominence of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles reflects a broader transformation in how sustainability, accountability, and long-term value creation are understood across sectors. While ESG frameworks have primarily emerged within corporate and investor-oriented contexts, their underlying concerns, responsible resource use, social contribution, and transparent governance, are equally relevant to public and cultural institutions. Within the GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums), these principles intersect with long-standing missions related to public value, cultural heritage stewardship, inclusion, and education, yet remain insufficiently articulated through integrated and sector-adapted ESG approaches.

At the European and international levels, sustainability-related engagement in culture has been strongly influenced by policy frameworks and agenda-setting initiatives, including the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNESCO cultural policy instruments, and European Union strategies linked to sustainable development and public value creation. These frameworks increasingly position cultural institutions as contributors to broader societal goals, such as inclusive growth, social cohesion, and environmental responsibility. However, despite this growing policy recognition, the translation of sustainability principles into coherent governance models, management systems, and competency frameworks tailored to the GLAM sector remains limited.

This report addresses this gap by examining how ESG principles can be aligned with the institutional realities, governance arrangements, and professional practices of the GLAM sector. Rather than assuming the direct transferability of corporate ESG models, the analysis adopts a critical and contextual approach, exploring how sustainability is currently conceptualised, operationalised, and governed across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. Particular attention is given to the extent to which existing sustainability practices correspond to ESG dimensions, and to the structural, financial, and organisational factors that condition their implementation.

Through desk research encompassing academic literature, policy documents, professional guidelines, and sector-specific initiatives, the report maps the state of the

art in sustainability-related knowledge and practice within the GLAM sector. It examines dominant approaches across environmental, social, economic, and governance dimensions; reviews existing initiatives, projects, and professional networks; and identifies key challenges and limitations affecting ESG application in cultural contexts. Central to this analysis is the identification of an ESG competency gap, understood not merely as a lack of individual skills, but as a systemic deficit in integrated ESG literacy, institutional learning capacity, and governance- and data-related competencies.

The primary objective of this report is to provide an evidence-based foundation for the development of sector-adapted ESG frameworks and competency models suitable for the GLAM sector. By clarifying existing knowledge, practices, constraints, and capacity gaps, the report supports subsequent project activities aimed at designing implementation-oriented ESG approaches that align sustainability principles with the public-interest missions, professional cultures, and governance realities of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

1. Context and background of ESG in the cultural (GLAM) sector

1.1. Culture within Contemporary Sustainability Frameworks

Existing policy and research-based analyses indicate that, despite the growing visibility of culture within sustainability-related policy debates, its integration into dominant development frameworks remains conceptually and operationally inconsistent. Earlier global development agendas, including the Millennium Development Goals, largely marginalised cultural dimensions, whereas more recent policy discussions increasingly recognise culture, particularly cultural industries, as a contributor to economic growth, social cohesion, and broader development outcomes. This shift is observable across diverse socio-economic contexts, including countries with low levels of human development, where culturally embedded practices, informal norms, and social mediation mechanisms play a central role in shaping development trajectories (Dessein et al., 2015).

At the same time, existing policy documents rely on heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting understandings of culture, which limits the coherence of sustainability-oriented strategies. Analyses conducted within the COST Action IS1007 demonstrate that culture is frequently framed either as an economic sector, encompassing cultural industries, heritage, tourism, and creative production, or as a broader social fabric shaping collective identities, practices, and modes of social interaction. The interchangeable use of these perspectives generates conceptual ambiguity and contributes to fragmented policy objectives, as economic, social, and cultural dimensions of development are addressed through parallel rather than integrated approaches (Dessein et al., 2015).

The literature further indicates that prevailing policy approaches predominantly operationalise culture in instrumental terms, emphasising its contribution to economic performance or its mediating role in fostering social cohesion and conflict management. However, culture's transformative potential, as a structuring element capable of informing development pathways, influencing everyday practices, and supporting grassroots sustainability initiatives—remains insufficiently embedded in formal policy frameworks. As a result, culturally rooted practices and locally grounded

forms of knowledge are frequently disconnected from abstract sustainability concepts and externally driven policy models, limiting their capacity to support long-term and context-sensitive development processes (Dessein et al., 2015).

Overall, existing analyses confirm that culture constitutes a significant yet under-theorised and inconsistently operationalised dimension of sustainable development. While policy recognition of culture has increased, the absence of a coherent conceptualisation and systematic integration across policy domains points to persistent structural limitations. These limitations provide a critical point of departure for theoretical frameworks that explicitly position culture as a core component of sustainable development, including models that distinguish between culture in, for, and as sustainable development (Dessein et al., 2015).

Within the broader sustainability discourse, ecologically sustainable development has predominantly been conceptualised through the framework of the triple bottom line, integrating environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic viability as its core dimensions. This model has become deeply embedded in contemporary planning, policy-making, and governance practices, shaping how sustainability objectives are defined, assessed, and operationalised across sectors. Nevertheless, within this dominant framework, cultural dimensions remain weakly articulated and largely peripheral, despite their frequent rhetorical acknowledgment in policy discourse (Hawkes, 2001).

Existing analytical literature indicates that, although references to cultural change, shared values, and cultural diversity occasionally appear in sustainability narratives, culture is rarely treated as a distinct analytical or operational category within prevailing sustainability frameworks. Instead, cultural aspects are commonly subsumed under social or economic dimensions, or reduced to sector-specific outputs such as arts, heritage, and creative industries. This conceptual positioning results in culture being framed as a secondary or residual element, rather than as a foundational driver of sustainable development processes (Hawkes, 2001; Yencken & Wilkinson, 2000).

Critical assessments of the triple bottom line approach further suggest that this structural omission constrains the capacity of sustainability models to address the deeper value-based and behavioural transformations required for long-term societal

change. Community wellbeing, social cohesion, and collective resilience are not solely outcomes of economic or social policy interventions, but are fundamentally shaped by shared meanings, norms, and culturally embedded practices. In the absence of an explicit cultural reference point, sustainability frameworks lack the conceptual tools necessary to explain how values inform action and how sustainable practices become embedded in everyday life (Hawkes, 2001).

In response to these limitations, alternative sustainability frameworks have proposed the formal inclusion of culture as a fourth pillar alongside environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Building on earlier conceptual work by Yencken and Wilkinson, Hawkes articulates cultural vitality, encompassing creativity, diversity, innovation, and collective identity, as a critical enabling condition for sustainable development. The explicit recognition of culture as a distinct pillar is intended to create conceptual and institutional space for public discourse, value negotiation, and participatory processes that support the translation of sustainability objectives into socially grounded and context-sensitive practices (Hawkes, 2001; Yencken & Wilkinson, 2000).

This expanded understanding of sustainability provides an important analytical foundation for subsequent theoretical models that further differentiate the roles culture may play within sustainable development, including frameworks that conceptualise culture not only as a sectoral domain or supportive instrument, but also as a transformative dimension shaping development pathways.

These conceptual limitations are particularly relevant for cultural institutions such as galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, whose societal roles extend beyond economic contribution and require sustainability frameworks capable of capturing cultural value, public benefit, and long-term stewardship. Moreover, these limitations are not confined to sustainability discourse alone, but extend to contemporary governance and accountability frameworks, including ESG-oriented approaches, which often struggle to accommodate culture as a distinct and transformative dimension of sustainable development.

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1.2. Specificities of the GLAM Sector in Relation to Sustainability and ESG

Galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM institutions) constitute a distinct category of organisations operating at the intersection of culture, knowledge production, public service, and long-term stewardship. Unlike market-oriented entities, GLAM institutions are primarily mission-driven, with mandates centred on heritage preservation, access to knowledge, education, and the promotion of social and cultural value. Their governance structures are predominantly public or non-profit, and their accountability extends beyond financial performance to include societal, ethical, and intergenerational responsibilities (Holden, 2006; ICOM, 2015).

Existing research highlights that GLAM institutions already contribute to sustainability objectives through core institutional functions rather than through explicitly labelled sustainability strategies. Educational programmes, inclusive access policies, community engagement initiatives, and the safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritage directly support social sustainability goals, including social cohesion, cultural diversity, and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015; Janes & Sandell, 2019). At the same time, collection management, conservation practices, and long-term preservation strategies reflect principles of environmental responsibility, particularly in relation to resource efficiency, preventive conservation, and intergenerational stewardship (Sutter, O'Neill, & Yaneva, 2013).

From a governance perspective, GLAM institutions operate within ethical and professional frameworks that align closely with the governance dimension of ESG. Codes of ethics, public accountability mechanisms, transparency requirements, and professional standards issued by international bodies such as ICOM and UNESCO shape institutional decision-making and risk management practices within the sector (ICOM, 2015; UNESCO, 2019). However, these governance arrangements are rarely articulated using ESG terminology, nor are they systematically translated into formal ESG reporting or performance frameworks.

Despite this intrinsic alignment with sustainability principles, the application of ESG frameworks within the GLAM sector remains limited and fragmented. ESG models have been largely developed in corporate and financial contexts, prioritising quantitative

indicators, standardised reporting formats, and performance metrics tailored to profit-oriented organisations (Gray, 2010; Adams, 2017). As a result, their direct transfer to GLAM institutions often fails to capture mission-based value creation, qualitative social impacts, and context-specific governance practices that are central to cultural organisations.

The literature further indicates that sustainability-related practices within GLAM institutions tend to emerge in a decentralised and project-based manner, driven by professional values, external funding requirements, or participation in international initiatives rather than by integrated organisational strategies (OECD, 2018). While environmental management, social inclusion, and ethical governance are addressed through isolated initiatives, these dimensions are rarely consolidated into coherent sustainability or ESG frameworks at the institutional level.

The GLAM sector occupies a structurally ambiguous position within sustainability and ESG discourse. On the one hand, GLAM institutions demonstrate strong normative alignment with environmental, social, and governance principles through their missions, practices, and professional standards. On the other hand, the absence of sector-specific ESG frameworks, shared indicators, and clearly articulated competencies constrains their ability to systematically integrate, assess, and communicate sustainability performance. This misalignment underscores the need for context-sensitive approaches that reflect the specific institutional roles, capacities, and societal functions of GLAM organisations, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent analysis of policy frameworks, implementation challenges, and competency requirements within the sector.

Although many of these practices closely correspond to environmental, social, and governance principles, they are rarely articulated through ESG terminology or aligned with formal ESG frameworks, contributing to their limited visibility within broader sustainability governance structures.

1.3. Why ESG Cannot Be Directly Transferred from Corporate Governance Frameworks

Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks have primarily emerged within corporate and financial governance contexts, where they are designed to support investor decision-making, risk management, and performance comparability across market-oriented organisations. Accordingly, ESG models rely on standardised indicators, quantifiable metrics, and reporting structures aligned with profit maximisation and shareholder accountability. While such characteristics enhance transparency and comparability in corporate settings, critical analyses indicate that a strong emphasis on measurement and disclosure can also lead to procedural and compliance-oriented approaches to sustainability, limiting the capacity of ESG frameworks to foster substantive organisational change. In particular, the prioritisation of what can be easily quantified often marginalises complex, qualitative, and context-dependent dimensions of social and cultural value, thereby constraining the ability of ESG reporting to capture processes related to value formation, behavioural change, and long-term societal impact that are central to sustainability in public-interest and mission-driven organisations (Gray, 2010). Further research emphasises that ESG frameworks are grounded in assumptions about value creation that are not universally applicable across organisational types. In corporate governance models, value creation is predominantly conceptualised in financial terms, with environmental and social considerations integrated insofar as they affect economic performance or risk exposure. In contrast, public and non-profit organisations operate according to broader value creation logics that prioritise public benefit, social outcomes, and long-term societal contributions over financial returns. Without explicit adaptation, ESG frameworks therefore struggle to accommodate forms of value creation that extend beyond profit and market performance (Adams, 2017).

This mismatch is particularly evident in sectors characterised by public accountability, ethical mandates, and societal missions, where governance arrangements are oriented toward legitimacy, trust, and public value rather than shareholder value. The literature underscores that applying corporate-derived ESG frameworks to such contexts risks obscuring core organisational purposes and constraining sustainability assessments to narrowly defined indicators. Consequently, the direct transfer of ESG

models from corporate governance to public and cultural sectors fails to reflect institutional realities and undermines the capacity of sustainability frameworks to support meaningful implementation (Holden, 2006).

ESG frameworks are not neutral or universally transferable tools, but context-specific governance instruments shaped by the assumptions and priorities of corporate environments. This insight underscores the need for adapted, sector-sensitive approaches to ESG integration that recognise alternative value creation logics, governance structures, and accountability mechanisms. Such adaptation is a necessary precondition for the effective application of ESG principles in non-corporate contexts and provides a conceptual basis for identifying implementation and competency gaps in sectors operating outside traditional market frameworks.

This structural mismatch highlights why ESG frameworks, in their current corporate-oriented form, remain difficult to operationalise within the GLAM sector and reinforces the need for adapted approaches capable of reflecting mission-driven value creation, public accountability, and cultural impact.

1.4. The Role of GLAM Institutions in Sustainable Societal Development

Galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM institutions) occupy a structurally important position in sustainable societal development through their combined roles in knowledge preservation, access provision, cultural mediation, and public engagement. Operating predominantly within public-interest and non-profit governance frameworks, GLAM institutions support sustainability as long-term custodians of cultural, social, and informational resources that underpin inclusive, resilient, and informed societies (Holden, 2006; UNESCO, 2015). While these institutions share a common societal mandate, each component of the GLAM sector addresses sustainability through distinct yet complementary functions.

Within this broader framework, galleries represent the most explicitly discursive component of the GLAM sector. They function as platforms for artistic expression, critical reflection, and public dialogue, enabling engagement with social, environmental, and ethical issues through visual and artistic practices. By exhibiting contemporary and historical works, galleries shape cultural narratives and foster

cultural diversity, thereby influencing public understanding of sustainability-related challenges. The literature indicates that galleries increasingly address themes such as climate change, social justice, and identity, positioning artistic practice as a medium through which sustainability-related values and societal questions are explored and negotiated (Janes & Sandell, 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

While galleries primarily operate at the level of cultural expression and debate, other GLAM institutions extend this engagement by providing structured access to knowledge and information.

In contrast to the expressive and interpretative role of galleries, libraries function as foundational infrastructures for equitable access to knowledge, information, and lifelong learning. As open and publicly accessible institutions, libraries reduce informational inequalities, support digital and media literacy, and strengthen informed citizenship. Policy and research sources consistently emphasise that libraries enable inclusive education, community learning, and civic participation, which are essential conditions for socially sustainable development. Through these functions, libraries translate abstract sustainability principles into accessible knowledge resources that empower individuals and communities to engage with societal and environmental challenges (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2018).

However, ensuring access to information alone is insufficient without mechanisms that preserve institutional memory and enable long-term accountability.

Building on the knowledge-access function of libraries, archives fulfil a critical role by safeguarding documentary heritage, institutional memory, and evidentiary records over time. Through the preservation of records related to governance, rights, environmental management, and social processes, archives ensure continuity, transparency, and accountability across generations. This archival function directly supports the governance dimension of sustainability by enabling evidence-based policymaking, legal protection, and institutional learning. In this sense, archives provide the temporal and evidentiary foundation necessary for sustainable governance and long-term societal resilience (Holden, 2006; UNESCO, 2019).

While archives secure the continuity of knowledge and accountability, museums integrate these dimensions through interpretation, education, and public engagement.

Museums operate at the intersection of education, heritage stewardship, and public engagement, synthesising elements present across the GLAM sector. By conserving and interpreting tangible and intangible heritage, museums facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer and promote awareness of historical, environmental, and cultural interdependencies. Existing research highlights a growing tendency for museums to adopt more active societal roles, addressing sustainability challenges related to environmental responsibility, social inclusion, and ethical governance through exhibitions, participatory programmes, and conservation practices. Through this integrative function, museums connect preserved knowledge and cultural expression with broader societal learning processes, reinforcing public value and institutional legitimacy (Hawkes, 2001; Janes & Sandell, 2019).

The GLAM sector supports sustainable societal development through a continuum of functions spanning cultural expression, knowledge access, institutional memory, and public interpretation. Although these functions align closely with environmental, social, and governance principles commonly associated with sustainability and ESG frameworks, they are rarely articulated through integrated strategies or recognised within standardised sustainability models. This structural misalignment underscores the need for approaches that systematically capture the societal value generated by GLAM institutions and translate it into coherent sustainability and ESG-related frameworks, thereby enabling more effective policy alignment, implementation, and capacity development across the sector.

2. Policies, Strategic Documents and Regulatory Framework Relevant to the GLAM Sector

2.1. SDGs and Culture

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents the central global framework guiding sustainability-oriented policies and development strategies across sectors. Adopted in 2015, the Agenda establishes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and associated targets intended to address interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges. Within this framework, culture is not articulated as a standalone objective or policy domain. Instead, cultural dimensions are embedded implicitly across multiple goals and targets, positioning culture as a cross-cutting or enabling factor rather than as an independently governed area of sustainable development.

Policy and analytical sources indicate that the contribution of culture, and by extension GLAM institutions, is most visible in relation to SDGs that emphasise education, inclusion, urban development, and institutional capacity. In particular, SDG 4 (Quality Education) recognises the importance of lifelong learning and access to knowledge, areas in which libraries, museums, and archives play a central role through educational programmes, information services, and heritage-based learning. Similarly, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) implicitly incorporate cultural participation, access to cultural resources, and the preservation of cultural heritage as components of inclusive and resilient communities. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) further aligns with the functions of archives and public cultural institutions in safeguarding institutional memory, supporting transparency, and strengthening public trust.

The role of culture within the SDG framework has been further elaborated through policy interpretations and guidance provided by UNESCO, which explicitly frames culture as a driver and enabler of sustainable development across the Agenda. UNESCO policy documents emphasise that cultural institutions contribute to sustainable development by supporting education, social cohesion, cultural diversity, and participatory governance, thereby reinforcing multiple SDGs simultaneously.

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Within this interpretation, GLAM institutions are positioned as key societal actors whose everyday functions, such as access provision, heritage stewardship, and community engagement, support the achievement of global sustainability objectives.

Despite this conceptual alignment, the SDG framework provides limited operational guidance for the systematic integration of culture and GLAM institutions into sustainability implementation processes. Culture is primarily addressed at a normative and strategic level, without dedicated SDGs, targets, or indicators specifically designed to capture the contributions of cultural institutions. As a result, GLAM-related activities are often subsumed under broader education, urban development, or governance indicators, making their specific impacts difficult to identify, measure, or communicate within formal SDG monitoring systems.

Existing SDG indicators tend to prioritise quantifiable outcomes, which constrains the visibility of qualitative, process-oriented, and context-dependent contributions characteristic of the GLAM sector. Educational impact, social inclusion, cultural participation, and long-term heritage stewardship are central to the societal role of GLAM institutions, yet these dimensions are not easily translated into standardised SDG metrics. This creates a structural disconnect between the global ambition of the Agenda 2030 and the institutional realities of cultural organisations operating within public-interest and non-profit frameworks.

As a consequence, the engagement of GLAM institutions with the SDGs often occurs through indirect or project-based mechanisms, such as participation in internationally funded initiatives, local sustainability strategies, or partnerships aligned with specific SDG themes. While these approaches demonstrate the relevance of the GLAM sector to sustainable development, they do not provide a coherent or standardised basis for long-term integration, reporting, or capacity development. The absence of sector-specific guidance further limits the ability of GLAM organisations to align institutional strategies, professional competencies, and governance practices with the SDG framework in a systematic manner.

The SDGs establish a globally recognised policy context in which culture and GLAM institutions are acknowledged as relevant contributors to sustainable development. However, this recognition remains largely implicit and insufficiently operationalised.

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The lack of dedicated instruments, indicators, and competency-oriented guidance for the cultural sector highlights a gap between global sustainability objectives and their practical implementation within GLAM institutions. This gap underscores the need to examine how regional policies, regulatory frameworks, and ESG-related approaches at the European level further shape and potentially constrain the role of the GLAM sector in sustainability governance.

To further clarify this alignment and its limitations, Table 1 provides an overview of selected SDGs in relation to GLAM functions.

Table 1. Alignment of selected SDGs with GLAM functions and structural limitations

SDG	Relevant GLAM functions	Identified limitations within the SDG framework
SDG 4 Quality Education	Lifelong learning; access to knowledge and information; educational programmes in libraries, museums, and archives; heritage-based learning	GLAM contributions embedded within broad education indicators; absence of sector-specific targets; limited recognition of informal, non-formal, and cultural learning outcomes
SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities	Inclusive access to cultural resources; reduction of information and digital divides; support for marginalised communities through public cultural services	Cultural participation treated indirectly; lack of indicators capturing social inclusion through culture; limited visibility of GLAM impact on equity and accessibility
SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities	Preservation of cultural heritage; cultural participation in urban life; strengthening local identity and community resilience	Focus on built heritage over institutional roles; GLAM institutions not explicitly addressed as sustainability actors; weak integration into urban sustainability monitoring

<p>SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions</p>	<p>Safeguarding institutional memory; access to public information; transparency and accountability through archival and documentary functions</p>	<p>GLAM governance roles remain implicit; cultural institutions rarely recognised as contributors to institutional trust and democratic governance mechanisms</p>
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Table 1 synthesises the alignment between selected Sustainable Development Goals and the core functions performed by GLAM institutions, while simultaneously highlighting the structural limitations of the SDG framework in relation to the cultural sector. Rather than providing an exhaustive mapping of all SDGs, the table focuses on goals where the contribution of GLAM institutions is most clearly articulated through policy interpretations and institutional practice, particularly in the areas of education, social inclusion, sustainable urban development, and institutional governance.

The table illustrates that GLAM institutions are consistently positioned as enablers of SDG implementation through access to knowledge, heritage stewardship, cultural participation, and the safeguarding of institutional memory. However, it also demonstrates that these contributions remain largely implicit within the SDG architecture, embedded within broad targets and indicators that do not explicitly recognise cultural institutions as sustainability actors. As a result, the societal value generated by GLAM institutions is difficult to capture within existing SDG monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

By juxtaposing GLAM functions with the limitations inherent in the SDG framework, the table reinforces the analytical finding that global sustainability agendas acknowledge the relevance of culture without providing sector-specific instruments for implementation, measurement, or capacity development. This gap between conceptual recognition and operational guidance underscores the need for complementary policy frameworks and tools at the European and institutional levels that can more effectively support the systematic integration of GLAM institutions into sustainability and ESG-related governance structures.

2.2. European Policies and Strategies Relevant to the GLAM Sector

At the European level, the policy landscape relevant to culture and the GLAM sector is shaped by a combination of sector-specific cultural strategies and horizontal sustainability, climate, and governance frameworks. While European policies provide more explicit recognition of culture as a policy domain than the global SDG framework, this recognition remains fragmented across multiple strategies and regulatory instruments, with limited integration into sustainability and ESG-oriented governance models (European Commission, 2018; 2019).

2.2.1. European cultural policy frameworks

The central strategic document guiding EU cultural policy is *A New European Agenda for Culture*, adopted by the European Commission. This Agenda positions culture as a driver of social cohesion, democratic participation, economic growth, and innovation, while highlighting the role of cultural institutions in fostering access to culture, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue (European Commission, 2018). Within this framework, GLAM institutions are implicitly addressed through their functions in cultural heritage preservation, education, knowledge access, and community engagement, rather than as a distinct institutional category with specific sustainability or governance requirements.

The Agenda is operationalised through the EU Work Plan for Culture, which defines priority actions related to cultural heritage, sustainability, digital transformation, and the resilience of cultural and creative sectors. Policy analyses indicate that, although sustainability is explicitly referenced within the Work Plan, it is primarily approached through thematic initiatives and project-based actions, with limited emphasis on institutional governance, reporting, or long-term capacity development within GLAM organisations (Council of the European Union, 2018).

The European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage further reinforces the link between cultural heritage and sustainable development, emphasising the social, economic, and environmental value of heritage for local and regional development (European Commission, 2020). While this framework recognises heritage institutions as contributors to sustainability objectives, it largely focuses on heritage content and

impact, offering limited guidance on sustainability-oriented management practices, organisational strategies, or professional competencies within GLAM institutions.

2.2.2. European sustainability and green transition policies

Broader European sustainability strategies, most notably the European Green Deal, establish binding objectives related to climate neutrality, resource efficiency, and sustainable development across sectors (European Commission, 2019). These frameworks are directly relevant to GLAM institutions as public or publicly funded organisations, particularly in relation to energy efficiency, renovation of public buildings, and climate adaptation measures.

However, European green transition policies adopt a predominantly sector-neutral and infrastructure-oriented approach, in which cultural institutions are addressed primarily as public buildings or service providers rather than as actors with specific cultural, educational, and social mandates. As a result, environmental sustainability requirements are often addressed in isolation from the social, educational, and governance dimensions that define the core mission of GLAM institutions, limiting the potential for integrated sustainability strategies at the institutional level.

2.2.3. European ESG-related policy and reporting frameworks

In parallel with cultural and environmental strategies, the European Union has significantly strengthened its sustainability governance framework through ESG-related regulation, particularly in the field of non-financial and sustainability reporting. The evolution from the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), supported by the development of the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), reflects a move towards mandatory, standardised, and comparable sustainability disclosure for large companies and financial market actors (European Commission, 2014; 2022; EFRAG, 2023).

These frameworks are not directly applicable to most GLAM institutions, which typically operate as public, non-profit, or hybrid organisations. Nevertheless, the expansion of ESG-related reporting requirements has indirect implications for the GLAM sector, particularly through increased expectations regarding transparency, environmental

responsibility, social impact, and governance practices in publicly funded or partnership-based contexts.

Existing analyses indicate that ESG frameworks prioritise quantifiable indicators and risk-oriented reporting, which limits their capacity to capture the qualitative, process-based, and long-term societal value generated by cultural institutions. Consequently, ESG-related policies tend to reinforce compliance-driven sustainability approaches that are poorly aligned with the public-interest mandate, cultural value creation, and governance structures characteristic of the GLAM sector (Gray, 2010; Adams, 2017).

2.2.4. Implications for the GLAM sector

Taken together, European cultural, sustainability, and ESG-related policies establish a complex regulatory and strategic environment in which GLAM institutions are increasingly expected to demonstrate alignment with sustainability principles. While cultural policies emphasise access, participation, and heritage value, and environmental strategies introduce obligations related to climate and resource efficiency, ESG frameworks remain largely external to the institutional logic of the GLAM sector.

This policy fragmentation creates a structural gap between European sustainability ambitions and their practical implementation within GLAM institutions. The absence of sector-specific guidance, adapted indicators, and competency frameworks constrains the ability of GLAM organisations to systematically integrate sustainability and ESG principles into institutional strategies, governance practices, and professional roles. This gap provides a critical point of departure for examining regulatory frameworks and implementation mechanisms relevant to the GLAM sector, as further explored in the subsequent sections.

2.3. Relevant Legal and Regulatory Frameworks Affecting the GLAM Sector

The legal and regulatory environment relevant to the GLAM sector is shaped by a combination of international conventions, European-level regulations, and national

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legal frameworks governing public institutions, cultural heritage, access to information, and public accountability. While these instruments rarely reference sustainability or ESG explicitly, they establish binding obligations that directly affect environmental responsibility, social inclusion, and governance practices within GLAM institutions.

At the international level, several conventions adopted under the auspices of UNESCO provide the normative foundation for the protection, management, and transmission of cultural heritage. The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) define state obligations related to heritage preservation, cultural diversity, and public access (UNESCO, 1972; UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2005). These instruments implicitly support sustainability objectives by promoting long-term stewardship, intergenerational responsibility, and inclusive cultural participation.

At the European level, GLAM institutions are primarily regulated through horizontal legal frameworks applicable to public-sector bodies. These include regulations and directives concerning access to public information, data protection, digitalisation, public procurement, and the energy performance of buildings (European Union, 2003; European Union, 2012; European Union, 2018). Collectively, these instruments impose requirements related to transparency, accountability, resource efficiency, and responsible management of public assets. Although sustainability terminology is rarely employed, the regulatory logic aligns closely with environmental, social, and governance principles.

Professional and ethical standards further complement formal regulation. In particular, the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, developed by the International Council of Museums, establishes principles related to public trust, responsible governance, accessibility, and ethical stewardship of collections (ICOM, 2015). While not legally binding, such standards play a significant role in shaping institutional practices and reinforcing governance-related dimensions of sustainability within the GLAM sector.

Existing legal and regulatory frameworks provide a fragmented but substantive foundation for sustainability-relevant practices in GLAM institutions. However, these

frameworks operate across multiple legal domains and policy areas, without a unifying sustainability or ESG-oriented structure tailored to the specific characteristics of the GLAM sector. This regulatory dispersion limits the visibility and coherence of sustainability practices and constrains the translation of broader sustainability and ESG objectives into integrated institutional strategies.

2.4. Indirect Applicability of ESG Regulation to GLAM Institutions

Although ESG-related regulation at the European level is primarily designed for large companies and financial market actors, its influence increasingly extends beyond its formal scope of application. Through funding mechanisms, partnership requirements, and public accountability expectations, ESG principles are becoming indirectly relevant for organisations operating within the public and non-profit sectors, including GLAM institutions.

The expansion of sustainability reporting requirements under the EU's corporate sustainability framework, notably through the *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)* and the *European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)*, has contributed to the normalisation of ESG-based language, indicators, and governance expectations across institutional environments. While GLAM institutions are not subject to mandatory ESG disclosure obligations, these frameworks shape the sustainability narratives, reporting practices, and performance expectations of public authorities, funding bodies, and private partners with whom GLAM organisations increasingly interact (European Commission, 2022; EFRAG, 2023).

Indirect applicability is particularly evident in the context of EU-funded programmes, public procurement procedures, and cross-sectoral partnerships, where requirements related to environmental responsibility, social impact, transparency, and risk management are progressively integrated into eligibility criteria, evaluation frameworks, and monitoring processes. In such contexts, GLAM institutions are expected to demonstrate alignment with ESG-related principles despite the absence of sector-specific guidance or adapted reporting instruments.

Existing analyses further indicate that prevailing ESG frameworks prioritise standardised, quantifiable indicators and risk-oriented disclosure models, reflecting

their origins in corporate governance and financial markets. This orientation limits their capacity to capture the qualitative, mission-driven, and long-term societal value generated by GLAM institutions, particularly in areas such as cultural participation, education, heritage stewardship, and institutional trust (Gray, 2010; Adams, 2017). As a result, ESG-related expectations are often translated into fragmented or ad hoc sustainability practices within the GLAM sector, rather than into coherent institutional strategies.

ESG regulation exerts a growing indirect influence on GLAM institutions without providing an appropriate conceptual or operational framework tailored to their specific roles, governance structures, and value-creation mechanisms. This mismatch between external expectations and internal capacities highlights a structural gap in the current sustainability governance landscape. As a result, while GLAM institutions are increasingly embedded within sustainability and ESG-related governance environments, they operate without clearly defined institutional frameworks, tools, or competencies to navigate these expectations in a systematic manner. Addressing this gap requires approaches that reinterpret ESG principles in ways that are compatible with the public-interest mandate of GLAM institutions and that support the development of relevant competencies, tools, and implementation models at the organisational level.

3. State of the Art: Sustainability and ESG Dimensions in the GLAM Sector

3.1. Environmental Sustainability in Museums: Dominant Themes and Approaches

Desk research indicates that the environmental dimension of sustainability is the most extensively developed area within GLAM-related literature, particularly in relation to museums. This strand of research has evolved over several decades and reflects

growing awareness of the significant environmental footprint associated with museum operations, including energy-intensive climate control systems, exhibition production, transport of collections, and building management practices (McGhie, 2020).

A substantial body of literature focuses on operational and technical aspects of environmental sustainability, with particular emphasis on energy efficiency, carbon emissions reduction, and optimisation of indoor climate control. Numerous studies address the environmental impacts of heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, which are widely recognised as the primary drivers of energy consumption in museums. In this context, research increasingly questions long-standing preventive conservation standards that prioritise rigid environmental parameters, arguing for more flexible, risk-based approaches that balance collection care with climate and energy objectives (McGhie, 2020; Garthe, 2022).

Closely linked to this operational focus is a growing body of guidance-oriented literature that seeks to translate sustainability principles into practical tools for museum management. Policy reports and sector handbooks promote measures such as adaptive climate control, lifecycle thinking in exhibition design, reuse of materials, sustainable procurement, and greener logistics for loans and touring exhibitions (McGhie, 2020).

Academic contributions further conceptualise museums as organisations capable of contributing to broader sustainability transitions by embedding environmental responsibility into their core functions and decision-making processes (Garthe, 2022; Pop et al., 2024).

Empirical research in this area is predominantly based on case studies of individual museums or national museum systems, documenting implemented sustainability measures and their outcomes. These studies often highlight both the potential for significant reductions in energy use and emissions, as well as persistent barriers such as ageing infrastructure, financial constraints, and institutional risk aversion linked to conservation ethics (Pop et al., 2024; Pop & Borza, 2016). While such contributions provide valuable insights into practical implementation, they tend to remain context-specific and rarely develop transferable governance or evaluation frameworks.

Despite the richness of this literature, environmental sustainability in museums is most often framed as a technical or managerial challenge, rather than as part of a broader governance or strategic sustainability framework. Research on museum evaluation systems reveals that a more holistic integration of sustainability principles, including alignment with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is essential for museums to meaningfully incorporate environmental, social and institutional imperatives into performance measurement and strategic decision-making (Cerquetti & Montella, 2021). The majority of studies focus on “how-to” solutions, how to reduce energy consumption, how to redesign exhibitions more sustainably, or how to adapt buildings to climate change, without systematically addressing questions of organisational competencies, accountability structures, or integration with social and economic dimensions of sustainability (Garthe, 2022; Pop & Borza, 2016). Additionally, recent research highlights the importance of synergistic collaborations between museums and cultural and creative industries (CCIs) as a means to advance sustainable development goals, suggesting that museums can extend their environmental and social impact by co-creating inclusive arts- and culture-based interventions with external creative stakeholders (Gaitán, Villuendas, & Targa, 2025).

Explicit references to ESG frameworks or integrated sustainability governance models are largely absent from museum-focused environmental literature. Environmental performance is typically discussed in isolation, with limited consideration of how environmental objectives intersect with social responsibilities, public value creation, or institutional governance. As a result, while museums are often portrayed as leaders or laboratories for environmental best practices, the literature provides little guidance on how such practices can be embedded within coherent, organisation-wide sustainability or ESG-oriented strategies.

The literature on environmental sustainability in museums demonstrates a high level of thematic maturity in terms of operational knowledge and practical experimentation. However, it also reveals a clear conceptual limitation: environmental sustainability is predominantly treated as an operational domain rather than as a strategic governance issue. This creates a gap between well-developed technical practices and the absence of integrative frameworks capable of aligning environmental action with

broader institutional missions, accountability mechanisms, and emerging ESG-related expectations.

3.2. Archives and Climate Change: Environmental Risk, Preservation, and Institutional Responses

Desk research reveals that environmental sustainability in archives has increasingly been framed through the lens of climate change risk, vulnerability, and resilience, reflecting growing concern over the exposure of archival collections and infrastructures to extreme weather events, rising temperatures, flooding, and long-term climatic instability. Unlike museum-focused literature, which often highlights proactive experimentation with sustainable practices, archival scholarship tends to emphasise risk awareness and damage mitigation as primary entry points to sustainability discourse (Robinson, 2021; Oliver, 2021).

A substantial body of archival literature documents the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on archival preservation, including threats to physical collections, storage facilities, and long-established preservation environments. Studies highlight how traditional archival standards, particularly those prescribing narrow ranges for temperature and relative humidity, can significantly increase energy consumption and carbon emissions, thereby creating tensions between environmental responsibility and preservation ethics (Oliver, 2021; Robinson, 2021). In this context, climate change is not merely an external environmental factor but a structural challenge that calls into question foundational assumptions of archival practice.

Recent contributions increasingly advocate for adaptive and risk-based approaches to preservation, encouraging archives to move away from rigid environmental controls toward more flexible, context-sensitive strategies. This shift is often framed as a necessary recalibration of professional norms, balancing acceptable levels of preservation risk against the environmental costs of energy-intensive climate control systems (Oliver, 2021). However, such discussions largely remain focused on technical decision-making at the operational level, rather than on broader organisational or governance transformation.

Alongside academic research, practitioner-oriented literature and sectoral initiatives underscore the urgency of climate action within archival institutions. Reports and policy-oriented documents argue that archives must recognise climate change as a systemic threat to cultural memory, requiring coordinated responses that extend beyond individual institutions to encompass sector-wide collaboration, advocacy, and long-term planning (CLIR, 2023). These contributions frequently highlight the need for climate-informed emergency preparedness, resilience planning, and institutional leadership, while also acknowledging the uneven capacity of archives to implement such measures due to resource constraints.

Despite the growing visibility of environmental sustainability in archival discourse, the literature reveals a number of persistent limitations. Most notably, climate action in archives is predominantly framed as a reactive response to environmental risk, rather than as part of a proactive sustainability or governance strategy. While environmental concerns are increasingly acknowledged, they are rarely embedded within integrated organisational frameworks that link environmental objectives with social responsibilities, institutional accountability, or strategic decision-making (Oliver, 2021; CLIR, 2023).

Explicit engagement with ESG concepts or integrated sustainability frameworks remains largely absent from archival literature. Environmental sustainability is typically treated as a professional or ethical obligation rather than as a component of structured governance systems. As a result, discussions of climate adaptation and mitigation in archives often operate in isolation from broader debates on sustainability governance, performance measurement, and institutional competencies.

The literature on archives and climate change demonstrates a growing awareness of environmental vulnerability and the urgent need for adaptation. However, it also exposes a structural gap between heightened risk consciousness and the development of comprehensive sustainability frameworks. While archives are increasingly positioned as institutions at risk in a changing climate, existing scholarship provides limited guidance on how environmental sustainability can be systematically integrated into archival governance, organisational capacity-building, and emerging ESG-related expectations.

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3.3. Social Dimension of Sustainability in the GLAM Sector (Inclusion, Participation, Public Value)

The social dimension of sustainability in museums, galleries, and related cultural institutions is most commonly articulated through concepts of public value, social relevance, and responsibility towards communities. Within this perspective, GLAM institutions are increasingly understood as public actors whose mandate extends beyond the preservation and display of collections to include contributions to social well-being, democratic access to culture, and social cohesion. The literature emphasises that the legitimacy of public funding for cultural institutions is closely linked to their capacity to generate inclusive and socially meaningful public value (Brown, 2019).

Within this body of work, social inclusion emerges as a central theme of social sustainability. Research highlights a shift from traditional notions of access focused primarily on physical or economic entry to broader interpretations of inclusion that encompass participation, representation, and the active involvement of diverse social groups in programming and interpretative processes. However, empirical evidence suggests that museum and gallery audiences often remain socially and demographically narrow, while inclusion initiatives are frequently implemented as isolated projects rather than embedded within long-term institutional strategies or governance structures (Baker, 2014).

A recurring issue in the literature concerns the evaluation of social outcomes associated with inclusive practices. Unlike environmental or financial indicators, social impacts such as a sense of belonging, empowerment, or community engagement are inherently difficult to measure. Case study research demonstrates that evaluation practices in public galleries often rely on proxy indicators such as visitor numbers or participation rates, which provide limited insight into the depth or quality of social impact. At the same time, evaluation is increasingly required as a condition of public accountability, creating tensions between administrative demands and meaningful learning-oriented assessment (Baker, 2014).

The social dimension of sustainability is also examined through the lens of institutional social responsibility, particularly in relation to cultural management and tourism

contexts. This literature indicates that museums and galleries operate under growing normative expectations regarding ethical conduct, inclusivity, and social contribution. However, social responsibility is frequently interpreted in a flexible and context-dependent manner, shaped by local priorities, resource availability, and organisational capacity. As a result, social sustainability practices often lack consistency and comparability across institutions, limiting their integration into systematic sustainability management (Zutshi et al., 2020).

Broader literature on visual arts and the art market further contributes to understanding social sustainability by highlighting the role of cultural practices in shaping societal values, norms, and narratives related to sustainability. Conceptual and interpretative studies suggest that art institutions can function as platforms for dialogue, reflection, and value transformation, thereby influencing public perceptions of social and environmental responsibility. While these contributions are less focused on institutional operations, they underscore the importance of cultural value and symbolic influence as components of social sustainability within the GLAM sector (Lewis, J. B., 2009; Maharaj, 2022).

The literature demonstrates that the social dimension of sustainability in the GLAM sector is well developed at the normative and conceptual levels, particularly with regard to public value, inclusion, and participation. However, desk research also reveals a persistent gap between aspirational social objectives and their operationalisation in practice. Challenges related to evaluation, institutional capacity, and governance integration continue to limit the systematic management of social sustainability. This gap highlights the need for tailored competencies, tools, and frameworks capable of translating social sustainability goals into actionable and accountable institutional practices.

3.4. Economic Sustainability, Business Models, and Value Creation in GLAM Institutions

Economic sustainability in GLAM institutions is conceptualised in ways that fundamentally differ from conventional corporate approaches. Rather than prioritising profitability or financial growth, the literature consistently frames economic

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sustainability as the capacity of cultural institutions to maintain their mission, safeguard cultural assets, and ensure long-term institutional continuity under conditions of financial, organisational, and environmental pressure (Pop & Borza, 2015; McKillip, 2024).

A central theme across the reviewed literature is the recognition that GLAM institutions operate within hybrid economic and governance models, combining public funding, grants, donations, and limited revenue-generating activities. Pop and Borza (2015) emphasise that museums' contribution to sustainable development cannot be assessed through traditional financial performance indicators alone, as their value creation is closely linked to public service, education, heritage preservation, and social legitimacy. Consequently, economic sustainability is understood less as financial optimisation and more as the ability to balance economic constraints with broader societal responsibilities.

Several studies further highlight that value creation in the cultural sector is inherently multidimensional. Cultural, educational, social, and symbolic values coexist alongside economic considerations, and these dimensions are often inseparable in practice. Lewis (2009) and Christensen (2024) demonstrate that sustainability initiatives in the visual arts sector frequently generate indirect economic benefits—such as enhanced reputation, audience engagement, and funding opportunities—while their primary contribution lies in shaping values, norms, and long-term societal awareness rather than immediate financial returns. This reinforces the argument that economic performance in GLAM contexts must be evaluated through long-term and non-market lenses.

Empirical research also reveals persistent tensions between economic pressures and institutional missions. McKillip's (2024) ESG-based assessment of museums illustrates how efforts to meet sustainability objectives are often constrained by limited financial resources, outdated infrastructure, and insufficient access to data. While some institutions demonstrate strengths in specific sustainability dimensions, economic and administrative limitations frequently hinder the systematic integration of sustainability into long-term planning and monitoring. These findings underscore that economic

sustainability in GLAM institutions is closely tied to organisational capacity and governance structures, rather than to revenue generation alone.

The literature additionally points to the role of accountability and evaluation frameworks in shaping economic sustainability. Christensen (2024) highlights the growing expectation that cultural organisations demonstrate accountability for sustainability practices, yet also notes significant variability and opacity in how such practices are reported and assessed across the visual arts industry. Similarly, McKillip (2024) identifies gaps in transparency, data availability, and standardised monitoring as major barriers to evaluating sustainability performance, particularly in relation to environmental and energy-related indicators. These limitations complicate the use of ESG-inspired tools in GLAM settings and further illustrate the mismatch between corporate sustainability metrics and cultural institutional realities.

Insights from archival management literature reinforce the broader argument that economic sustainability in cultural institutions must be aligned with affordability, responsibility, and long-term stewardship, rather than short-term efficiency gains. Abbey (2012) demonstrates that cost-effective and sustainable practices in archives are closely linked to strategic prioritisation, incremental improvements, and mission-driven decision-making, offering lessons that extend beyond archival contexts to the wider GLAM sector.

GLAM institutions cannot be meaningfully assessed using standard corporate economic or ESG metrics focused on profit and short-term returns. Economic sustainability in this sector is fundamentally oriented toward long-term value creation, institutional resilience, and the preservation of public cultural goods. The absence of evaluation frameworks that adequately capture these dimensions represents a significant gap in both academic research and sustainability governance practice, underscoring the need for context-sensitive economic models tailored to the specific missions and constraints of GLAM organisations.

3.5. Policies, Regulation, and Institutional Frameworks (Governance, Public Policy, Sustainability Regulation)

Sustainability in the GLAM sector is increasingly shaped by policy environments and governance expectations, rather than by direct, binding regulation. Although museums and related cultural institutions are generally not subject to mandatory sustainability or ESG reporting requirements, they operate within broader public policy frameworks that progressively normalise sustainability principles, performance accountability, and transparency as institutional expectations. In this context, sustainability emerges primarily as a policy-driven phenomenon, advancing through indirect regulatory pressure rather than formal legal obligations (Merriman, 2008).

Across the reviewed literature, sustainability governance in museums is characterised by the dominance of soft regulatory instruments, including professional guidelines, ethical codes, strategic recommendations, and voluntary reporting practices. These mechanisms encourage alignment with overarching public objectives, such as sustainable development and responsible resource management, while leaving substantial discretion to individual institutions. As a result, sustainability practices remain unevenly developed and highly context-dependent, reflecting differences in leadership priorities, organisational capacity, and national policy settings (Esposito & Fisichella, 2019).

A recurring issue concerns the long-term structural implications of governance decisions, particularly in relation to collection development, storage strategies, and resource allocation. Such decisions have lasting consequences for energy use, space requirements, conservation costs, and institutional risk exposure. From a policy and governance perspective, this demonstrates that sustainability in GLAM institutions is embedded in core decision-making processes rather than confined to environmental management or operational efficiency measures (Merriman, 2008).

More recent literature indicates that GLAM institutions are increasingly exposed to indirect ESG-like expectations, especially through funding programmes, benchmarking initiatives, and international professional networks. These expectations emphasise strategic commitment, systematic monitoring, comparability, and transparency features commonly associated with corporate ESG frameworks. However, in the

absence of sector-specific regulatory guidance, such expectations are translated inconsistently, resulting in fragmented approaches to sustainability assessment and reporting (Müller & Grieshaber, 2024).

The literature consistently points to a persistent institutional framework gap between external policy expectations and internal organisational tools. While sustainability is frequently articulated at the strategic or policy level, many GLAM institutions lack coherent governance frameworks, standardised indicators, and routine reporting mechanisms capable of operationalising these expectations in a systematic manner. Consequently, sustainability initiatives often remain project-based or symbolic rather than embedded within organisational structures and decision-making routines (Esposito & Fisichella, 2019; Müller & Grieshaber, 2024).

Emerging framework-oriented approaches seek to address this gap by translating broad policy goals into governance-oriented sustainability models tailored to the cultural sector. Such approaches emphasise the integration of strategic commitment, governance responsibilities, monitoring practices, and reporting processes, thereby shifting sustainability from aspirational alignment with public policy toward structured institutional governance. These developments reflect a gradual move toward ESG-like logic adapted to the specific missions and constraints of GLAM institutions (Müller & Grieshaber, 2020).

GLAM institutions operate within an expanding landscape of sustainability-related policy expectations without corresponding regulatory clarity or sector-wide governance frameworks. This misalignment constrains institutional capacity for systematic sustainability management and reinforces reliance on indirect, voluntary, and unevenly applied mechanisms. The resulting framework gap highlights the need for sector-specific governance models that recognise the public-interest mandate, long-term stewardship responsibilities, and organisational realities of GLAM institutions, rather than relying on the uncritical transfer of corporate sustainability or ESG logics.

3.6. Cross-cutting Synthesis of State-of-the-Art Findings in the GLAM Sector

Based on the reviewed literature across museums, archives, and related cultural institutions, several cross-cutting patterns and structural characteristics of sustainability practice in the GLAM sector can be identified:

- **Operational maturity combined with strategic fragmentation:**

Across GLAM sub-sectors, sustainability-related practices particularly in the environmental domain are relatively well developed at the operational level. However, these practices are rarely embedded within coherent, organisation-wide strategies or governance frameworks, resulting in fragmented and project-based implementation.

- **Dominance of single-dimension approaches:**

Sustainability initiatives in GLAM institutions are most often addressed through isolated environmental, social, or economic lenses. Systematic integration across sustainability dimensions remains limited, with little evidence of holistic frameworks that align environmental action, social responsibility, economic resilience, and governance structures.

- **Normative strength and evaluative weakness of the social dimension:**

Social sustainability is strongly articulated in terms of public value, inclusion, and cultural legitimacy, yet it suffers from persistent challenges related to measurement, comparability, and accountability. The absence of robust evaluation tools limits the translation of social objectives into actionable and monitorable institutional practices.

- **Context-specific economic logics resistant to standard ESG metrics:**

Economic sustainability in GLAM institutions is fundamentally oriented toward long-term value creation, stewardship, and institutional continuity rather than profitability. This orientation complicates the application of conventional corporate ESG indicators, which often fail to capture the multidimensional and non-market value generated by cultural institutions.

- **Prevalence of soft governance and indirect policy pressure:**

Sustainability governance in the GLAM sector is primarily shaped by soft regulatory instruments, professional norms, and funding-related expectations rather than binding regulation. While these mechanisms promote alignment with sustainability agendas, they result in uneven adoption and limited standardisation across institutions.

- **Persistent governance and capacity gaps:**

Across all dimensions, the literature reveals a lack of formal governance mechanisms, clearly defined responsibilities, and institutional competencies dedicated to sustainability management. This gap constrains the ability of GLAM institutions to move from aspirational commitments to systematic and accountable sustainability practices.

- **Limited engagement with integrated ESG frameworks:**

Explicit references to ESG concepts or integrated sustainability governance models remain largely absent from GLAM-focused literature. Where ESG-like expectations emerge indirectly through funding schemes, benchmarking initiatives, or professional networks they are translated inconsistently and without sector-specific adaptation.

- **Need for context-sensitive, integrative sustainability frameworks:**

Collectively, the reviewed literature underscores the need for sustainability and ESG-inspired frameworks that are tailored to the public-interest mandate, governance structures, and operational realities of GLAM institutions, rather than relying on the uncritical transfer of corporate sustainability models.

4. Existing Initiatives, Projects, and Practices in the GLAM Sector

Existing initiatives, projects, and practice-oriented approaches constitute the primary mechanisms through which environmental, social, and governance-related objectives are currently addressed across the GLAM sector. Drawing on European and international initiatives, professional networks, and sector-specific sources, the analysis identifies dominant implementation patterns and institutional configurations shaping current practice. Emphasis is placed on recurring structural characteristics that condition the operationalisation of ESG-related principles across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, rather than on evaluative assessment of individual initiatives.

4.1. European and International Initiatives

At the international level, sustainability-related engagement in the GLAM sector is strongly influenced by agenda-setting initiatives developed by intergovernmental organisations. UNESCO has played a central role in articulating the contribution of culture to sustainable development through frameworks such as the Culture|2030 Indicators, which position cultural institutions as contributors to inclusion, education, heritage protection, and sustainable cities. These initiatives provide a shared normative language and reinforce the societal relevance of GLAM institutions within global sustainability agendas.

The OECD has emphasised the role of culture in local development, innovation, and public value creation. OECD initiatives frame cultural institutions as actors within broader territorial and public policy strategies, particularly in relation to social cohesion and place-based development. However, both UNESCO and OECD initiatives primarily operate at a strategic and policy level, offering limited operational guidance for institutional governance or integrated ESG implementation within GLAM organisations.

At the European level, cultural engagement with sustainability is shaped by policy frameworks promoted by the European Commission and the Council of the European Union. These initiatives support cooperation, funding, and thematic prioritisation, but do not establish binding ESG requirements for cultural institutions. As a result, European and international initiatives function primarily as contextual drivers and funding enablers, rather than as mechanisms for systematic ESG integration. Although these initiatives increasingly employ concepts closely aligned with ESG logic – such as impact, accountability, and public value creation – they do not translate these principles into formalised governance structures, indicators, or reporting mechanisms applicable at the institutional level. Consequently, their contribution to ESG alignment in the GLAM sector remains indirect and largely non-operational.

4.2. Projects and Professional Networks Relevant to ESG and Culture

Beyond policy-level initiatives, sustainability-related practices in the GLAM sector are predominantly advanced through projects and professional networks. In the museum and gallery domains, international organisations such as the International Council of

Museums and CIMAM have developed collaborative frameworks addressing climate action, sustainable exhibition practices, and responsible collection management. Instruments such as the ICOM Climate Action Framework and the Bizot Green Protocol reflect growing professional engagement with environmental sustainability, particularly in relation to energy use, transport, and climate control.

Comparable network-based activity can be observed in other GLAM sub-sectors. The International Council on Archives has highlighted climate-related risks to archival collections and promoted dialogue on environmentally responsible preservation practices, while research-led initiatives such as A Green New Deal for Archives developed by CLIR address the tensions between preservation standards and environmental objectives. In the library sector, the IFLA has positioned libraries as key actors in advancing the UN 2030 Agenda, with particular emphasis on access to information, social inclusion, and environmental responsibility. Taken together, these initiatives illustrate a form of network-driven and project-based sustainability governance, in which ESG-related concerns are addressed through voluntary professional engagement rather than through institutionalised management systems.

While these projects and networks play a crucial role in knowledge exchange and professional mobilisation, their influence remains constrained by their voluntary and project-based character. Participation is uneven across institutions and sub-sectors, and outcomes are rarely consolidated into permanent organisational structures. Consequently, sustainability-related expertise circulates within professional communities but remains weakly embedded within institutional governance systems across the GLAM sector.

4.3. Examples of Practice Across GLAM Sub-Sectors

Across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums, existing practices addressing ESG-related objectives exhibit notable similarities in form and scope. Environmental practices are most frequently associated with energy efficiency measures, optimisation of climate control systems, sustainable exhibition production, and the reduction of material and transport-related impacts. These practices are particularly

visible in museums and galleries, but are increasingly relevant for libraries and archives as well, especially in relation to building management and digital infrastructure.

Socially oriented practices focus on accessibility, inclusion, participation, and the creation of public value. Libraries are often highlighted as spaces supporting social cohesion, equitable access to knowledge, and lifelong learning, while museums and galleries increasingly adopt participatory and community-oriented programming. Archival practices contribute to social sustainability through transparency, accountability, and the safeguarding of collective memory, although these contributions are rarely framed explicitly within ESG terminology.

Governance-related practices across the GLAM sector are typically grounded in professional ethics, codes of conduct, and accountability to public funders. Instruments such as professional ethical codes promoted by ICOM and ICA provide important reference points for integrity and transparency. However, governance practices remain fragmented across compliance requirements, project reporting obligations, and professional norms, rather than integrated into a coherent ESG-oriented governance framework. Although many of these practices correspond substantively to environmental, social, and governance dimensions, they are rarely articulated using ESG terminology or structured according to principles such as materiality, prioritisation, or integrated performance assessment.

These examples illustrate that sustainability-related practices are present across all GLAM sub-sectors, but are predominantly implemented as discrete responses to specific challenges rather than as elements of integrated organisational models.

4.4. Institutional Roles, Public Sector Involvement, and Partnerships

A defining characteristic of sustainability-related initiatives in the GLAM sector is the central role of public institutions and external partnerships. Most GLAM organisations operate within public or non-profit governance frameworks and depend on public funding, which strongly shapes their engagement with sustainability agendas. Initiatives are frequently initiated or enabled through public programmes, international funding schemes, or policy-driven calls, reinforcing the project-based nature of implementation.

Partnerships with academic institutions, civil society organisations, private actors, and professional networks are commonly employed to access expertise and resources. While such collaborations enable GLAM institutions to engage with complex sustainability challenges, they also contribute to the externalisation of ESG-related responsibilities. In many cases, sustainability knowledge and implementation capacity reside with project partners rather than within the institutional structures of GLAM organisations themselves. This pattern stands in contrast to ESG-oriented governance models, which emphasise the internalisation of sustainability responsibilities, institutional learning, and the development of permanent organisational competencies rather than reliance on external actors.

This reliance on partnerships and external drivers limits opportunities for organisational learning and the development of internal competencies. As a result, sustainability-related practices remain contingent on funding cycles and individual initiatives, rather than becoming embedded features of institutional governance and management across the GLAM sector.

4.5. Analytical Implications

The mapping of existing initiatives and practices across the GLAM sector demonstrates that sustainability-related action is both widespread and structurally constrained. European and international initiatives, professional networks, and sector-specific practices provide important entry points for addressing environmental, social, and governance-related objectives. However, the predominance of project-based implementation, voluntary participation, and externally driven partnerships limits the consolidation of these practices into coherent, institutionalised ESG approaches. This pattern reinforces the implementation gap identified in earlier chapters and highlights the absence of sector-adapted frameworks and competencies capable of supporting systematic ESG integration across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. Importantly, the limitations identified do not reflect a lack of commitment or innovation within the GLAM sector, but rather structural constraints arising from project-based implementation, diffuse governance arrangements, and the absence of sector-adapted ESG frameworks capable of consolidating existing practices into coherent institutional systems.

5. Challenges and Limitations in the Application of ESG Frameworks in the GLAM Sector

The application of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks within the GLAM sector takes place in an institutional and structural context that differs substantially from the corporate environments for which ESG concepts were originally developed. Although cultural institutions are increasingly expected to demonstrate responsible resource management, social contribution, and transparency, existing ESG models show limited adaptability to the public-interest mandate, cultural values, and governance arrangements characteristic of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. Literature in the fields of cultural policy and cultural management consistently indicates that sustainability in culture is predominantly addressed through partial, externally driven approaches rather than through integrated institutional strategies and management systems (Belfiore, 2008; Holden, 2015). Importantly, the challenges discussed in this chapter do not question the relevance of ESG principles as such, but rather highlight the limitations of their unadapted transfer into cultural

institutional contexts characterised by public-interest mandates, hybrid governance arrangements, and constrained organisational capacity.

5.1. Structural and Institutional Challenges

A central challenge in applying ESG frameworks in the GLAM sector stems from the structural misalignment between corporately oriented ESG models and the public-interest logic underpinning cultural institutions. GLAM organisations operate primarily on the basis of normative objectives related to heritage preservation, cultural access, and public value creation, whereas ESG frameworks are grounded in risk management, performance measurement, and accountability mechanisms developed for investor-oriented contexts. This creates not only a structural misalignment, but also a normative one, as ESG frameworks prioritise financial materiality and risk exposure, while GLAM institutions operate within value systems centred on cultural significance, public access, and long-term stewardship.

This fundamental divergence complicates the direct transfer of ESG frameworks into cultural governance settings (Gray, 2010; Belfiore, 2022).

Analyses of cultural policy further demonstrate that governance structures in GLAM institutions are frequently fragmented, with responsibilities distributed across professional autonomy, administrative management, and political oversight. Within such arrangements, ESG-related requirements are rarely positioned as components of an integrated governance framework. Instead, they tend to appear through isolated policy references, ethical codes, or project-specific obligations, without mechanisms to ensure coordination across environmental, social, and governance dimensions (Holden, 2015; Gray, 2010).

Moreover, GLAM institutions are not subject to binding ESG regulatory regimes comparable to those applicable to corporate actors. The absence of mandatory requirements results in uneven implementation practices and a lack of shared sector-wide standards. Reliance on voluntary guidelines and professional recommendations places ESG integration at the level of individual institutional interpretation rather than embedding it within coherent, sector-adapted governance frameworks (Müller, 2019).

5.2. Financial and Organisational Constraints

The financial structure of the GLAM sector constitutes a significant constraint on the systematic integration of ESG frameworks. Cultural institutions typically operate within funding models characterised by high dependence on public subsidies, competitive project-based grants, and short-term budgetary cycles. Such funding arrangements prioritise operational continuity and programme delivery over long-term strategic investment, thereby limiting the capacity of institutions to plan and implement sustained structural and infrastructural transformations required for comprehensive ESG integration (Toepler, 2011; European Court of Auditors, 2022).

Public funding mechanisms for culture are frequently earmarked for specific activities or outputs, leaving limited discretionary resources for cross-cutting initiatives such as sustainability governance, internal capacity building, or the development of integrated management systems. As a result, ESG-related investments, particularly those related to energy efficiency, monitoring systems, staff training, or structural restructuring, are often deferred or pursued only when aligned with external funding priorities. This structural funding logic constrains the ability of GLAM institutions to embed ESG principles within core strategic and operational processes (European Court of Auditors, 2022). Under these conditions, ESG integration is structurally subordinated to short-term funding priorities, reinforcing a project-driven logic that undermines the development of stable governance mechanisms and long-term sustainability strategies.

Empirical research further indicates that sustainability-related actions in cultural institutions are predominantly supported through externally funded, time-limited projects rather than through stable institutional budgets. While project-based funding enables experimentation and innovation, it also reinforces the fragmentation of ESG-related activities across discrete initiatives, each with its own objectives, timelines, and reporting requirements. Once project funding concludes, continuity is frequently compromised, and lessons learned are not systematically integrated into structural practice, thereby limiting cumulative institutional learning and long-term impact (Müller & Grieshaber, 2024).

Organisational constraints compound these financial limitations. Many GLAM institutions operate with limited administrative capacity and relatively small staff complements, particularly in non-metropolitan or resource-constrained contexts. Within such organisational settings, sustainability and ESG-related responsibilities are typically assigned as additional tasks to existing roles, often to curatorial, educational, or technical staff, without formal recognition, dedicated resources, or clear lines of responsibility. Such arrangements limit the institutional visibility and strategic positioning of ESG-related responsibilities, effectively preventing their consolidation into recognised roles, decision-making structures, or performance management systems. This lack of institutional anchoring reduces the visibility and strategic relevance of ESG-related activities within institutional hierarchies (Toepler, 2011).

ESG-related actions tend to remain peripheral to core institutional functions, rather than being embedded within decision-making processes, governance arrangements, and performance management systems. The combination of constrained financial resources, project-dependent funding structures, and limited structural capacity thus reinforces a cycle in which ESG principles are addressed episodically and opportunistically, rather than through coherent and sustained institutional strategies.

5.3. Gaps in Knowledge and Institutional Capacity

Literature on cultural management and policy consistently highlights deficiencies in the knowledge and competencies required to manage complex sustainability and ESG frameworks within cultural institutions. Professional roles in the GLAM sector have traditionally focused on curatorial, archival, library, and educational functions, while competencies related to sustainability governance, performance measurement, and integrated strategic planning remain underdeveloped (Holden, 2015; O'Hagan, J., 2016). At the same time, ESG implementation presupposes cross-functional competencies that cut across curatorial, administrative, technical, and managerial domains – competencies that are not systematically embedded within existing professional profiles or training pathways in the GLAM sector.

Sectoral evidence further confirms the existence of a capacity gap. Reports produced by professional networks such as the Network of European Museum Organisations

(NEMO) indicate that, although museums increasingly recognise the importance of climate action and sustainability, many institutions lack the internal expertise, tools, and institutional structures necessary for systematic implementation (NEMO, 2021). Comparable challenges have been identified across other GLAM sub-sectors, where sustainability-related knowledge is treated as specialised expertise rather than as a core institutional capacity.

The limited availability of formal education and training programmes addressing ESG implementation in cultural contexts further constrains institutional learning. As a result, ESG-related initiatives frequently depend on individual motivation and ad hoc expertise rather than on stable, organisation-wide competencies and processes (Comunian, Gilmore, & Jacobi, 2021).

5.4. Risks of a Formalistic Approach to ESG

In the absence of sector-adapted frameworks and adequate institutional capacity, the application of ESG principles within the GLAM sector entails a pronounced risk of formalistic or symbolic compliance. Cultural policy scholarship has consistently demonstrated that externally imposed governance frameworks, particularly those introduced through funding conditionalities or policy, to be adopted at a procedural level, emphasising compliance with terminology, indicators, and reporting requirements rather than substantive changes in institutional behaviour or decision-making practices (Belfiore, 2008; Belfiore, 2022).

Within this context, ESG-related concepts are frequently translated into surface-level institutional practices, such as the inclusion of sustainability statements in strategic documents, the selective reporting of environmentally or socially oriented activities, or the alignment of existing projects with ESG-related language. While such practices signal formal alignment with sustainability agendas, they often lack integration into core governance processes, resource allocation mechanisms, or performance management systems. In this form, ESG frameworks risk losing their potential as tools for organisational learning, strategic reflection, and institutional transformation, becoming instead administrative instruments focused on symbolic compliance. As a

result, ESG principles remain weakly connected to institutional priorities and operational routines, limiting their transformative potential (Holden, 2015; Müller, 2019).

The prevalence of “tick-box” approaches is further reinforced by the project-based funding structures that characterise much of the GLAM sector. Funding and reporting requirements frequently prioritise demonstrable outputs and short-term indicators, encouraging institutions to frame activities in ways that meet external expectations without necessitating deeper institutional change. Under these conditions, ESG-related reporting becomes an end in itself rather than a tool for institutional learning, reflection, and strategic adjustment (Belfiore, 2022).

Importantly, existing literature suggests that formalistic compliance should not be interpreted as a lack of commitment or awareness within cultural institutions. Rather, it reflects the interaction of structural constraints, financial dependency, and limited internal expertise, which collectively restrict the capacity of GLAM organisations to engage with ESG frameworks in a systematic and meaningful manner. In the absence of competency-based implementation models and governance mechanisms tailored to the cultural sector, formalism emerges as a rational institutional response to external pressures rather than as an intentional avoidance of substantive change (Holden, 2015; Müller, 2019).

From an analytical standpoint, the persistence of formalistic approaches highlights a systemic implementation gap between ESG-related aspirations and institutional realities in the GLAM sector. This gap underscores the limitations of transferring generic ESG frameworks into cultural contexts without corresponding adaptation to sector-specific governance structures, professional practices, and capacity constraints.

These challenges point to a systemic implementation gap that cannot be addressed through incremental adjustments or additional projects, but requires the development of sector-adapted ESG frameworks capable of aligning sustainability principles with the governance logics, professional realities, and public-value missions of GLAM institutions.

6. Identifying the ESG Competency Gap in the GLAM Sector

6.1. Existing Competencies and Role Configurations

Across the GLAM sector, sustainability-related work is most commonly embedded within existing professional roles rather than articulated through dedicated ESG functions. In museums, professional discussions increasingly emphasise the need for adaptive skill sets linked to sustainable development, including audience-oriented practice, community engagement, experimentation, and cross-functional management capabilities, indicating a gradual shift in professional expectations beyond traditional curatorial and collection-centred competencies (Gobbato, 2024). At the organisational level, museum sustainability is frequently approached through reporting, policy alignment, and public accountability instruments, suggesting that competences related to communication, performance documentation, and institutional legitimacy are becoming progressively more relevant (Cerquetti et al., 2024).

In the library domain, ESG-related competencies are most often framed through organisational learning, service quality, and governance arrangements, particularly in public libraries where ESG-oriented integration has been examined as a transformation process that affects operational routines, accountability structures,

and staff learning dynamics (Lee, 2024). Practice-oriented library scholarship similarly suggests that ESG thinking, where it is adopted, tends to be translated into policy, strategic planning, and operational culture, implicitly requiring competencies in internal change management, evidence-based goal setting, and performance tracking (Connell & Porta, 2023).

In archives, sustainability-related competencies have historically been articulated through the lens of “green” archival management, which links environmentally sustainable and socially responsible practice to affordability constraints and day-to-day operational decisions (Abbey, 2012). This framing indicates that archival sustainability competencies have often evolved as pragmatic professional guidance rather than as part of an explicit ESG governance model.

Beyond core GLAM organisations, ESG-related competence discussions also appear in heritage governance contexts where sustainability performance measurement and reporting are proposed for cultural heritage partnerships (e.g., tourism-heritage arrangements), implying a growing expectation for competency in cross-sector coordination, performance assessment, and stakeholder accountability (Sotiriadis & Shen, 2025). This broadens the scope of ESG-relevant competencies from institutional operations towards ecosystem-level collaboration and governance.

6.2. Observed Skill and Knowledge Gaps

While sustainability language and practices are increasingly visible across GLAM domains, the reviewed sources converge on the finding that capacity limitations persist, particularly in knowledge, implementation expertise, and institutional learning. In museums, empirical evidence from sustainability-related disclosure and institutional analysis highlights that impediments to sustainability transitions include limited knowledge, alongside financial and governance-related constraints, suggesting that the competence gap is not purely technical but also organisational (Cerquetti et al., 2024). Complementing this, research focusing on museum professionals indicates that sustainable development expectations are reshaping professional work, but that the shift requires new governance, management, and staff-

development capabilities that are not systematically established across the profession (Gobbato, 2024).

Museum-focused work also points to gaps in integrated decision-making capability. Evidence from professional/visitor perspectives suggests that museum decision-makers may struggle to integrate multiple sustainability dimensions into coherent choices, implying a deficit in systems-oriented competency that connects environmental, social, economic, and governance considerations (Fehér, 2023). Where ESG becomes operationalised through reporting expectations, the competence gap increasingly includes data governance and analytics capacity. Emerging research on AI-enabled analytics for ESG reporting in museums identifies enabling conditions and barriers linked to IT infrastructure, data collection, organisational structures, and capability development, indicating that ESG reporting requires technical and managerial competencies that many museums may not currently possess (Kim et al., 2025).

In public libraries, ESG-oriented integration has been analysed through organisational learning models, suggesting that effective implementation depends on structured learning processes and governance arrangements that translate ESG principles into routines and service delivery (Lee, 2024). The implied gap concerns the availability of institutional mechanisms that support staff upskilling, knowledge retention, and cross-unit learning in ESG-related domains. Practice-oriented library literature further indicates that ESG adoption requires internal research and organisational change to build “intrinsic competencies” for systemic change, reinforcing that competencies are not limited to individual knowledge but include organisational capability to manage transformation (Connell & Porta, 2023).

In archives, sustainability guidance highlights the need to broaden professional approaches beyond narrow technical fixes, focusing instead on operationally feasible strategies that integrate environmental and social responsibility into everyday archival management (Abbey, 2012). This indicates a continuing gap between recognised sustainability priorities and the availability of structured competency development pathways tailored to archival governance and preservation constraints.

6.3. Alignment with Sector Needs and External Expectations

The competence gap is reinforced by the fact that GLAM institutions operate within expanding public-value expectations and policy environments, yet without stable ESG implementation infrastructures. In libraries, the sector's contribution to SDGs has been documented through roles in information access, partnership-building, and skills development, implying that staff competencies increasingly need to include collaboration, advocacy, and advanced information practices aligned with development priorities (Mbagwu et al., 2020). In museums and heritage domains, sustainability expectations are increasingly connected to accountability, reporting, and legitimacy mechanisms, which elevate the need for competences in metrics, disclosure, and governance-oriented communication (Cerquetti et al., 2024).

At the intersection of heritage and tourism, ESG-oriented performance measurement and reporting proposals for intangible cultural heritage partnerships reflect rising expectations for systematic assessment and stakeholder accountability across institutional boundaries (Sotiriadis & Shen, 2025). This development implies that GLAM-related professionals may need competencies that extend beyond single-institution practice, including partnership governance, shared indicators, and performance management across multi-actor arrangements.

Digitalisation trends further amplify competence needs. In museums, ESG reporting and related accountability practices increasingly depend on data availability, digital infrastructures, and analytics capabilities, and the emerging literature suggests that the transition towards technology-enabled ESG reporting introduces additional competence demands in IT leadership and organisational capability-building (Kim et al., 2025). These expectations align unevenly with current professional training patterns, indicating that sector needs are evolving faster than structured competency provision.

6.4. Analytical Synthesis: Defining the ESG Competency Gap

Taken together, the reviewed evidence indicates that the GLAM sector demonstrates growing engagement with sustainability and ESG-relevant themes, but lacks a systematic and competency-grounded implementation model that spans organisational levels and GLAM subdomains. Museums show increasing professional

recognition of sustainability-driven role transformation and reporting pressures, yet persistent deficits in knowledge, integrated decision-making skills, and technical capacity for ESG-oriented disclosure (Gobbato, 2024; Cerquetti et al., 2024; Fehér, 2023). Libraries demonstrate relevance of ESG framing through organisational learning and strategic integration, but the implied requirement for institutionalised learning mechanisms and change-management capacity is not consistently embedded as a standardised competency pathway (Lee, 2024; Connell & Porta, 2023). Archives show a relatively strong tradition of practice-oriented sustainability guidance, but primarily as pragmatic operational strategies rather than as a governance-linked ESG competence framework (Abbey, 2012).

The competence gap is therefore best characterised as a combined deficit in (a) integrated ESG literacy across E-S-G dimensions, (b) organisational learning and change-management capability, and (c) data, reporting, and governance capacities required for credible ESG-oriented accountability. The cross-domain nature of these gaps, also visible in heritage partnership contexts, supports the conclusion that future interventions require sector-adapted competency frameworks and implementation models that are valid across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums rather than museum-centric solutions alone (Sotiriadis & Shen, 2025).

This analysis defines the ESG competency gap in the GLAM sector as a systemic and multi-level challenge rather than as a collection of isolated skill deficits. The identified gaps in integrated ESG literacy, organisational learning and change-management capacity, and data- and governance-related competencies highlight the need for structured, sector-adapted competency frameworks capable of supporting coherent ESG implementation across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. These findings provide the analytical foundation for subsequent project activities aimed at developing ESG competency models aligned with the institutional realities and public-value missions of the GLAM sector.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this report demonstrates that the application of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks within the GLAM sector represents not a straightforward transfer of corporate sustainability models, but a complex process of adaptation shaped by the public-interest mandate, institutional diversity, and governance realities of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. Drawing on desk research across policy frameworks, academic literature, professional practices, and sector-specific initiatives, the report confirms that sustainability is already a deeply embedded concern within the GLAM sector, albeit articulated through fragmented, project-based, and predominantly non-integrated approaches.

The review of conceptual foundations and policy contexts highlights that culture has long been recognised as a contributor to sustainable development, particularly in relation to public value creation, social inclusion, education, and heritage stewardship. However, this recognition has largely remained at a normative and agenda-setting level, without corresponding sector-adapted governance models or operational frameworks capable of translating sustainability principles into coherent institutional practice. As a result, ESG-related expectations increasingly shape the environment in which GLAM institutions operate, while remaining only partially aligned with their organisational structures, decision-making processes, and professional roles.

State-of-the-art analysis across environmental, social, economic, and governance dimensions reveals a consistent pattern across GLAM sub-sectors. Environmental sustainability demonstrates the highest degree of operational maturity, particularly in museums and archives, yet remains predominantly framed as a technical or managerial challenge rather than a strategic governance issue. Social sustainability is conceptually well developed through discourses of public value, inclusion, and participation, but continues to face persistent challenges related to evaluation, accountability, and institutional integration. Economic sustainability in the GLAM sector is fundamentally oriented toward long-term value creation, resilience, and stewardship rather than profitability, limiting the applicability of conventional corporate ESG metrics. Governance arrangements are largely shaped by soft regulation, professional norms, and funding-related expectations, resulting in uneven and fragmented sustainability practices across institutions.

The mapping of existing initiatives, projects, and professional networks further confirms that sustainability-related action in the GLAM sector is widespread but structurally constrained. European and international initiatives, professional associations, and collaborative projects play a crucial role in knowledge exchange and experimentation, yet their voluntary and time-bound nature limits the consolidation of sustainability practices into permanent institutional structures. Reliance on external partnerships and project-based funding reinforces the externalisation of ESG-related responsibilities and restricts opportunities for cumulative organisational learning and long-term capacity development.

Analysis of challenges and limitations underscores that these patterns are not the result of insufficient awareness or commitment, but of structural, financial, and institutional constraints. The absence of binding ESG regulation, combined with fragmented governance arrangements and limited discretionary resources, constrains the capacity of GLAM institutions to adopt integrated ESG frameworks. Financial dependency on public funding and project-based grants further reinforces short-term implementation logics, while limited administrative capacity and underdeveloped sustainability-related roles hinder systematic integration. Under such conditions, the risk of formalistic or symbolic ESG compliance emerges as a rational organisational

response to external pressures rather than a deliberate avoidance of substantive change.

Central to these findings is the identification of a pronounced ESG competency gap within the GLAM sector. While sustainability-related skills and practices are increasingly embedded within existing professional roles, they remain fragmented and unevenly distributed across sub-sectors and institutional levels. The analysis demonstrates that the competency gap extends beyond individual knowledge deficits to encompass deficiencies in integrated ESG literacy, organisational learning and change-management capacity, and data, reporting, and governance-related competencies. These gaps are further amplified by digitalisation trends and rising expectations for accountability, transparency, and performance measurement.

The findings of this report indicate that the key challenge facing the GLAM sector is not whether ESG principles are relevant, but how they can be meaningfully translated into governance, management, and competency frameworks compatible with cultural institutional realities. The uncritical transfer of corporate ESG models risks reinforcing fragmentation and formalism, whereas sector-adapted approaches grounded in public value, long-term stewardship, and institutional capacity-building offer a more viable pathway for integration.

Effective ESG integration in the GLAM sector requires the development of context-sensitive, competency-based frameworks that align sustainability principles with the governance logics, professional practices, and public-interest missions of cultural institutions. By shifting the focus from isolated initiatives toward institutionalised learning, coherent governance arrangements, and cross-sector competency development, ESG can evolve from a peripheral or symbolic concern into a meaningful driver of sustainable transformation across galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

The conclusions presented in this report provide the analytical foundation for subsequent project activities aimed at designing ESG competency frameworks and implementation models tailored to the GLAM sector. These next steps are essential for supporting cultural institutions in navigating evolving sustainability expectations while safeguarding their core missions and societal roles in the long term.

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