

INTRODUCTION

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FROM INVISIBLE TO VISIBLE: CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT IN CREATIVE AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES IN LATVIA: INTRODUCING THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In the context of public investment into culture and arts, an ever-present issue is that of impact measurement. The issue of impacts is often oversimplified, because of the need to express non-linear processes in linear, monetary terms (especially for policy purposes). On the one hand, there is a growing demand for evidence-based policy evaluation in this field [Evans 2005]. On the other hand, researchers have started a broader debate regarding intrinsic versus instrumental impacts of culture [Seaman 2020] leading to the debate on cultural value [Belfiore 2020]. Researchers also acknowledge that there is a lot of *bad* or unverifiable evidence of impact in cultural policy documents [Belfiore 2022], or they warn about *hyperinstrumentalisation* of cultural policy, where claims about the value of culture are irrelevant to political actors [Hadley and Grey 2017].

Thus, the need for impact measurement and the identification of impacts that could demonstrate the social and economic value of culture in a more persuasive way is an ongoing academic debate. Researchers are discussing more effective

Culture Crossroads

Volume 32, 2026, doi <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol32.674>

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ISSN: 2500-9974



approaches to capturing the various impacts of the cultural and creative sectors, since overwhelming evidence is accumulating on the non-linearity of processes in the cultural and creative sectors, as well as society.

The special issue of *Culture Crossroads* titled *How to Make It Visible? Assessing Social and Economic Impact in Creative and Cultural Industries* (Vol. 32, 2026) has been prepared as a continuation of this topical scientific discussion. Its aim was to develop new ideas, as well as test the existing theoretical and empirical approaches to social and economic impact assessment in the cultural and creative industries (CCIs). Researchers from different fields were invited to present articles dedicated to methodological approaches that could be used to study the impacts of the CCIs on the sustainable development of society and the country.

The aim of this introductory article is to discuss the main challenges in measuring and assessing the economic and social impact of CCIs in Latvia, as well as to acquaint the readers with the articles of this issue. To unfold these challenges, the article is structured, as follows: (1) introduction of the complexity of cultural economics; (2) outline of the challenges in social impact assessment; (3) short overview of previous impact assessment research tradition in Latvia; (4) an overview of approaches presented in the special issue.

Understanding complexity in cultural economics

Discussions in cultural economics frequently begin by emphasizing the substantial economic potential of the CCIs. The latest Creative Economy Outlook report [2024] indicates that the cultural and creative industries globally generate revenues of nearly USD 2.3 trillion, contributing 3.1% to the world's gross domestic product (GDP) [UN 2024:5]. However, differences in how CCIs are defined, how data is used, and how statistics are compiled across countries continue to spark debates about which sectors should be included as part of the CCIs and which should not. Measuring the creative economy involves multiple dimensions, including economic performance, employment, and public participation in creative activities – dimensions that are constantly evolving and are influenced by global events. This calls for the development of new methodologies and definitions to more comprehensively capture the sectors associated with CCIs.

A clear understanding of the boundaries and returns of the CCIs is influenced by the use of different approaches to impact measurement, as well as by how the value of cultural and creative products is assessed. Perspectives among cultural economists regarding the evaluation and impact of culture and the arts vary, linking the concept of *impact* to the changes that occur through experiencing culture – where such changes may be interpreted either as an inherent part of the cultural experience or as an external outcome [Carnwaith & Brown 2014: 9]. In most cases, when discussing

the significance of CCIs, individual sectors, or even specific cultural products, impact is perceived as something external that must be demonstrated – especially in cultural policy-making, where there is a drive to prove the monetary value of art and culture. For this purpose, economic impact assessment approaches are used, which are particularly serviceable for evaluating specific events or programmes to argue for their sustainability and economic return, alongside attracting private or public funding [Snowball 2020: 207]. Economic impact studies have played an important role in political debates and decision-making, shaping cross-sectoral relationships, data exchange, and strategic planning to foster the growth of creative industries and knowledge transfer. Meanwhile, impact of cultural and creative activities is most commonly understood in terms of the added value they generate within a given economy and the number of people employed – these being the key metrics that provide the most accurate and comparable data [MCM Statistics Working Group 2018: 9].

Economic impact is generally expressed as direct, indirect, and induced impact. Added value is part of the direct economic impact generated by various CCI institutions, enterprises, or activities through the purchase of materials or services from other companies for the creation of their artistic and cultural products, as well as through the employment of new staff – thus contributing to the gross domestic product. In addition to direct economic contribution, CCI enterprises also stimulate indirect economic activity in specific sectors, such as through cultural tourism [MCM Statistics Working Group 2018: 30]. For example, organizing a particular event may generate indirect impact for the hospitality sector in a given region by attracting new visitors and encouraging spending on accommodation. Induced impact can be expressed at various scales – local, regional, or national – by measuring the effects that arise within the broader economic system [Herrero 2006]. The economic impact assessment approach aims to capture and demonstrate the instrumental value of culture and the arts, emphasizing their functionality [Loots and Vermeulen 2022]. Thus, culture and art are viewed in the context of economic development, applying quantitative research methods, examining cost-benefit relationships, and evaluating growth potential and productivity.

In contrast to instrumental value, cultural products also embody intrinsic cultural value, indicating that “something is valuable in and of itself” [Mair 2019: 22]. For example, in the context of art, intrinsic value is expressed through the creation of art as an end in itself [Snowball 2020: 207]. The measurement of intrinsic cultural value often relies on qualitative methods, based on the attitudes or opinions of stakeholders involved in the creation and experience of cultural products. This value is linked to the personal sphere of the cultural and creative product consumer, revealing the experiences and changes that cultural products can foster.

At the core of these debates lies a fundamental methodological complexity: the CCI is not fixed or uniform but a fluid, multilayered concept, making it difficult to establish universally accepted criteria for what should be measured and how. The boundaries between cultural, creative, and other knowledge-intensive sectors are increasingly overlapping. As a result, statistical classifications and measurement frameworks often lag the actual practices of cultural and creative actors, leading to inconsistencies in cross-country comparisons and long-term trend analysis. This mismatch between rapidly evolving creative practices and slower-moving institutional measurement systems underscores one of the central challenges in cultural economics – how to capture the full scope of cultural and creative value in a way that is both conceptually up to date and empirically comparable.

Challenges in social impact assessment

The social impact measurement approach offers an alternative perspective to economic impact assessment, focusing on the creation and evaluation of social value, and emphasizing the continuous influence of arts and cultural events on people's lives [Loots and Vermeulen 2022]. Social impact of culture usually may include such dimensions as health and well-being; people's engagement, participation and social cohesion; and urban and territorial renovation [Bonet and Calvano, eds. 2023].

Social impact measurement can be applied at the organizational level to understand the changes and effects generated by activities on the local community or the organization's direct target audience. This provides feedback on the social effectiveness of activities, enabling more informed decision-making. Measuring social impact in arts and cultural organizations involves tracking both quantitative data (attendance, demographics) and qualitative, long-term outcomes (wellbeing, social cohesion) to demonstrate value to stakeholders [Vermeulen and Maas 2021]. Methodological approaches offer a mix of general social impact methodologies and culture-specific evaluation tools. Theory of Change model is widely used to map how cultural activities lead to outputs, outcomes, and long-term impact [Ebrahim 2019]; Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a model for quantifying social value in monetary terms [Feor et al. 2023], while the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) is an economic survey-based technique used to estimate the monetary value people place on non-market goods, such as cultural heritage or public art, which can be used to assess the social impact of culture [Noonan 2003]. Apart from these, numerous other approaches based on qualitative methods have been developed.

On the societal level, new approaches to measure broader imprint on society have been developed in several projects funded by European Union (EU) research and innovation programme *Horizon Europe*, making a significant contribution to the discussion. The project *Measuring the Social Dimension of Culture* (MESOC)

(2020–2023)¹ tested and validated an innovative and original approach to measuring the societal value and impacts of culture and cultural policies and practices, while the project *Understanding, Capturing and Fostering the Societal Value of Culture* (UNCHARTED) (2020–2024) aimed to identify, contextualize, understand, measure and analyse the emergence and conformation of the values of culture from an interdisciplinary, collaborative and pluralistic perspective². These discussions are in line with the current debate on cultural policy, which focuses on increasing cross-sectoral overlaps between different policy areas, such as health, integration and sustainability (*State of Culture Report* [Polivtseva 2024]; *Culture and Health: Time to Act* [Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission) 2025]).

Some of the challenges of social impact measurement of cultural interventions have occurred because the blurred boundaries of the research object (*culture*) that makes measurement inconsistent. Often, impact measurement frameworks for cultural organizations are criticized for focusing on outputs or acknowledge difficulties to measure intangible and subjective outcomes, such as identity, belonging, emotional experience, creativity or empowerment, and to quantify these impacts. Another criticism is aimed at focusing on the perception of the intended or expected impact instead of on the actual achieved impact [Vermeulen and Maas 2021]. Altogether, researchers acknowledge that there is a lack of culture specific measurement frameworks in comparison to environmental, social, or economic impact methodologies.

Previous impact assessment research tradition in Latvia

In Latvia, both economic and social impact studies in the cultural sector are mostly instrumental in nature – they are designed to demonstrate the impact of various cultural and artistic phenomena to the stakeholders, including justifying public investment in these sectors.

Several studies have been conducted in Latvia that examine the economic impact of culture in general, also highlighting the problems of measurement. The first studies were conducted in the late 1990s and beginning of 2000s by the Institute of Economics of the Latvian Academy of Sciences: *The Economic Significance of the Cultural Sector* [LZA Ekonomikas institūts 1999]; *Assessment of the Economic Importance of the Cultural Sector* [LZA Ekonomikas institūts 1998]; *Calculating the Contribution of the Cultural Sector to the Economy* [LZA Ekonomikas institūts 2003]. A significant study, integrating the latest international methodological

¹ <https://www.mesoc-project.eu/>

² <https://uncharted-culture.eu/>

approaches, was conducted some years later under the leadership of researcher Roberts Ķīlis: *The Economic Significance and Impact of the Cultural Sector in Latvia* [Analītisko pētījumu un stratēģiju laboratorija 2007]. The report begins with a theoretical section, offering analysis of the key concepts such as economic impact (direct, indirect, and induced), and defining the concept of the cultural sector. Describing the economic impact assessment methods used around the world, the choice of the input-output model was justified and its interpretation in the context of Latvia was described in detail.

Several studies on the economic impact of a specific sector have also been carried out, but these studies are fragmentary and situational in nature, driven by the need to justify EU Structural Fund investments or to study a specific sector within the framework of a particular project, for example: assessment of EU Structural Fund investments in the preservation of Latvia's cultural heritage and the development of the cultural environment [Enviroprojekts 2019]; *The importance of the cultural sector in Latvia's economy and the use of EU Structural funds for cultural purposes* [Baltic Project Consulting 2006]; *Economic value and impact of public libraries in Latvia* [Trešais tēva dēls 2012].

Economic impact studies are often associated with the need to justify significant investments in culture, which is why there is a wide range of studies on large-scale cultural events. Several studies have been conducted in Latvia to analyse one of the largest cultural phenomena in Latvia – the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration. These studies examine both the economic and social impact of this phenomenon.

The beginnings of research into the festival's economic justification can be traced to the studies by the Institute of Economics of the Latvian Academy of Sciences titled *Song and Dance Festival in a Changing Economic Environment* [LZA Ekonomikas institūts 2008]. This study was dedicated to analysing the distribution of the festival's budget among the state, municipalities, and participant contributions. The researchers also examined the indirect income generated by businesses related to the festival and provided an assessment of economic efficiency based on a cost-benefit analysis. The greatest limitations in forming the economic justification stemmed from difficulties in obtaining data. These included inconsistencies in municipal financial data collection systems and shortcomings in the classification of business activities, which hindered the ability to gather data on specific types of enterprises. Although the study claimed that the costs associated with organizing the festival generate revenue for sectors of the Latvian economy that serve the festival, the exact amount and distribution of this impact were not calculated.

The issue of measuring the impact of large-scale events has been most directly addressed in the report published by *Marketing Practitioners Academia* on

the economic impact of the Song and Dance Celebration, identifying multi-level impact analysis – which includes indicators of direct, indirect, and induced economic effects – as the most suitable approach for evaluation [Mārketinga praktiķu Academia 2013]. As frequently noted, the authors of this study also emphasized the lack of comparable data. Moreover, the unique nature of the Song and Dance Celebration further complicated impact assessment, requiring customized measurement methods and in-depth, long-term research before and after the event.

More recent research has been developed by the Latvian Academy of Culture within the framework of the project *Cultural Capital as a Resource for Latvia's Sustainable Development* (CARD) [Judrupa and Zemīte 2022] and related studies on the Song and Dance Celebration's economic network [Zemīte et al. 2024]. These studies employed input-output models to estimate economic multipliers and the festival's contribution to GDP. The methodological discussion deepened the understanding of the analytical challenges in applying input–output (I–O) models to measure the economic impact of cultural sectors in Latvia. The I–O approach, used within the CARD project, underscores that the precision of this method is constrained by several structural and contextual factors. One of the key limitations lies in the ambiguous boundaries of the cultural and creative industries, where overlapping or loosely defined sectoral classifications hinder accurate attribution of economic effects. The reliance on Statistical classification of economic activities (NACE Rev.2)³ codes at the first level of aggregation results in the inclusion of heterogeneous activities under broad categories, thereby diluting the cultural specificity of the analysis. Furthermore, the inclusion of activities like the gambling industry within the broader *entertainment* category distorts sectoral analysis, underscoring the inadequacy of current statistical classifications for capturing the specificities of cultural industries. Additionally, the model's reliance on national statistical input-output tables – updated only every five years (2015, 2020, 2025) – restricts temporal accuracy and forces researchers to assume that intersectoral relationships remain constant over time, even in a rapidly evolving cultural economy.

Similar to economic impact studies, the social impact of large-scale events, like Song and Dance Celebration in Latvia and European Capital of Culture (ECoC) events in Latvia have been assessed several times. Using network analysis, researchers of Latvian Academy of Culture have examined the impact of both the *Rīga 2014* ECoC and the *Liepāja 2027* ECoC: *Measuring social and economic impact of large scale cultural events: a social network analysis* [Laķe et al. 2015]; *Final/ex-post internal evaluation of the European Capital of Culture Riga 2014*

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-manuals-and-guidelines/-/ks-ra-07-015>

programe [Nodibinājums Rīga 2014 2015]; *Liepāja – European Capital of Culture 2027 assessment* [Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija 2025]. Song and Dance Celebration of Latvia is one of the most researched phenomena, also from social impact perspective. The monography *The Song and Dance Celebration. The Anatomy of Tradition* [Muktupāvela and Laķe, eds. 2018] discusses diverse aspects of social impact (see also Vinogradova and Laķe 2019).

Even though direct social impact evaluations have been carried out occasionally (e.g. *Study on the socio-economic impact of non-governmental organizations in the cultural sector* [Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija 2018]; *The socio-economic impact of culture and creative industries in Liepāja* [Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija 2019], social impact of cultural interventions have been a focus of several academic research projects of Latvian Academy of Culture. For example, there have been two research projects examining the impact of cultural and creative industries on the territorial development and well-being of communities: *Rethinking Creative Cities: Networks, Intermediaries, Development Prospects (REPRINT)*⁴ (2022–2024), and *Creative Industries in Small Towns: Potential and Contribution to Sustainability (CRISP)* (2020–2021)⁵. Impact of cultural manifestations and especially films were studied in the project *The art of nationalism: Social solidarity and exclusion in contemporary Latvia* (2020–2021)⁶ including a quantitative, representative Latvian resident survey to ascertain their opinions.

Overall, it can be concluded that neither social nor economic impact studies have been conducted regularly or longitudinally in Latvia. Economic studies are mostly commissioned studies aimed at demonstrating the economic impact of cultural interventions to stakeholders and policy makers. Large-scale event evaluations deserve a special mention. The most widely studied events are linked to the Latvian Song and Dance Celebration, including its diverse social impact.

Consequently, despite advances in quantitative modelling, these studies collectively underscore that reliable impact evaluation in cultural economics requires not only refined methodologies but also the development of coherent, continuous, and sector-sensitive data systems capable of reflecting the complex, hybrid nature of cultural sector performance and its socio-economic effects. Moreover, the question

⁴ <https://lka.edu.lv/en/research/research-projects/fundamental-and-applied-research-projects/re-print/>

⁵ <https://lka.edu.lv/en/research/research-projects/fundamental-and-applied-research-projects/archive-fundamental-and-applied-research-projects/creative-industries-small-towns-potential-and-contribution-susta/>

⁶ <https://lka.edu.lv/lv/petnieciba/petijumu-projekti/fundamentalo-un-lietisko-petijumu-projekti/realizetie-fundamentali-lietisko-petijumu-projekti/nacionalisma-maksla-sociala-solidaritate-un-atstumtiba-musdienu->

of the most appropriate social impact measurement approaches remains open for future research.

The contribution of the special issue of *Culture Crossroads* to social and economic impact assessment

The contributions to this special issue also reflect the complexity of the matter at stake here, and demonstrate that assessing the social and economic impact of CCIs cannot be reduced to a single methodological framework. Instead, they articulate a set of recurring impact-assessment approaches that account for different epistemological positions, organizational contexts, and sectoral realities. These papers reveal how impact is made visible – or remains invisible – through specific evaluative logics, and why this poses persistent challenges also in the Latvian CCI context.

A recurring point of departure across the papers is the dominance of metric-based and audit-oriented evaluation approaches, particularly in public funding and cultural policy contexts. These frameworks privilege standardised indicators, quantitative outputs, and short-term results that can be aggregated and compared across projects. As demonstrated by Ranczakowska [2026], such audit cultures shape not only reporting practices but also organisational priorities, rendering relational, processual, and long-term cultural effects largely invisible. Bonilla Berrocal et al. [2026] similarly describe an approach to social impact assessment that focuses on measurable indicators and attempts to predict and explain change, sometimes by expressing social value in economic terms. While these approaches offer institutional legitimacy and comparability, researchers consistently point to their limited capacity to capture the complex social dynamics through which cultural meaning, cohesion, and agency emerge.

In response to these limitations, several contributions foreground participatory and learning-oriented approaches, in which impact assessment is embedded within practice and oriented toward collective sense-making rather than retrospective measurement. Here, evaluation functions as an ongoing process of reflection, adaptation, and organisational learning, often relying on qualitative or mixed methods such as stakeholder engagement, narrative inquiry, and iterative feedback. Bonilla Berrocal et al. [2026] explicitly frame impact assessment as a continuous cycle that supports strategic development rather than merely external accountability, while Ranczakowska [2026] documents the ways how cultural practitioners even develop their own parallel informal evaluation practices that reflect the experienced cultural value better than permitted by standard reporting templates. Across these accounts, participatory approaches (ones that involve those affected by an initiative in identifying relevant forms of impact and reflecting on change) are shown to

highlight forms of impact – such as trust-building, empowerment, and shifts in social relations – that remain structurally under-recognised within audit-driven systems.

Closely related to this topic is a shared critique of linear evaluation models that struggle to account for distributed, emergent, and long-term cultural effects, whilst seeking to isolate effects into directly traceable outcomes. Several papers argue that cultural and social change unfolds in non-linear, relational, and temporally dispersed ways that resist isolation into discrete outcomes. Ranczakowska's [2026] notion of rhizomatic impact evaluation conceptualises impact as a network of interconnected "ripples" that emerge across actors and over extended timeframes, rather than as direct causal effects of individual interventions. Bonilla Berrocal et al. [2026] similarly emphasise the emergent nature of social change in complex ecosystems, where impact is co-produced and difficult to attribute to singular actions. Such perspectives are particularly relevant in the Latvian CCI context, where many initiatives operate at small scales and rely on sustained relational work rather than immediate economic return.

Another important strand across the contributions to the special issue highlights the necessity of context-sensitive and multidimensional approaches to impact assessment. Sanul and Köse [2026] demonstrates how cultural impact in rural and regional contexts cannot be adequately captured through universal indicators, proposing instead a framework that integrates social, spatial, and ecological dimensions and combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Crucially, indicator development remains open and responsive to context as indicators are refined in response to local conditions and emerging insights. This approach acknowledges that cultural value is locally situated and differently experienced across communities. It also resonates with broader challenges in Latvia, where diversity of cultural practices across urban, regional, and rural settings differs considerably.

Finally, several contributions foreground the pragmatic realities of impact assessment under conditions of constraint. Kalēja et al. [2026] show that hybrid creative-social enterprises frequently rely on informal, experience-based assessment practices – such as observing participation, stakeholder responses, or social media engagement – due to limited resources and differences between formal reporting requirements and lived practice. Svempe's [2026] analysis of digital health interventions shows a practical approach, where effects are assessed using indirect measures such as how often people use a service and how they describe their experience. While such approaches may lack methodological rigour or comparability, they often align more closely with practitioners' understanding of value and change.

These accounts clearly indicate that the challenge of assessing social and economic impact in CCIs is not merely methodological, but deeply structural and epistemological in nature. The impact becomes visible – or remains invisible –

depending on which evaluative logic is mobilised, whose knowledge counts, and which timeframes are analysed. This difficulty is further reinforced as creative practices become more embedded and strategic, since their effects are increasingly indirect and dispersed across organisational processes rather than visible as discrete outcomes [Kaygan 2026]. Rather than pointing toward a single solution, the contributions suggest a plural and reflexive understanding of impact assessment, combining basic standardised measures with participatory and context-sensitive ways of observing change over time.

Acknowledgement

The publication is funded by the Ministry of Culture, Republic of Latvia, project “Cultural and creative ecosystem of Latvia as a resource of resilience and sustainability”, project No. VPP-MM-LKRVA-2023/1-0001

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