

Report | Cultural Policy Hub on Leveraging Culture to Strengthen Canada's Global Power

The Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University is a national, bilingual platform that aims to build informed, inclusive and integrated cultural policy. It contributes to policy issues in collaboration with researchers, policymakers, artists and creators from across Canada's academic, government, non-profit and private spheres.

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Executive Summary

On April 17, 2026, the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University held a workshop at the 2026 DemocracyXChange, in partnership with the Goethe-Institut, with representatives from creative industries, government, the not-for-profit sector and public agencies to reflect on how Canada can leverage its culture to strengthen its global power.

Workshop participants identified the current moment as one of opportunity for Canada to shine on the international stage, with its diversity of cultural outputs and the strength of its values. Arts and culture are powerful tools of influence and of economic diplomacy in an era marked by geopolitical fragmentation, digital disruption, and intensifying economic competition.

Despite the assets at its disposal, Canada has not yet fully articulated how culture can advance its geopolitical, economic, and democratic interests. Workshop participants identified two structural obstacles to Canada's cultural internationalization as it stands: inconsistent policy-building and a fragmented leadership that does not include all players.

To address these issues and bolster Canada's cultural economy globally, participants came up with four recommendations:

1. Develop an outside-of-government entity to promote cultural internationalization as a form of economic diplomacy;
2. Systematically embed culture into external government strategies, including inbound trade missions;
3. Increase collaboration between federal, provincial and local governments; and
4. Be intentional and proud to build a Canadian cultural brand, domestically and abroad.

Background & Context

Culture is a strategic multiplier that middle powers can use to project influence. It opens doors, shapes perceptions, strengthens trade relationships, and elevates global presence.

The Canadian government has recently emphasized the importance of cultivating, protecting, and projecting Canadian cultural expression and democratic narratives domestically and abroad. When the workshop discussed in this report was held, the Government of Canada's Creative Export Strategy had sunset in March 2026, which left participants with some uncertainty about the future of Canada's cultural trade. But since then, the announcement of the strategy's permanent renewal has sent a strong signal that the government intends to foster Canada's cultural internationalization. The sector is also closely monitoring the government's approach to the upcoming joint review of the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement in July 2026, as the outcome of that joint review could have a significant impact on trade conditions for cultural industries.

Canada has assets to lead in the field of soft power and cultural diplomacy thanks to an overwhelmingly positive international perception and to its dynamic and diverse cultural industries.¹ As Canada develops a new approach to its global trade relationships, it has an opportunity to articulate a strategic approach to cultural diplomacy that works alongside its economic approach to strengthen ties with high priority partners.

During the Cultural Policy Hub's convening at the 2026 DemocracyXChange, representatives from government, the not-for-profit sector, cultural subsectors (arts, audiovisual, music, publishing, digital creative content) and the public agencies responsible for them gathered to explore possibilities around the following questions:

- How can middle power countries like Canada use culture intentionally, credibly, and ethically to shape their place in the world?
- How can Canada utilize culture to build alliances, open new markets, and reinforce democratic narratives? How do we build this roadmap together?
- What is Canada's unique advantage in terms of culture and soft power? How can our stories, including those from Indigenous and diverse communities, contribute to Canada's global image?
- How can the cultural and creative industries take an active role in shaping the power of Canadian culture on the international stage? What should the role of government be in leading or supporting these efforts?

Prior to the session, participants received a scene-setter prepared by the Hub providing a detailed overview of Canada's past cultural diplomacy and cultural export mechanisms as well as a jurisdictional scan of Germany, France, South Korea and the charity Gold House. To read this briefing document, [click here](#).

Participants then broke into four groups to reflect on possible models, priorities, policy ownership, and delivery pathways for Canada to leverage its culture on the global stage. The conversation was structured into two stages:

1. Exploration and framing: identifying models, frameworks, and coordination approaches—including trade-offs—for Canada's cultural internationalization strategy;

¹ According to a survey in 33 countries by the Canadian International Council, in 2025, [85% of respondents said Canada mainly has a positive influence in the world](#).

2. Translating frameworks into action: identifying priority policy actions tied to cultural trade, export, and diplomatic mandates.

This report provides an overview of the key takeaways coming out of this discussion, and the recommended policies and action items for the government and the sector.

What We Heard: Policy Pathways

For workshop participants, culture's role as a tool of influence is becoming more important than ever in a world characterized by geopolitical fragmentation, digital disruption, and intensifying economic competition. Participants highlighted that culture is a unique currency in the diplomatic world, as it emphasizes dialogue and exchange and allows for continued relationship-building, especially in contexts where other forms of diplomacy are increasingly characterized by openly antagonistic power dynamics.

Canada has assets to lead in the field of cultural diplomacy thanks to its dynamic cultural industries, which contributed \$65 billion in direct GDP in 2024 (2% of the GDP) and \$27.1 billion to Canadian exports in 2023, and to its diversity of cultures, including Indigenous cultures, Francophone cultures, regional cultures and diasporic cultures.

But despite the assets at its disposal, Canada has not yet fully articulated how arts and culture can advance its geopolitical, economic, and democratic interests. Participants identified two key structural gaps that prevent Canada from fully leveraging its culture to strengthen its global power so far: inconsistent policy-building and fragmented, non-inclusive leadership.

Participants developed four recommendations for government, creative industries, and Canadians to undertake in order to strengthen Canada's international position as a middle power through arts and culture:

1. Develop an outside-of-government entity to promote cultural internationalization as a form of economic diplomacy;
2. Systematically embed culture into external government strategies, including inbound trade missions;
3. Increase collaboration between federal, provincial and local governments; and
4. Be intentional and proud to build a Canadian cultural brand, domestically and abroad.

1. Develop a new entity to promote cultural internationalization as a form of economic diplomacy

Problems identified: Canada's approach to cultural diplomacy throughout the past three decades has been hesitant and lacked the consistency to fully bolster the sector on the international stage, with panelists regretting the "stop-and-go" character of past federal programs. The Senate of Canada put Global Affairs Canada (GAC) in charge of developing a cultural diplomacy strategy in its [2019 landmark report](#) and asked for other departments, including the Department of Canadian Heritage (PCH), to be partners in this strategy; but it seemed to many panelists that government branches and levels have essentially continued to work very independently of one another, and that there is no coherent national model for

cultural internationalization.² Leadership has also been fragmented within the cultural and creative industries: creators and cultural businesses currently lack a coordinated infrastructure through which to collaborate and engage with government.

Recommendations: For the government and the creative sector to create a non-government entity to centralize resources and activate culture as a form of economic diplomacy. This could take different forms, from an arms-length agency to an industry-led association or a digital platform. Both government and industry could have their own complementary organizations working hand-in-hand.

Arms-length agency with a cultural export mandate

A new standalone agency focusing on cultural exports could operate with more flexibility than a government department. If the Creative Export Strategy renewal process included revisions to improve its effectiveness, a dedicated agency could scale up existing work and provide the "connective tissue" and infrastructure to develop targeted programs in partnership with diplomatic staff.³ This agency would be able to leverage arts and culture funders' data to map the landscape, identify gaps, and pinpoint opportunities for the entire sector.

Participants suggested that this new entity could operate similarly to Québec's Société de développement des entreprises culturelles (SODEC) model, which supports Québec's cultural exports with provincial government funding. They reflected on how Ontario and federal bodies could potentially interface with Québec's existing international infrastructure, rather than duplicate it. Programs could also draw inspiration from France's general export agency, Business France, which works with France's investment bank and with subsectors professional associations to offer services to creative businesses. However, these services should avoid operating under a pay-to-play system as much as possible, as it underserves galleries, individual artists, and smaller institutions.

Industry-led association

Participants spoke in favour of an industry-led "cultural sovereignty/cultural export" association. This consortium could be organized with subgroups based on specific sectors within the cultural and creative industries, but would generally work to advocate for the sector, share resources to facilitate exports, diagnose issues and identify needs, and push the government to address those issues and needs. An industry-led association could function alongside the type of arms-length agency described above; if such an agency didn't exist, this association would need to have solid government relations capacity to navigate dialogue across departments.

This non-governmental coalition could for example share point people or offices in different countries around the world to facilitate networking efforts and market studies. It could audit existing data with the support of partners such as the Cultural Policy Hub and Nordicity to assess how existing cultural and creative sector data can inform its strategy and identify gaps.

² See details of Canada's attempts at developing a cultural diplomacy strategy in [the Hub's scene-setter for this workshop](#).

³ Since the workshop, [Minister Miller has declared in a webinar with Business/Arts](#) that PCH is conducting an evaluation of the renewed Creative Export Strategy to see how its mechanisms could evolve to improve the strategy's efficiency and impact.

The consortium could even include private investors and other sectors (e.g. post-secondary education) in a co-creation model. Private philanthropy is also an underdeveloped funding lever for international market development which could be utilized by this association.

Digital platform gathering resources and industry professionals

Several participants brought up ideas around a digital platform and loose association to connect industry leaders, pool resources, and create programs to amplify the reach of their cultural outputs. The Cultural Policy Hub suggested piloting a digital amplification platform tentatively titled the "Maple House." Participants were very receptive to the idea and viewed it as a low-lift tool to raise international awareness and facilitate branding of Canadian cultural outputs.

This platform would draw inspiration from Gold House, which connects Asian-American and Pacific Islander TV and film industry leaders and talents to foster networking, worldwide opportunities and promotion; or from "French touch", a label created by French cultural and creative entrepreneurs to encourage the internationalization of their businesses, advocate for the sector, and contribute to the brand of French cultural products abroad.⁴

2. Systematically embed culture into government trade and diplomatic strategies, including inbound trade missions

Problems identified: Panelists generally felt a lack of systematized and consistent support to cultural exports in their industries, with culture often treated as an afterthought in trade and diplomatic strategies. They pointed to the issue of a "pay-to-play" system for international opportunities like GAC Trade Missions that favours businesses who are willing or able to pay to access trade missions, fairs, etc. This creates a significant barrier to many cultural organizations and creatives, especially marginalized and emerging ones.

Recommendations: *For the government to recognize culture as an economic tool, a central pillar of foreign policy and not a soft add-on; to shift away from one-off events and instead build mechanisms to systematically promote Canadian culture abroad. GAC could also develop inbound trade missions to lower entry barriers for international collaboration.*

Making culture an essential part of outward-facing government strategies

Culture should be positioned as a pillar of foreign policy, not a soft add-on. It needs to be systematically embedded as an essential component of trade missions, diplomatic efforts, tourism, and higher education strategies. Cultural and creative businesses are not a burden to these strategies but an asset and an amplifier for other sectors of the economy: they not only contribute to building connections but also have a direct economic impact by attracting tourists, international students and buyers of all sorts of products. This has been observed in South Korea, whose government has strongly supported cultural exports, leading to marked revenue generation across many other industries.⁵

⁴ See [the Hub's scene setter to this workshop](#) for more details on how France supports exports from creative and cultural businesses and how Gold House amplifies the voice and economic impact of AAPI creatives.

⁵ Read more about how South Korea has developed and implemented its cultural internationalization strategy across sectors in [the Hub's scene setter](#).

Canada's international cultural strategy will need to balance immediate trade sales with broader goals like building real friendships between countries, sharing Canadian values, and promoting a deeper understanding of our culture, ensuring the work plants the seed for future economic and diplomatic collaboration. For participants, Canadian ministers should integrate the promotion of Canadian arts and culture into their agendas for all visits abroad.

Shifting away from one-off events to build a more effective, sustained approach

Participants unanimously called for a shift away from one-off events or short-term cash injections, which they viewed as ineffective. They instead recommended organizing support to creative businesses into three clear steps:

- Training creative businesses to be ready for a new market;
- Offering small grants for travel/marketing to make a first international visit happen; and
- Continuing to invest after the trip to keep the momentum going and build a lasting career, rather than just letting the opportunity end there.

It is also crucial to develop responsive systems that can effectively bolster Canadian artists or cultural products that reach high levels of success domestically, go viral, or become flashpoints in other markets. Some participants suggested attaching some opportunities for exports and international exposure to specific awards, so any winner is automatically put on a track to have their cultural product exported.

One way to make these support systems more consistent, cohesive, and effective for artists and creative industries—outside of a dedicated agency—would be to reinstate and expand trade commissioner/promotion officer roles with a cultural mandate within GAC or CanExport programs.

Inbound mission blitz

GAC heavily emphasizes outbound trade missions. But for several workshop participants, there is untapped value in inbound missions that could bring international buyers, curators, and decision-makers to Canada: “why take eight organizations to Korea when you could showcase dozens of Canadian organizations on an inbound mission?” asked one participant. This would lower barriers to participation in international trade for cultural organizations that are smaller, but whose cultural products would nevertheless appeal to an international audience.

Canada's festivals and markets (TIFF, MUTEK, etc.) are already world-class platforms and could be leveraged as inbound cultural and commercial infrastructure, creating opportunities to attract investors and potential partners. There could also be specific cultural moments or anniversaries in diplomatic relations with a specific country to utilize as opportunities to invite cross-sectorial delegations.

3. Increase collaboration between federal, provincial, and local governments

Problems identified: Many workshop participants highlighted that different levels of government need to work more closely together to grow Canada's cultural internationalization strategy, as they were called to do in the 2019 Senate report on cultural diplomacy. Participants

pointed to the leadership of provinces particularly, and called for successful initiatives to be shared across the country.

Recommendations: *For federal, provincial, and municipal governments to leverage local knowledge, develop a micro-grant system, and increase cross-provincial collaboration.*

Leverage local knowledge

With a deeper knowledge of smaller organizations and businesses on the ground, cities and municipal governments have the capacity to identify when artists or products may be ripe for international exposure. A cultural trade association or agency could provide them with tools and guidelines to assess local businesses' readiness for exports or for international collaboration, and to orient those that have been identified towards resources such as grants, in-kind support programs, or collaboration opportunities with international actors that already have a relationship with local entities.

Provincial and municipal governments could also assist in collecting data on the state of the sector, the experiences of creative businesses with exports and international collaboration, and how interested these businesses are in developing their internationalization in the future.

Develop a system of micro-grants

Cities and provincial governments could collaborate with GAC and/or PCH to establish a system of micro-grants to support initial international travel and marketing efforts. If some artists and creative businesses show promise or have opportunities for international collaboration, a decentralized model where other levels of government have the latitude to distribute micro-grants could lead to better support for creative businesses in piloting their internationalization. If these first travels or international collaboration are successful, the businesses could then be integrated into larger national systems of support and inbound or outbound trade missions.

The implementation of such a system would likely rely on cooperation with provincial chambers of commerce and local arts, culture, and heritage associations, which can provide networking opportunities and mentorship.

4. Be intentional and proud to build a Canadian cultural brand, domestically and abroad

Problems identified: Participants positioned the image and branding of Canada abroad as an essential part of a successful strategy to leverage culture to strengthen Canada's global power. Canada needs to differentiate itself on the international stage and project its own cultural identity. At the same time, Canadian identity and culture often resist categorization due to their diversity and their contradictions, making it impossible—and undesirable—to only present to the world one homogenous cultural identity.

Recommendations: *For government to embrace a narrative of strength that centers diversity as the core of Canada's cultural brand and reflects how Canadians perceive themselves; for government and creative industries to research and improve the virality of Canadian content.*

Embrace a narrative of strength and tangible power for Canadian arts and culture

Many participants rejected the use of the academic term “soft power” and instead argued in favor of a narrative of strength and tangible power for Canadian arts and culture. They reflected on Canadians’ ambivalences towards feelings of national pride; but they also highlighted that Canada can recognize and carry the responsibility of its colonial history while embracing the diversity of its current cultural expressions and celebrating the power of Indigenous and Canadian cultural outputs.

Panelists also noted that Québec is a leader in representing Canada’s cultural diversity abroad, with high levels of investment in culture domestically and strong support for cultural exports that reflect the importance the province places on cultural sovereignty and its longstanding relationships with various Francophone cultural actors around the world. French-language creatives give Canada a privileged access to Francophone markets, but the increased preference for English-language content for youth around the world—even over their domestic content—represents an opportunity for Anglophone Canadian creative businesses, notably the audiovisual industry, to export their cultural products.⁶

Diversity as the obvious core of Canada’s cultural brand

Workshop participants talked about the complexity with which Canadians’ form their personal and collective sense of identity, and unanimously shared that diversity is Canada’s “unique selling point,” what gives the country a competitive edge.⁷ Diversity should be front and center in Canada’s cultural internationalization strategy: cultural institutions and funding bodies already support diasporic communities and invest in diverse cultural products, but these should be leveraged to gain better access to different markets around the world.

Canada could draw inspiration from Germany’s approach through its Goethe-Institut and other cultural internationalization initiatives: Germany promotes a multi-dimensional perspective on German culture that is more focused on the diversity of contemporary German artists and thinkers and on cross-cultural collaborations than purely on national pride. This approach also includes encouraging students from around the world to come study in Germany, creating sustained cultural and economic connections.⁸

Beyond diasporic communities, Indigenous cultural and creative industries also have unique opportunities to create with and export to other countries, including those with Indigenous nations and communities. For example, the ISO is currently setting up “codesigning labs” with sister organizations in Australia and New-Zealand to grow opportunities for coproductions between Indigenous AV creators in the three countries.

While a strategy that places diversity as Canada’s unique selling point could undoubtedly be successful, the idea of leveraging diversity must be considered with care and caution, given the country’s colonial history. Governments and funding bodies should always distinguish between

⁶ Research has revealed [a shift among younger European viewers towards English-language productions](#), especially American ones, driven by the accessibility of English-language content, declining interest in domestic content and growing English-language proficiency.

⁷ This feeling reflects the opinions of Canadians at large, which continue to describe their country’s uniqueness first and foremost in terms of its multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance in 2025 according to the [Environics Institute for Survey Research](#).

⁸ See [the Hub’s scene setter to this workshop](#) for more details on Germany’s cultural diplomacy strategy.

supporting Indigenous and racialized people's cultural production and instrumentalizing it for national goals.

Consult Canadians to develop Canada's national branding

Several participants suggested doing a national storytelling campaign to gather insights from Canadians on how to represent Canada's culture abroad, which could then inform the development of an international cultural brand for Canada. This could be accomplished through citizen assemblies across Canada, during which young Canadians of all backgrounds could discuss what Canadian culture and identity means to them. This initiative could be woven into the Government of Canada's "Canada Strong" objectives and would enable government and industry leaders to better understand how to synthesize a brand for Canada abroad.

Create a Viral Digital Content Strategy

The most successful cultural products in Canada and abroad in recent history are the ones that have gone viral, highlighting the importance not only of discoverability of Canadian content online but also of the digital marketing capacities of Canadian creative industries. Participants called for a Viral Digital Content Strategy, which could come from PCH but also from the creative industries themselves, working across sectors to gain insights on how to produce cultural products that creates engagement on social media. The secondary goal would be to create "export-ready" products and test their international appeal online before attempting to promote them abroad.

Next steps

In the weeks since this workshop took place, the Government of Canada permanently renewed its Creative Export Strategy with a stable envelope of \$19 million per year. Minister Marc Miller announced that the Creative Export Strategy's mechanisms are currently undergoing evaluation to improve the efficiency of the program. The Cultural Policy Hub will work to bring the obstacles and opportunities outlined in this report to those tasked with this evaluation.

The upcoming joint review of the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement in July 2026—with the risk of a significant impact on trade conditions for cultural industries that it carries—also highlights the need for coordinated advocacy efforts from the arts, culture, and heritage sector. The sector needs to promote its economic impact and show its relevance for Canada's sovereignty, economic diplomacy, and trade diversification. Cultural trade can open the door to new markets, facilitate relationships, and create opportunities for Canada to promote its other goals.

In the coming months, the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD U will conduct follow-up conversations with workshop participants to expand the discussion on proposed frameworks and how the action items detailed above can be implemented, with a particular focus on the recommendations for a "Maple House" digital platform and for improved data on the state and readiness of the cultural sector to grow its exports. The Hub encourages any other stakeholders interested in furthering this work to get in touch.